

IF ONLY WE COULD START ALL OVER AGAIN

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

January 8, 2005

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

Acts 19:1-7

It's year's beginning all of a sudden and where did the last one go? Not that I have any longing for it, mind you. This past year was as Queen Elizabeth said of 1992, an "annus horribilis," a horrible year. The horrors of the past year were earthquakes, tidal waves, tsunamis, hurricanes, war's casualties, terrorism, the death of a Pope, and the threat of a pandemic.

And this year, only one week old, has its own bad omens. The violence in Iraq escalated out of hand this week, and Ariel Sharon lies near death with all of the instability and confusion that that bodes. We can only hope that these are but the last of the trailing clouds of the year just past and not the coming of a fog to envelop the new.

This is the time of year that people think about what comes next, what they would like to accomplish, what resolutions they want to make, and how many pounds they need to lose. January is a bleak month, in that respect, so much to do, so little time!

I guess it's the passing of the holidays that adds to it. You either spend time with relatives or you don't, and if you do you realize that the years are passing and you're not getting any younger, your parents or your children are looking older, and there's only so much one can do in a lifetime so you'd better get moving.

How interesting, then, that the church remembers on this early Sunday in the new year three lessons that have to do with new beginnings. The first is just five verses of the story of the Creation in the book of Genesis. And whether you take the seven days at face value or imagine that a day in Biblical terms is a relative thing, is neither here nor there. The basic affirmation of Genesis 1:1 is that in the beginning of all things God was there. God was there to separate the day from the night, to form the heavens and the earth, to divide the dry land from the waters, to shape the sea monsters and the goldfish, the monkeys and salamanders, and for a laugh or two God threw some paint on the canvass and created the zebras and giraffes and armadillos. God was there, to start it all.

Of course, we know that not long after the world got going, there was that business with the snake and the forbidden fruit in the Garden, and then Cain and Abel and one morning on the front page of the Eden Daily News there was a story about a murder between brothers, and the cat was out of the bag so to speak.

One day God started all over again, a flood, an ark filled with creatures two by two, Noah, the great waters, and a rainbow promise that this was the last time for that. No more floods from that time on, God said, shocked at the destruction. Banda Ache, New Orleans, and Biloxi notwithstanding. No more floods from God. It would all have to play out some other way. That's the first story for the day.

And the second is like unto it. It's Mark's version of the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, his baptism. Another water story. But it's quite a jump this time. In just two weeks from the child laid in the manger, whose birth we have just celebrated, we

now hear of the man of Nazareth, sporting a beard and showing his biceps honed and shaped in the heavy lifting of his father's carpentry business. The second story is the story of his baptism.

No infant baptism mind you, but the beginning of a new page in his adult life, as he dusts off the sawdust and shavings of his daddy's woodshop and enters into the work that God has called him to fulfill, which will be the work of an itinerant rabbi, traveling around the countryside preaching good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captive, and bringing healing to the sick.

This is a major career change, from craftsman-carpenter, to rabbi-evangelist-miracle worker. But there, at the Jordan, Jesus makes that change in baptism and starts life all over again.

The last of the lessons that we read for today describes Paul's experience in the church in Ephesus. A church started by Apollos, another disciple, who had botched things pretty seriously by baptizing the believers there *in the name of John the Baptist*. Close but no cigar!

As a way of testing the efficacy of what had happened, Paul asked the good folks of the church in Ephesus if they had received the Holy Spirit when they were baptized. And they said they didn't know there was a Holy Spirit. So Paul shook his head and began to straighten things out. He baptized the whole lot of them a second time, but this time in the name of Jesus Christ, and when he did, the Spirit came upon them and they spoke in tongues and prophesied and with that the church in Ephesus was on a roll.

It was a new beginning for those young Ephesian Christians, and while there would be other matters for Paul to attend there at a later time, at least he had gotten things straightened out for the time being and helped them make a new and right beginning.

All three stories are stories of fresh starts, the first day of creation, the day of Jesus' baptism, the church in Ephesus starting over. Three accounts of life made new by the gift of the Spirit. All of them good stories to hear early in this new year as we think about turning over new leaves.

The consistent witness of the scriptures from beginning to end is the promise of renewal, the assurance that we can make a new start in life, carried on the wings of God's spirit; that spirit which divided the waters at the beginning of all things, and came with power to Jesus at the Jordan, and has touched each of us, as well, we who have been baptized in his name.

You may remember old Nicodemus, a Pharisee who came by night and studied with Jesus by candlelight. Jesus told him that he must be born from above, born anew. And Nicodemus, who could be a little slow on the draw sometimes, took Jesus literally and thought that he must re-enter his mother's womb somehow, he knew not how. So he asked Jesus why he would suggest such an impossible thing. Of course, he misunderstood the fact that Jesus was speaking in spiritual terms. That you must be born from above spiritually. So Nicodemus struggled with this idea of being born anew.

Maybe we all struggle with the idea of such new beginnings in life because we have been there before, done that, made those false starts and felt the disappointment of failing. We've promised ourselves, or God, or the stars above... not to swear so much, or

to be so self-absorbed, or to be so blunt, or ...*you fill in the blank*. And the first hour or the first day or two things seemed to be off to a good start, but pretty soon it all went downhill fast, and before you knew it you were right back to the same old ways.

I think about that email that was making the rounds not so long ago, the prayer for the day that said,

Dear Lord
So far today,
I've done all right.
I haven't gossiped.
I haven't lost my temper.
I haven't lied or cheated.
I haven't been greedy, grumpy,
Nasty, selfish or overindulgent.
I'm very thankful for that.

But in a few minutes, Lord,
I'm going to get out of bed.
And from then on, I'm probably
Going to need a lot more help! Amen.

All of us tend to take stock of our lives in the early days of each new year and reflect on where we are headed and where we want to go. But timely as these good intentions are, when I speak of new beginnings I'm not thinking about New Year's Resolutions, the challenges of keeping weight under control or not being so grumpy.

I'm thinking about what it is to make a fresh start from a Christian perspective, standing before God and one another, with the water mark of baptism on our foreheads determined to reflect in our lives that new life that we have seen in Jesus Christ. That is a different kind of beginning, the kind that goes to the deepest need of our lives, something far more important than that which can be resolved by will power or dieting or even being purpose driven as a matter of our own drivenness.

Starting anew, in the Christian life is living out the promise of baptism; it is recognizing that God's love is greater than our sin, and acknowledging that we need that love every day of our lives. That without it we're sunk!

Deep inside us, we all know the truth of what Paul confessed to the Romans, when he wrote, I have left undone those things that I ought to have done, and I have done the very thing that I would not do.¹

There isn't a person here who does not have some regrets about life, a road not taken, a word said that cannot be reversed, an injury inflicted that did more harm than we ever intended, a decision that had unfortunate consequences for us and for the ones we love. Most of us have wounds inside and scars on our soul that do not show at surface level, but that nonetheless run deep. Getting past the past is one of the hardest things there is to do in life.

In Cambridge, England there is a project underway in which students have constructed a number of mobile computer stations in the city where people may come in off the street and log in their regrets. This, in order to construct a sociological database

of contemporary remorse. The project designers say that instant feedback based on other contributors' similar concerns is algorithmically generated and calculated to “share the burden”. Random selections and groupings of the regrets are made public across the city through signage and broadcast facilities.

Taking these private thoughts and publishing them, they say, will have a positive effect through public debate, shared learning and community building. Now I ask you, “What’s wrong with that picture?”

I am not sure that any of us would like to have our most private disappoints, our most personal failures or regrets on anyone’s signage or broadcast facilities.

It does make me wonder, though, can any of us really start over again, regrets and all, once the damage is done, once the word is said, once the violation has occurred? Of course, the answer is; it depends.

It depends not just on us, but also on the ones we have hurt, the ones who have been shut out or rejected, or injured by our actions. Sometimes we and they are ready to let go of the past, and sometimes not.

I shall never forget a man who had been a custodian in a church I once served. I hadn’t seen Joe in probably ten years. He had been a good worker, but he had a drinking problem that one day got the better of him on the job, and he had to be let go. Joe was a Viet Nam vet, and had had a lot of demons stalking him, a grunt in the war who had more than a few regrets, most of which I could not have imagined.

Ten years had passed and he stopped by my office one day unannounced to see me. He sat down and told me that he was in the process of getting sober and that as a part of his twelve step recovery he was going back to every person that he had ever offended and asking for their forgiveness. He had been told that not everybody would forgive him, some people might still be angry at him, but that he should ask anyway, because people might tell him what his actions had done to them, and it was important for him to know that.

The years had passed, of course, and it was no problem for me to assure him that I did forgive anything that he might have done. He told me that he had also stolen some things from the church, some tools and some money occasionally. I told him it was all right, I was sorry that he had, but at the same time that was forgiven, too.

Then he told me that his drinking had caused an automobile accident a few years ago in which his wife was killed. And there I simply said that I was sorry, because in that instance, forgiveness was not mine to give. Only empathy at the anguish of his soul, which I felt.

Some things we can forgive in others, and we can ask forgiveness for what we have done that has caused injury, forgiveness from God and forgiveness from one another. It won’t hurt to ask, and we cannot help but learn something in the process. When we do ask forgiveness it keeps life real, and makes us accountable for what we have done, which is ultimately good, painful though it may be.

For Joe, however, and for many of us there are some regrets, some sorrows, some sins which only God can forgive. And it's that that these stories of new beginning that we have read today address.

In baptism we celebrate the good news that God's love and forgiveness exceeds our sin. That there is always more love in God than sin in us.

Anne Lamott in her book, **Traveling Mercies** refers to a truth that is not easy, but that is nonetheless as true as truth can be. And that is that forgiveness is giving up all hope of having had a different past. Forgiveness is giving up all hope of having had a different past.²

As long as we continually blow on the embers of what we might have done differently in life, or how others might have treated us differently, we keep alive the illusion that we can somehow undo what we cannot. The truth is that the hurtful past cannot be changed it can only be put to rest, accepted, and ultimately rendered powerless by our laying it aside.

Which is what God has done in Jesus Christ, given the world a new beginning. Laid aside hate and replaced it with love, replaced regret with promise, sadness with joy, ending with beginning, and turned death into life.

There is a point in every baptismal service when the minister says, "Let us remember with joy our own baptism as we celebrate this sacrament." And it's not for nothing that those words are spoken. They are our comfort and for our assurance as Christians that we *can* begin anew, because in baptism that is what we remember, that God is a God of new beginnings, who makes all things new, who at year's start and year's end is the same yesterday, today and forever. A God of grace, of love, and of compassion. A God who knows us through and through, and loves us still and all.

At the font, at the table, and at pulpit that is the truth we proclaim, the hope joy that we celebrate, so help me God. That by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit we really can start all over again.

© Copyright, Jon M. Walton, 2006.

¹ See Romans 7

² Anne Lamott, **Traveling Mercies**. New York: Pantheon Books, 1999. 213.