

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, January 11, 2015

Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

This is the Word of the Lord: thanks be to God!

Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Let us pray....Amen.

New beginnings. We are constantly being offered opportunities for new beginnings.

In the ancient Hebrew calendar, every 50 years, known as a Jubilee Year, all debts were forgiven, all slaves and prisoners released. A new beginning for those who had fallen into debt, or trouble.

For Christians, the time of baptism is a new beginning: born anew, the baptized go forth forgiven, washed clean of their sins, to live lives newly dedicated to Christ. In most traditions, there is only one baptism. Some have been re-baptized in traditions that require a 'believer's baptism', where only an adult can make the baptismal promises. Sometimes, someone who was baptized as a child, submits to a believer's baptism as an adult. A new beginning.

Also in the Hebrew calendar, is Rosh Hashana, or New Year. Every autumn, at the beginning of the High Holy Days, Rosh Hashanah ushers in another year of life. A new beginning for the faithful who practice Judaism.

In the Roman calendar, the one we follow, the one most of the world follows, the new year is celebrated on January 1st. The time leading up to the New Year is often filled with resolutions and hope for a better year, for better health, for better life. A new beginning for the world, regardless of what faith is practiced.

Every Sunday, when we gather to worship God, we gather in honor of the resurrection of our Lord and Savior. He was raised up on a Sunday, and our worship day honors the new beginning of the week: most calendars start the week on a Sunday, and end the week on a Saturday. Each week, we can go from here, or wherever we worship, renewed and inspired to make improvements or changes. A new beginning each week.

Every day, when we wake from our slumber, we have an opportunity to live more faithfully, more in keeping with the path of our faith. Every day that

the sun rises, every day that we rise, we have an opportunity for a new beginning.

Learned theologians use a special kind of theology called 'Process Theology'. It can get really complicated, but in its essence, God recreates the world, in all its glory, every second. And every second, in that new creation, the faithful get to decide if they want to follow God, or not.

50 years, a Jubilee, once in a lifetime, a baptism, once a year, a spiritual new year, or a calendar new year, once a week, a resurrection, once a day, a sunrise, every second, a new chance to make a new beginning.

Today's Hebrew scripture retells the creation of the universe, beginning with light and dark, the first day, and the first night.

And our Gospel lesson recalls Jesus at his baptism, another kind of beginning altogether. Still dripping from his rebirth out of the waters of his baptism, Jesus began his ministry and his journey to fulfill what the prophets foretold of the Messiah. He began with God's love and approval.

Not a bad way to start.

We, too, begin our journeys with God's love and approval: we may not have the Holy Spirit descend upon us like a dove, but our faith tells us that when we begin again, we are God's beloved, and we receive God's approval.

But how often do we actually begin again? How often do we take the opportunity to start over, to wipe the slate clean, to make substantial changes to our lives? Far less often that you'd think!

We're not changing every second, I can tell you that! Even though it's an opportunity, we couldn't survive if we were always changing, always beginning again.

Maybe we're looking daily at what we might do differently, but most of us are so wrapped up in our routines, it becomes increasingly hard to step outside of them in order to make a significant change.

More of us use the new week to begin again. More weeks than not, though, it's business as usual. But a tough week often is followed by our resolve to have a better week.

The New Year brings many of us to the resolution table...new approaches for health, for happiness. And more likely, by Lent, most of us have slipped back into the comfort of our routines, the ones we have spent a lifetime developing.

There is *no* shortage of opportunities for new beginnings. There *is* a significant shortage of resolve to make them happen! That is our human condition. God understood it, as that was the way we were created. Given ample opportunities for new beginnings in our lives, we are beloved by God, and we please God, even when we fall short of our expectations.

But just because we were created to seek comfort in routine, just because we were created to seek predictability in the face of change, doesn't mean we can't change. We can. And we will. Because the human race didn't survive the creation because it was rigid and inflexible. The human race survive all kinds of catastrophes because it adapted to change.

So even though we all would feel much more comfortable if things would only stay the way they are, we all have the capacity to adapt.

And reminders that there are moments in our lives when we can turn in a new direction, reminders like the story of God's creation of the heavens and the earth, and the story of the baptism of our Lord and Savior, they serve to help us reflect on where we might begin again.

And we begin again all the time: we begin again after a loved one passes away, and we have to face the world without them. We begin again after a diagnosis that tells us we must take a medicine, or have a surgery to correct what ails us. We begin again, not because it's convenient, or because it's easy, but because we must, if we wish to survive.

Once in a lifetime, once a year, once a week, once a day, once every living and breathing second we are here on this earth, we get the chance to start anew, to make a new beginning. Let's grab the chance, and make the

most of it. We, too, are God's beloved, and with us too, God is well pleased. That gives us all the permission we need. Amen.