

## Sermon: “Beginning Again”

*St. James Presbyterian Church*

*Ephesians 1: 3–14; John 1: 1–18*

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Someone has said that at the beginning of a new year we are all a bit like rock climbers, scaling a rock wall. Personally, I find this idea not only surprising but also surprisingly ambitious, even a little bit flattering. What the writer had in mind, though, is the way in which, at the turn of the year, we are partly still clinging to where we have been, but at the same time we are reaching out toward something new. Probably the past year is not something that a lot of us want to hold onto, but moving into a new year might still feel a bit precarious. We may know what direction we want to go in, but we are still groping for that next sturdy handhold, that next rocky outcropping strong enough to hold our weight. We might feel a bit insecure as we move into a new year. We might dangle a bit.

Lately I’ve been mulling over what it means to “begin again,” and collecting some examples of how that idea sometimes turns up. It’s not always in a good way:

- “If you can’t do better than that, you’ll have to start over from the beginning!” (That sounds like a cranky teacher.)
- “You do that over right now!”
- “I bet you can’t do that again!” (Could be an older brother!)
- “I *dare* you to do that again!” (But maybe we shouldn’t.)

Sometimes beginning again means starting over when the task we are attempting completely falls apart, like a pie crust I was making a few weeks ago. Sometimes beginning again means having a second chance, like a golfer who “takes a mulligan” — a free-be, a do-over — when his tee shot dribbles pathetically onto the fairway. Many of us, I imagine, would like to take a mulligan on the rough year we’ve just had.

And so we come to January, when we have that instinct, that pull, to reset, to try again, to try to bring something new, something better into the new year. I think our instincts are often pretty good. We want to make the world a better place. We want to make ourselves better people. As we reflect on the year that has past, we probably know that we have not been all that we could be. And even though we probably also know that by February 80% of new

year's resolutions will have fallen by the wayside, we greet the new year with a sense of new possibility. We want to begin again out of a compelling sense of *hope*. We *hope* that things may yet be made better than they have been.

I'd like to suggest two things about *beginning again* that might be helpful for us as we launch ourselves into the New Year. The first comes from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was not very optimistic about the human capacity to begin again in anything like a helpful or constructive way. He did, however, find a tremendous, joyous liberation in recognizing that "God's beginning with us" has "already happened."

As many of you will know, Bonhoeffer did not write such things lightly. His work as a theologian and pastor had taken him away from Germany in the years before the Second World War. But he felt compelled to return to Germany to be a pastor to his people, and in 1943 his outspoken rejection of Nazism landed him in prison, from which he never emerged. Yet even while in a Nazi prison he could affirm the liberation of God's new beginning in us.

If left to our own devices, he wrote, we pursue what he calls the "murderous law of incessant beginnings":

Waiting day after day for the new beginning, thinking countless times that we have found it, only in the evening to give up on it again as lost — that [he says] is the perfect destruction of faith in the God who set the beginning once and for all time.

But, Bonhoeffer goes on to say, "*God has set the beginning: this is the joyous certainty of faith.*" Because of what God has done in Jesus Christ, we do not have to worry about beginning again on our own. God has already done the work. All we have to do, as Bonhoeffer writes, is to stay on the path that God has set out for us:

The beginning — God's beginning — lies behind me, once and for all time. . . . Together we are on the path whose beginning consists of the fact that God has found his own people, a path whose end can consist only in the fact that God is seeking us again. The path between this beginning and this end is our walk in the law of God. It is life under the word of God in all its many facets.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *God is in the Manger*.

It is this new beginning that the Wise Men travel to Bethlehem to see, guided by their star. It is this new beginning that the Gospel of John lays out for us in its stirring words:

<sup>1</sup>In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup>All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup>in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

What does it mean to say that Jesus is the Word of God? The Word of God is among other things the *speech* of God, as the American theologian David Lose tells us. In the Gospel of John, the speech of God becomes a *communication* of God, a word of hope and insight and reassurance and call to God's wandering people. For, says John,

<sup>18</sup>No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

The Word of God has become, for our sake, the Son of the Father, and he has given us, if we are willing to trust in him, the "power to become children of God." This is the new beginning of which Bonhoeffer writes. For us, it is the ground beneath our feet, a firm foothold as we dangle between what has happened and what will be.

So the first thing to say about beginning again is that God has done this. God has *already* done this. In Jesus Christ, God himself is beginning again with us. As Bonhoeffer pointed out, there is tremendous, joyous liberation in recognizing that.

The second thing I want to say about beginning again is simply this: in our walk on the path that God has set out for us, between God's beginning and God's fulfillment, in what Bonhoeffer calls our "life under the word of God in all its facets," it is *never too late* to begin again. In our spiritual lives, we are *always* being given the opportunity to begin again.

Our spiritual lives have many components. And in our busy lives it is possible, or probable, or even guaranteed that at one time or another we will fall away. And then it is that we need not fear to begin again. "Do not *wait* to begin again": so says Bruno Lanteri, a 19<sup>th</sup> century cleric who gave comfort and spir-

itual direction to many people. His world was very different from our own, yet in his world as in ours, the greatest obstacle to spiritual life is discouragement. In the words of one scholar of Bruno Lanteri, "there is never anywhere [we] have been in [our] spiritual life that can stop us from turning to God," who has already made a new beginning on our behalf.<sup>2</sup>

A couple of months ago, I was sitting quietly at a desk by an upstairs window, reading a book on prayer and the spiritual life. The quiet was broken by a sudden noise in the road below my window: a young neighbour on a motorbike, running it up and down, up and down the road. So much for the life of prayer!

But meanwhile, and at the very same time, in the hayfield on the other side of the house, a man appeared with a bundle of blue and orange and white nylon. He worked at it for a while, and gradually the bundle of nylon began to take shape. The breeze filled it, and it moved skyward, opening into a vibrant arc of colour. As the man ran with it, he pulled this or that of its long lines to try to capture and hold the wind, and so to lift himself aloft. Sometimes the canopy wavered and sank over the mown hay, yet sometimes it rose again, arcing upward, and lifting that man off the ground.

Our lives as Christians are a lot like that, I think: on one side of us the clatter and noise, the rush and run of the world; on the other our Christian life: our worship, our ministering to others, our life of prayer and reflection, our openness to God, our acceptance of grace, our participation in Christian community. If from time to time we are distracted by the motorbikes running through our lives, we need to turn again to what lifts us up. We need to begin again.

The wind, the breath, the spirit that lifts us is from God, for it is God who has made the new beginning in our lives and in our hearts.

<sup>14</sup>And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. . . . <sup>16</sup>From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

Because in Jesus Christ God begins again with us, we are free to begin again with him. This is our liberation, and our joy, and our calling. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Father Timothy Gallagher