



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

“Beginnings”

Scripture – Mark 1:1-11

Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson

Sunday, January 7, 2018

January 1, 2018

Dear Diary — It’s here: A new year, a new beginning. The perfect time to start doing all those things I’ve been saying I’d do since last July. Like going to bed at a decent hour. For months I have been telling myself that I’d be more productive and less cranky if I didn’t stay up ’til midnight. Well, tonight I’m going to bed at 10:00.

And this is the year I start eating healthier. No more frozen pizzas; no more Chinese take-out. I’m going to be better about cooking for myself, and eating balanced meals with lots of veggies. This year I’m falling in love with veggies.

And another thing: I’m saying ‘goodbye’ to Facebook. Deleting my account. There are so many better things I could be doing with my time. Like journaling ... I’m going to journal every day. Even if it’s just for a few minutes. That will hold me accountable — help me stick to these goals. So, Diary — it looks like we’ll be spending a lot of time together this year. See you tomorrow.

January 4, 2018

Dear Diary — Sorry I’ve forgotten about you for a few days. What can I say? Old habits die hard.

Well, I’m off to a rocky start: Ate a whole bag of Tostitos when I got home from work tonight and wasn’t hungry for dinner. At least salsa’s a vegetable, right?

And I spent my entire lunch break on Facebook. I swear - I really am deleting my account. Tomorrow.

In other news, I did go to sleep last night at 10:30. So that’s progress.

January 7, 2018

Dear Diary — One week in and I’m already screwing this up. Maybe New Year’s Resolutions just aren’t my thing ...

How many of us have come to the same conclusion? — Maybe New Year’s Resolutions just aren’t my thing ...

I won’t ask for a show of hands, but I imagine most of us have had this experience: As we stand on the threshold of a year pregnant with possibility, we saturate the new year with recycled hopes of how it will be different, of how *we* will be different. But, as the winter days drag on, we find that turning the page on the calendar is a lot easier than turning over a new leaf. So, before long, this fresh beginning grows stale as the new year ushers us into the same, tired routines.

Now, some of you may be experts at keeping New Year’s Resolutions, and — one week in — you can boast that your goals for 2018 are already becoming second nature. But — if you’re like me — by the end of the month, you’ll be shrugging your shoulders and resorting to the phrase: “Well, maybe next year.”

Such is the fate of so many New Year’s Resolutions – of the well-intentioned beginnings born of December’s regrets and January’s optimism.

This is a season of beginnings — some that are destined to wither and die; others that will blossom and bring forth new life.

Today we hear of a promising beginning, as John the Baptizer cries out from the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord!” This is where Mark starts his story — not with an angel chorus announcing Christ’s birth or with Magi trekking across desert sands to kneel before the newborn king, but with a messenger clothed in camel’s hair calling all to repent and be baptized.

So the people come; from Jerusalem and the whole Judean countryside, they stream to the River Jordan where John welcomes them to the water. Like us, these first century seekers thirst for a new beginning. But their quest for renewal is marked by something we rarely consider when crafting our New Year’s Resolutions: Repentance. Those who step into the Jordan’s waters have come to confess their sin and to seek forgiveness.

This ‘Baptism of Repentance’ — which John proclaims and practices — is a turning point, a fresh start for these disciples. They emerge from the water — washed, renewed, and ready to reject the old and embrace the new. This is something the church still proclaims whenever we come to the waters. Baptism marks a new beginning for us as well, as the water-washed turn from wilderness wanderings to faithful paths, from death to life.

But, as we have come to know, there is more to this new beginning than being washed. And John is the first to proclaim this promise: “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me,” he says. “I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

And so — right on cue — Jesus appears on the scene; he comes from Nazareth to the River Jordan, so that he too can be baptized by John. It is our first glimpse of the Messiah. We meet him not as a babe lying in a manger, but as a full-grown man poised to start his public ministry. For Mark, this is the beginning of the good news. And it is good news, indeed.

For, as we soon see, it is a beginning graced by God. As Jesus emerges from the Jordan’s waters, the heavens rip open and the Spirit descends as a dove to rest upon the newly-baptized Christ. And, at that moment, the divine voice proclaims: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” By word and Spirit, God blesses this beginning — ordaining Jesus to a new ministry that will blossom and bring forth life.

And it is an echo of another beginning: the *first* beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth. As we read in Genesis, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters. We know this story ... The Creator speaks, calling forth light and life:

trees of the field, and birds of the air, and oceans brimming with creatures of the deep, and — finally — humankind, fashioned in the divine image.

And then — with the work finished — the Creator utters words of blessing, much like those that ring out from heaven at Jesus' baptism. "It is very good."

Water. Word. Spirit. They are the ingredients of God's new beginnings: A world the Almighty creates and claims, a Son the Father claims and calls. These beginnings are drenched in promise, for the Spirit is at work to enliven and sustain, to empower and send.

Of course, as we know too well from the witness of Scripture, even a genesis that is born of water and blessed by the word can evolve into realities that run counter to the goodness God intended. Yet, our ever-faithful God is still at work to redeem and renew this world that was created good. That is why one new beginning yields another — like the one we witness on Jordan's banks, as Jesus rises from the water to be claimed by God's word and Spirit. As the Gospel of Mark makes clear, this is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. For the same Spirit that descended as a dove now sends Jesus to embrace a ministry that will deliver us from death to life.

By water, word and Spirit, God has been at work from the dawn of time to the dawn of a new year, creating and re-creating so that we might experience the promise of new life.

Through baptism we take our place in this story; for it is in these waters that we are claimed by word and Spirit and sealed as beloved children of God. Like it was for Jesus, baptism marks a new beginning for us. Whether we come to the font as infants ignorant of the promises made on our behalf, or as adults who claim these promises for ourselves, this sacrament is a turning point, a fresh start. For as the baptismal waters wash over us, we are invited to turn from away from sin and turn to Christ, to choose life over death.

But — unlike those first century Judeans who streamed to the River Jordan — we recognize that there is more to baptism than repentance. This is the beginning of a journey — a journey blessed by God, guided by Christ, and sustained by the Holy Spirit. It is a journey that calls us into God's creative work, and that ushers us into the new life Christ offers. It is a journey that starts with baptism — a beginning rich with promise for it is one ordained by God. So it is with beginnings marked by water, word, Spirit.

As we return to the story of John baptizing Jesus at the River Jordan, we are invited to remember our own baptism, and to celebrate the promise of new life God offers. We are invited to remember the promise of this new beginning, and to commit ourselves again to this journey of faith. This is an invitation not only for Baptism of the Lord Sunday, not only for a new year, but for every day that we set out to follow the God who claims and calls.

And, yes — even with a beginning marked by water, word, and Spirit — we fall short. We waste precious energy on fruitless endeavors; we neglect these bodies God created good; we do things we don't even dare name in our list of New Year's Resolutions. Yes — we must repent and seek forgiveness; yes — we must set goals that will inspire us to live more faithfully. But, every time we gather 'round the font, we remember that the promise offered to us in baptism is constant, that our ever-faithful God is still at work ... blessing us, guiding us, sustaining us on this journey.

January 7, 2018

Dear Diary — It's here: A day to embrace a new beginning ... Not because it's the start of a new year, but because it's a day to remember that I'm a baptized child of God. I have been claimed in the waters of baptism, and called to new life with Christ.

It's true that I have goals that go unmet and resolutions I've cast aside, but I am made whole in other ways. I have shortcomings and growing edges, but I have gifts to offer as well. I am broken, but I have been washed in grace.

For the same Spirit that rested upon Jesus at his baptism, sustains me on this journey. And God's voice still proclaims: "You are my child, my beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Thanks be to God.

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving (Communion) ~ Susan Moseley

Eternal God, we marvel and wonder that your Spirit empowers, enlivens, and prays in us. We rejoice that in us the Spirit sings, dances, speaks, writes, loves, and creates.

O God, we give thanks for Jesus of Nazareth, baptized in Jordan's waters and anointed by your Spirit. He brought good news to the poor, release to the captives, and sight to the blind. Jesus loved so greatly and taught so courageously that he was able to set people free from customs, ideas, and religious practices that bound them in fear.

Through Jesus we have learned how our serving and sacrifice are sharing in the life of your Spirit. We remember the night before he died, when Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke the bread, and shared it with his friends asking them to remember his total surrender to Love's purposes. We take this bread and eat it, mindful of your divine work in our lives, in the ordinary, in the everyday, and in our desire to love as generously as Jesus loved. Likewise, knowing his life was to be poured out, Jesus shared the cup of wine with his friends. We drink now in joyful recognition of your Spirit poured out into our world and into our lives.

So enliven this meal, we pray, that we may be who and what we are called to be: the "body of Christ." Pour us out for each other. Transform our minds, ignite your church, and nourish the life of the earth. And may your grace make us open to new beginnings and all that the future holds, both now and in the life beyond death.

O God, enfold these prayers of gratitude and commitment into your sacred purposes. We ask this in the strong name of Jesus who taught us to pray, saying...

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.**