

Texts: Acts 1:1-9, Deut. 9:1-6

X: It's new year's day, and lots of people are making promises: to lose weight, to quit smoking, to listen better, to not get angry so much. Do you think it will make any difference?

Z: Naw, they'll go along for a few weeks, and then they'll give up and go back to the same thing.

X: But people really do quit smoking for good. They just make up their mind and do it.

Z: Maybe a few. But statistics show that less than one tenth of people who try to give up smoking actually do.

X: What about promises to exercise? Lots of people start exercising in January, after eating and drinking too much. I bet a lot of those people are successful.

Z: Statistics say that less than half of the people who make exercise resolutions keep them as long as six months.

X: Well, if keeping promises is so hard, then why do people keep making promises?

Z: You tell me. Maybe they think someone is looking over their shoulder, and when they find out nobody is, they give up.

X: But what about promises to God? Do people keep those?

Z: I don't know. I couldn't find any statistics about that.

X: Well, I suppose there's marriage statistics. Marriage is a promise to God, but it seems that the promise doesn't stick in many cases.

Z: And the way that parents make promises at baptism to raise their child in the church – well, we should have more kids in Sunday School.

X: I bet most of the promises people make to God sound something like: "If you do this for me, God, I'll do something good."

Z: A bargain? Do a lot of people bargain with God?

X: Well, they try to. Jeremiah, Moses, Abraham all tried to bargain with God.

Z: Did you ever bargain with God?

X: Well... I did ask God to get me out of a mess I got myself into, once. I said, "God, if you get me out of this, I'll never swear again."

Z: Did you ever swear again?

X: Well, yes, but not as much as I used to. Anyway, did you ever make a bargain with God?

Z: Not really. I just pleaded with God for help, asked God to help me figure things out, asked God to not let me screw up, but I never really promised much in return.

X: Did you ever just promise God something without asking for anything?

Z: Well, once I saw a terrible accident, and I promised God I would never drink and drive. I promised God I'd always use my seat belts.

X: Wasn't that kind of like an unspoken bargain? Like, "Lord, If I do these things, you keep me out of an accident." Wasn't it kind of a bargain like that.

Z: Well, maybe. Maybe not. But I will grant you that we human beings want so many things. I guess we can promise a lot to God to try to get God to do what we want.

X: But I wonder how many people make promises to God without asking for anything. I bet there's quite a few who say, "God, you're so great, I just want to serve you. Just use me, Lord."

Z: You think so?

X: I do think a lot of people just want to be better people. They're tired of making mistakes, and want the Lord to guide them. So they kneel down and give themselves to God.

Z: Now, I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. No, that's a prayer for safe rest or a safe trip to heaven. Give me an example of an unselfish promise to God.

X: Well, there's Wesley's Covenant Prayer.

Z: What's that?

X: It's a prayer that Methodists have said for 250 years around New Years. It's a pledge of loyalty to God. Well, more than a pledge of loyalty, it's a request to God.

Z: Doesn't sound very unselfish to me.

X: But it's a request to God to use me or not use me as God sees fit. It's a pledge to put God in the driver's seat.

Z: How does it go?

X: It starts out, "I am not longer my own, but yours."

Z: Mine?

X: No, not yours, God's. It's a prayer to God. "I am no longer my own, but God's."

Z: Well, what does that mean? Of course God made me, so I'm God's. God can take away my life. God can make me sick or heal me. Of course I'm not my own.

X: But how often do you act like you're God's? How often do you act like God's in charge, like God is directing your actions?

Z: I get your point. So it starts, "I am no longer my own, but yours."

X: That's right. Then next, the covenant prayer says: "Put me to what thou wilt,

Z: I take it that means, "God, make me do what you want me to do. Give me a job, and I'll do it."

X: Yes, and it goes on: "Rank me with whom thou wilt."

Z: Does that mean "rank" like rank in the army? That some people are more important than others? Does that mean that God can make me important or not important, as God sees fit? That could get in my craw.

X: You wanted an unselfish promise to God. That is unselfish. To not care who has more power than you is unselfish.

Z: You know, Jesus promised power to his followers, to heal, to be witnesses, to set people free, to change the world with love, even. But here this prayer seems to be asking Christians to be well, unpowerful.

X: No, the covenant prayer just reminds us who really has the power. God, not us. The next part of the prayer lets us really see that. It goes, "Put me to doing, put me to suffering."

Z: God would want me to suffer?

X: That's not what the prayer says. But it does say I should be willing to suffer for God's sake if it's called for.

Z: This is getting more uncomfortable all the time.

X: The prayer goes on, "Let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you."

Z: Huh. "Use me, God, or don't use me." ...I read that God promised the Israelites the promised land not because they earned it, but because they were less bad than the people already in the land. God used them because he couldn't use the other people.

X: Yep. Sometimes God uses us for something, and sometimes God can't use us. I've heard that God doesn't want our ability so much as our availability. The next sentence in the covenant prayer says kind of the same thing: "Let me be full, let me be empty; let me have all things, let me have nothing."

Z: It really is a kind of naked prayer. Empty. Nothing. I suppose that means "nothing but God."

X: I think that pretty well sums it up. Nothing but God. The last promise in the prayer says, "I freely and with a willing heart give it all to your pleasure and disposal."

Z: If I make that kind of prayer, and really mean it, I could really be a different kind of person.

X: Exactly. Only you have to keep on meaning it over and over again.

Z: I think that's the hard part.

X. I think so, too.

"In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." Acts 1:1-9, NRSV.

"Hear, O Israel! You are about to cross the Jordan today, to go in and dispossess nations larger and mightier than you, great cities, fortified to the heavens, a strong and tall people, the offspring of the Anakim, whom you know. You have heard it said of them, "Who can stand up to the Anakim?" Know then today that the LORD your God is the one who crosses over before you as a devouring fire; he will defeat them and subdue them before you, so that you may dispossess and destroy them quickly, as the LORD has promised you. When the LORD your God thrusts them out before you, do not say to yourself, "It is because of my righteousness that the LORD has brought me in to occupy this land"; it is rather because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is dispossessing them before you. It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you are going in to occupy their land; but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is dispossessing them before you, in order to fulfill the promise that the LORD made on oath to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. Know, then, that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to occupy because of your righteousness; for you are a stubborn people." Deuteronomy 9:1-6, NRSV.