

# A Renewed Beginning

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Damascus United Methodist Church

**Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12**

Epiphany Sunday – January 1, 2012

## A Renewed Beginning

Thankfully, the beginning of a New Year offers us a fresh start – in all parts of life. We can newly consider those things we intended to do last year but didn't ... things like regular exercising, eating right, praying more, cleaning out our closets & daily flossing ☺

In this day and time, contracts are created to bind us to what we promise. Professional sports teams sign contracts with their players. I confess that I created a contract for all Motter family members to sign so that order would prevail - in return for the privilege of using our laundry room – really. These days, we're used to contracts being signed when we buy a house or car. In recent years, even pre-nuptial agreements have been contracted.

At this very altar in 1992 on our 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Wes and I stood with Pastor Walt - to renew our marriage vows. For 29+ years, we have upheld our sacred marriage covenant through joys and sorrows. We have remained faithful to our marriage covenant through trust, belief, and commitment to one another.

Similarly, today before this altar on New Year's Day of 2012, as Christians, we share a sacred faith covenant with God and with each other. What might it mean to renew our sacred covenant- our promises with God?

Renewing our covenant with God simply involves recommitting our faith. What does our faith include? It involves our head, our heart and our hands. All 3 are necessary for faithful holy living.

First, our head represents an intellectual component to our faith. This represents what we learn and store as head knowledge. This occurs through Sunday school, through Bible study, personal devotions and listening to the Holy Scriptures as it is read (just as Mickey did today) and proclaimed through preaching in worship. Throughout our life, our knowledge about God needs to grow. Childlike faith should evolve as we mature. Faith grows best when given the spiritual nourishment it needs.

Think of comparing our faith growth to a growing tree. A cross-section of a tree shows rings that mark stages in its growth. Now, imagine a cross-section of your faith with rings that mark your stages in faith growth. During your life, have you moved beyond where you started? Today, you can commit to adding more rings of growth to your faith life. One way to do so comes from our Gospel reading from John 15. Jesus is

the vine and we are the branches. We, the branches, must remain connected to the vine (Jesus) to grow. But that isn't all, because faith in God includes more than our head.

Second, faith in God also includes our heart. Without heart connections, head knowledge is empty. The Pharisees practiced only head knowledge. Their faith life was full of empty rituals. Being mindful of this helps us. We find that when we dare open up our heart to God, strong emotional connections develop -- with God and with other believers. Our feelings result in trusting God. When we trust God to be in control, it means that we turn to God in all that we do --when we're taking a test, when facing surgery or when we need to have a difficult conversation with someone. Because we trust God to support and guide us, we can look to God in all things. Yet, faith in God still includes more than our head and heart.

Third, faith in God also includes our hands. This results in behavior that shows commitment. This commitment is shown in how a Christian behaves and acts. You see, faith without action is just empty words. I can share a personal example.

In 2007, I saw the movie "The Bucket List." This movie is about 2 men who are told they have cancer and soon, they will die. Each one makes a list of the adventures he wants to experience before he "kicks the bucket." They spend the time they have left experiencing their 'bucket list.' This movie made me think, "What do I most want to do in life?" My honest answer included 2 things: Visit the Holy Land & take tap dancing lessons.... (but not at the same time).

When I retired from my former career, my longtime co-workers remembered my bucket list. They gave me a pair of tap shoes. Here at DUMC, I keep my tap shoes in my office closet...just waiting for me to take lessons. When I think about doing so, I get really excited and smile. I believe that one day I will take tap lessons, but so far they are just empty words—with no action or commitment. My head and heart are in sync, but my hands/feet are a vital missing part.

Similarly, for Christians, faith involves all three components: our head, our heart and our hands. Through our head, we believe in God. Through our heart, we trust God. Through our hands, we commit ourselves to the work of God. In our faith life, these 3 cannot be separated: head, heart and hands. Jesus models this so well.

From John 15, Jesus says, "*Apart from me, you can do nothing... I am the vine, you are the branches.*" Gardeners know that the best fruit is found closest to the vine, where it receives the most nourishment. Likewise, as Christians, the deeper and closer our relationship with Jesus, the more fruit we produce in our holy living. Jesus offers us all the nourishment we need to live holy lives and produce fruit. Fruit is shown through our actions in how we care for others. This action does not only happen on Sundays, but throughout the rest of our week, especially outside the walls of our church.

What does this look like? We only need to look fifteen miles away to find out.

For a long time, the Brown family had lived along Araby Church Road in Urbana.

They were known for being “a little different.” The family included a husband, a wife and an adult daughter in her late thirties -- who appeared to suffer from mental illness. Members of Araby UMC watched bits of the Brown family’s story unfold as they drove past on their way to church. From time to time, some reached out with gift cards to local grocery stores. Church members knew the family, who were renters, had been evicted as they watched the family’s possessions set out on the front yard and dumpsters were brought in.

One winter evening, temperatures dropped well below freezing. People realized the family was living in a red shed that had been dragged close to the edge of the road. Araby church members felt compelled to act and went to the shed. Mr. and Mrs. Brown had sent their daughter to a shelter, but wouldn’t leave themselves for fear of leaving their dog alone and that someone might steal their possessions.

Upon looking inside the shed, the Browns had nothing but 2 quilts, so a church member gave them a down comforter with concern they would freeze during the night. They were covered with additional blankets and the dog jumped right in. The next morning, church members brought them breakfast. Police were called to help relocate the couple. Because they were trespassing, jail was the next step. Church members asked the police to take them to a shelter instead. Because of the couple’s smell, they were not allowed in the police car. Instead, church members drove the Browns, in their car, to get a bath and dress in new clothes before getting settled in the shelter.

Later that night, Mr. Brown died from a diabetic heart attack. While the church members mourned his death, they celebrated providing Mr. Brown with some dignity. He died clean, clothed and fed. Meanwhile, the church arranged for Mrs. Brown and her daughter to be housed together in another local shelter.

The church members know that it was God who led them to act. They say, “We’re Christians, and that is how God wants us to live.” (UM Connection April 8, 2009) People can get stuck when they try to make church just two hours a week. Being a Christian requires our whole life.

Jesus’ life, teachings, death and resurrection most clearly reveal God to us. In who Jesus is, and what Jesus did, we see God. Jesus came, not as the world expected (like a warrior or political leader) but as the world needed. Jesus came, born in a stable- not in a palace; riding into Jerusalem on a donkey-- not on a grand horse or on a chariot; dying on a cross- instead of killing his enemies. Jesus came as a suffering servant -- breaking the power of sin and death as he ushered in God’s kingdom on earth. Jesus came that we might have abundant life, joy and peace.

On this New Year’s Day of 2012, as Christians who follow Jesus the Christ, let us stand before this altar and commit to a renewed beginning in our faith relationship with God and with one another. (John Wesley’s Covenant Service follows)

