

Sermon – January 8, 2012

“The Blessing of New Beginnings” (or: “I Want a Do-Over”)

Scripture: Genesis 1:1-5, Mark 1:4-11

- Mike Hickcox

The season of Advent and Christmas is the beginning of the new liturgical year. This is a time when we can take a fresh look at ourselves in relation to God through Jesus' life, teachings, and spirit. Today is the beginning of ...

Wait – that’s not today’s sermon. That’s David’s sermon from last week. Why was that still here?

Well, okay – I’d like to start over again. Can I have a do-over?

Thank you for granting me that – a clean start – a new beginning. Now, let’s move on to today’s sermon ...

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What is better than a new beginning?

A new beginning means so much to us so many times in life ... it is:

- Starting clean ... tabula rasa ... a clean slate
- Leaving behind that pesky baggage of what you’ve done in the past
- Going down a new path
- The optimism of looking forward to new things
- Letting go of the guilt
- Exciting

Last week, David talked about new beginnings. As I re-read a few moments ago – we’re in a season that starts a new liturgical year.

This is also the beginning of a new calendar year. The month we're in now is called January. Let me remind you that the month of January got this name for a very good reason. It is named after the Roman god Janus. He was the Roman god with two faces. One face looked backward - toward the past. The other looked forward - toward the future. January is the month in which we can look back at the past to learn from it, because last year is right there. And we can look forward to the future so we can plan for it and make the best of it.

Last week, David's sermon was called "Called by a New Name." It had to do with receiving a new name while getting a brand-new start. Examples are:

- Saul became Paul
- Simon became Peter
- Cassius Clay became Muhammad Ali
- "Failure" becomes "Exactly What I Made You to Be"
- 2011 became 2012.

This business about "starting over" isn't just talk. It isn't just "sermonizing." People take this stuff seriously. When the New Year starts, we often really do put faith in new starts. We really do think about what we can put behind us, and what can be better in this year than it was in the last.

How real is this effect? Weightwatchers – the weight-loss program – calls January its "Superbowl." So many people decide the New Year will be different from the old one – and determine that they will lose weight this year – that Weightwatchers does huge business this month.

Why don't hordes of people join weight-watching programs in the other months? It is because we want to take advantage of the theme of starting over again, just like the year does in January. We want to jump on the wave of starting over.

From a publication called the “Bible Illustrator” comes a little soliloquy ... with the New Year itself talking. This is what the New Year says:

I am the New Year. I am an unspoiled page in your book of time.

I am your next chance at the art of living. I am your opportunity to practice what you have learned about life during the last twelve months.

All that you sought and didn't find is hidden in me, waiting for you to search it out, but with more determination.

All the good that you tried for, and didn't achieve, is mine to grant when you have fewer conflicting desires.

All that you dreamed but didn't dare to do, all that you hoped but did not will, all the faith that you claimed but did not have—these slumber lightly, waiting to be awakened by the touch of a strong purpose.

I am your opportunity to renew your allegiance to Him who said, "Behold, I make all things new."

The new year is a fresh chance for a better experience, and for a better you.

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The people who created the common lectionary – from which we get the Bible readings for this day – determined the readings we heard today:

From the Old Testament, we get the very start of the book – Genesis, Chapter 1, verses 1-5. It starts with God creating the heavens and the earth. And then God said, “Let there be light.” And there was light.

The point, though, is that this is the story of a beginning. It is a start, not a new start, but it is the beginning.

Then we heard the passage from the Gospel of Mark that was chosen for us today. In this reading, John the Baptist lived in the wilderness. People went to

him, from the countryside and from the city of Jerusalem, so he could baptize them in the river.

The people of 2,000 years ago also believed in new starts. Were so many of them drawn to John because they believed in John himself? No, it doesn't seem like he was one to instill that kind of confidence. The accounts we find in the Bible are written in a way that tells us that John was not a vision that would give anyone confidence.

John lived in the wilderness. That, alone, gives us a picture. In Connecticut, where both Alys and I grew up, there was for decades, a man known as "the leather man." He wandered regularly in a big circuit, covering many counties. Few people knew any of his sleeping places. He would walk his circuit, covered in leather, and people would see him and report his whereabouts.

Jesus' cousin John had to be a little like the leather man. Except that John was "the camel hair man." John wore clothes made of camel's hair, lived in the wilderness, and survived on wild honey and locusts. I don't imagine he entertained much. And yet he sometimes had lots of company. John preached about a baptism of repentance that brought about the forgiveness of sins. As people listened, and signed on for his program of forgiveness, he would baptize them in the river – symbolically washing the filth and sins from them – so they could start all over again.

For Weightwatchers, January is their Superbowl – the biggest season of their year. According to the gospels, John was himself a kind of Superbowl-level draw. People flocked to him to have a chance to start over again.

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Let's take a look at what was so appealing about John and his sin-loss program.

We're told he offered a way for people to be forgiven for what they had done in the past, so they could start new, with all the optimism and hope that comes with a clean re-do.

And just like the weight-loss programs, the program is there to help you, but you still have to do the work. With weight-loss programs, you have to amend your diet, you have to get exercise, you have to be honest with yourself, and you have to track your progress.

John's sin-loss program isn't magic, either. In order to lose sin, you have work to do:

- Like Janus, you have to be willing to look backward at your past.
- You have to be willing to look at what you have done and what you still do.
- You need to recognize the wrongs you have done.
- You need to confess your wrongdoings.
- You need to be truly sorry for what you have done.
- You have to turn to a new direction for your life.

Once you have done the hard work... once you have really, really evaluated and changed your heart and mind, and have determined that you will turn to a new direction, John will then wash you in the Jordan River. And in that ritual washing, all your hard work is recognized, and honored, and your new direction is affirmed.

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The word "repent" is actually a key to what is happening. The word "repent" means "to turn." That's a very important thing.

- Repentance is diverging from the direction you were going before.
- It is taking a new direction.
- It is turning toward God.
- It is turning to the good.
- It is turning toward the light.

- It is taking a brand new path.

A number of years ago, in Nicaragua, I attended several worship services at different churches, in the city and in the countryside. There was much music that was familiar to me:

- El Condor Pasa (Simon & Garfunkle)
- El Pescador / The Fisherman
- La Cruz de Jesus / The Old Rugged Cross

And I heard some wonderful worship music that I had never heard before. One was a song of repentance... not a sad song, but a raucous, joyous song. It is called “Estamos de Fiesta con Jesus” / We are Celebrating with Jesus. And in every chorus, everybody in the room spins around and around – celebrating the great joy of taking a new direction.

That song recognizes the understanding that repentance is “turning in a new direction.”

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In the gospels, John says, “I baptize with water, but one comes after me who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” He speaks of his cousin, Jesus, who actually went into the wilderness to be baptized by John.

This is the point where we usually make a turn of our own. This is where we so often turn away from John and toward Jesus, leaving John in the dust of the wilderness.

But I ask you to stay with him a little longer. Don’t sell John short. He’s not just a minor character; not only the opening act for the headliner ... Jesus. John deserves recognition, too.

What John brought is, in fact, a major tenet of Christianity. This is a major promise of Christianity. With the story of John, we have the beginning of the new beginning, the beginning of the great do-over.

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And why is this promise of a new beginning so very important? It is because of what a new start means to the life of a human being.

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This is not one of those obscure ideas that many of us really don't understand. This has so many elements that we all know, because it is the story of our lives.

Throughout our lives, we have made decisions that were bad ones. We have done things that are really stupid. We have hurt people. We have bad habits. We have done things we should not have done. And there are things we really should have done – that we have not done.

One way we deal with these things is to get depressed, and to keep our lives going in the same direction, while feeling guilty and bad about all we've done and our inability to change.

If we want to lose weight, but still eat the things we shouldn't, and we fail to get the exercise we should, we will continue to be heavier than we want to be, and we'll continue to feel bad about it. The only way to change all this is to change our minds and our habits.

And in our lives, if we want to do things as we should, but we still do wrong, and we don't do the things we ought to do, then we continue to be wracked by self-disappointment and guilt. The only way to change all this is to change our minds and our habits... and to take a new direction.

What if we have the opportunity to leave all that bad stuff behind? What if we have the opportunity to turn in a new direction, drop all the baggage, and start

clean? That is one of the greatest things that can happen to a human being!

What if we can:

- Take the bad decisions and through them out?
- Take the bad habits and through them out?
- Take the guilt and depression and through it all out?

Then – suddenly - with a lightened heart, a renewed faith, a song in the air, sunshine on you shoulders, and a clear road ahead, you are ready to make your life anew.

The challenge you have remaining after your big change is to keep moving in that new direction. You will still face potholes and roadblocks and bad weather on your new road, so the challenge is never over, but you have started over, without the baggage, with a new chance to make it.

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That's the new beginning John was talking about. That's the do-over that was signified by a rinse-out in the Jordan River.

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Some other time, the lectionary readings will focus on Jesus and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. One of the other readings selected for today is Acts 19:1-7. In the New International Version, it reads like this:

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"

They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?"

"John's baptism," they replied.

Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance.

The shift in baptism later, with Jesus, is the addition of the Holy Spirit to the equation. But that's for another day.

In the meantime, for today, the spotlight is on John, and on his offering in our faith story.

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Now that we are two millennia further on, and in the new year of 2012, you can't go into the wilderness and find John snacking on honey and locusts. He won't preach to you and dunk you in the Jordan. But here in 2012, you can still turn in a new direction. You never needed John there to help you do it. The work was always yours to do. John's job was to bring the message; to deliver the promise. He did his job. Your job, whenever you choose to do it, is to turn. Turn to God. Turn to the good. Turn to the light. That program is always available. There is no January special. It's a free program, every day of the year.

This morning, I began with David's sermon from last week, and you let me start over again. New Beginnings are a blessing. They are a cleansing. They lighten your soul. They bring you closer to God, and they make you more available to joyfully do God's work.

Join the program. This special offer is always available. Amen to that.