

BEGINNING AFRESH

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Mark D. Hostetter

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Scripture: Genesis 1: 1-5; Acts 19: 1-7

I have discovered over the years that preachers and CEO's seem to have at least one thing in common: they generally share a fairly positive outlook on life, a glass-half-full kind of mentality. Whether it's proclaiming the Good News, or promoting good morale and productivity, at their best their focus tends to bring hope and optimism. So, for better or worse, my dual career as Reverend and CEO, gave me a double whammy. . . . and here we find ourselves, less than two weeks into 2009 – a brand New Year and the inauguration of a new President just days away. Lots of fuel for a sermon on fresh beginnings.

Yet there can be no one alive today, cleric or clerk, for whom the realities of the year do not burst through. War: Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, Gaza, Darfur. The economy, unemployment, decimated savings. Corporate scandals, fraud and manipulation. Cynicism about government: from incompetence and cronyism, to outright greed and extortion, the destruction of personal liberties, and the dismantling of agencies designed to promote peace and protect our planet. The collapse of Wall Street and the auto industry and main street business alike. Nothing remains the same.

I read the funniest advice on what we can do in the current economy. One Sojourners Magazine editor suggested that Americans need to keep a balanced portfolio of investments: Keep some treasure in heaven and some here on earth. (Very biblically based!) Everyone's familiar with an Individual Retirement Account – I.R.A. So what better place for your earthly treasures than under a queen-size, rollover M-R-A: a Mattress Retirement Account. It's in the comfort of your own home, you can roll over any time you want – without the paperwork – and it's like sleeping on your own ATM. ⁽¹⁾

We all long, as a nation and as individuals, we all yearn to begin afresh.

I realized the significance of this Sunday, this first Sunday after Epiphany every year, where we celebrate the baptism of Jesus, as we too celebrate the baptism of three of our own children here today. Beginning afresh – isn't that what baptism is about?

You may also know that this new year, 2009, marks the 500th birthday of John Calvin, one of the key reformers in the early 1500's. And, as good Presbyterians, I know you'll remember that Calvin gave us our basic theology, the way we Presbyterians still think about our faith today. Theology does matter, as does the intersection with the world. And any reformed preacher's sermon worth the breath it's delivered with, covers both theology and application. So first a few words about the theology of baptism before we settle back into our Sunday Times world around us.

But rather than start with 500-year-old Calvin, some of you may be familiar with the actor and comedian John Leguizamo. He's very funny, but not generally thought of as a theologian, I suppose.

Well, in his Broadway run about 5 years ago, he described how his first marriage failed because he selfishly thought only of himself, going out every night drinking with his buddies. Finally his wife has had enough, and tells him she's leaving. He cries out, "You're supposed to love me no matter what." As she walks out the door, she yells back over her shoulder, "Supposed to love you no matter what? I'm sorry, but you must have me confused for Jesus."

Well, through the humor of that exchange there's an underlying truth. God does love us no matter what. No matter what we do, no matter what we fail to do, no matter how much we mess up the world and the people around us.

Infant baptism brings that clearly into focus. Nothing is intentional for a baby. There are no moral choices – no actions, no failures – that carry any consequences for God's love, or ours. That same thing's true for us, too. There's nothing we can do to effect our own salvation, no amount of money we can give,

no magic words we can say, no creed we can confess, no good deeds we can perform. It's entirely up to God.

But that's not so bad really. With our faith that God's love and forgiveness are without limit, I'll take that theology any day. God's grace is greater than anything we can do or fail to do. Baptism is not a prerequisite for God's love or forgiveness. It's not a ritual act, necessary for our salvation, like the pre-Reformation church believed. Nothing can limit God's power to forgive. God's grace is greater than that.

In many ways, that's exactly what John the Baptist was doing before Jesus came on the scene. The scripture in Acts that we read today and the version of Jesus' baptism in the gospels, in the beginning of Mark, speaks of John baptizing for repentance, forgiveness, redemption. Reminding us of God's unconditional love.

But the baptism of Jesus was different. It was something new: God beginning afresh. Jesus baptism, and ours, invokes more than just forgiveness and unconditional love. Individually, as parents, as church members, as Christians, we invite God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – we invite God to be present in our lives. And we mark each other with the water of baptism, we mark each other as part of our community as Christians, reminding us of our belonging, our sense of commonality, and of God's active presence in our lives.

Many of you may know the connection that my family has to Hawaii. In some ways I think the connection is more than just a love for palm trees and sun, and blended coconut drinks. (Though I must admit that's a big draw.) I think for us, it's more a connection to the spirit of the place.

At the core of the Hawaiian spirit is the Hawaiian concept called "*ohana*". Some of you may have heard that word before. If you have Disney-programmed children, it's the key concept in the movie *Lilo and Stitch*.

Ohana means family, but it's much more than the English word "family" implies. Especially in America over the past few decades, so often our English word "family" is used to define who is included, in order to exclude others. As if any recognition of your family, somehow takes away from mine. My family vs. your family. The family Corleone. Family Feud. Or the loaded term "family values".

But the Hawaiian term *ohana* is much deeper, much richer. *Ohana* is an inclusive term, applied to more than just blood relatives. *Ohana* family includes friends, community, church. Every Hawaiian knows about *ohana*. *Ohana* rises out of the belief that everyone is connected, and should stick together no matter what. It isn't hard to understand how a concept like *ohana* would be a really important theology for an island community separated by vast ocean from the rest of the world. *Ohana* focuses on how interdependent we all are, how at the core we share far more in common than the few differences that divide. What a wonderful concept of family.

Ohana.

As a part-time resident of Hawaii, I'll give you an inside tip into the personal theology of our new president, who was born, and was raised, and grew up, and still has deep ties to Hawaii: *Ohana*. Connectedness and commonality and community. I suppose it will be called "Obama *Ohana*."

In this church, in this congregation, ever since I was a young boy, I have always felt it – I can feel it here today. There's an awful lot of that same *ohana* going around in this congregation.

That's another big part of our theology around the meaning of baptism. It's about our interconnectedness, our interdependence. It's about belonging to a community, this community, this congregation, this denomination, Christ's church universal, that promises to nurture and to support us, to teach us and to guide us, and to remind us of God's continued journey with us, throughout our entire lives. It's beginning afresh.

Whenever the topic of baptism comes up I can't help but remember the story Barrie Shepherd used to tell about one of his first experiences baptizing a baby. When it came to the actual baptism, Barrie asked the

father what was the name of the child. “Spindonna,” Barry heard the father say. Wanting to be sure he got it right, Barrie asked again, and again he heard “Spindonna.” So, being aware of the modern trend of naming kids unusual names, he proceeded, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to baptize the child Spindonna. After the service, the father, livid and red in the face with anger, rushed up to Barrie and shouted, “What were you thinking, man? It’s written right on her name tag. When you asked me her name, I told you it was pinned on her!”

So enough theology, on to the real world. Really I suppose what we’re experiencing in our country today is a new way of doing things, with all the disturbing dynamics that impact all of us in so many ways.

In our personal lives, I read that something like 62% of all US families this past Christmas cut back on their Christmas gifts, and explained to their children and loved ones that material possessions are not the most important things in life. In the face of financial disaster, we all focus on our families, our friends, our church, reaching out to others, relying more on our human connections than our financial ones. Beginning afresh.

In our political lives, we’re rejecting the polarizing, me-first, exclusionary politics of the past three decades, thinking more about what we have in common with each other to address our critical needs, rather than just continuing to fight about and focus on what makes us different. There’s a visible excitement about this upcoming inauguration, you can feel it, far more than I can ever remember before. It’s the hope that we’re beginning afresh. A new president, “no drama Obama”, who claims a commitment to competence and compassion and the common good, and to restoring our country’s damaged reputation in the world. Even evangelicals are no longer willing to tie their theology to party platform, and Christians of every stripe are joining forces, right and left, conservatives and progressives, joining forces against war, destruction of our environment, inhumane immigration policies, and a criminal and penal system in which justice and mercy no longer go hand-in-hand.

In our own denomination – I’ve spoken about the Presbyterian Church USA before – it’s just a shadow of its glory back in the mid-60’s when we had 4½ million members, compared to the just over 2 million now. When we had nearly 1000 missionaries around the world, compared with less than 200 now. And an annual budget now slashed to bare bones. The national conference centers – Stony Point, Ghost Ranch, Montreat – actually owned directly by the national church, have total annual support by the church of exactly zero. There’s simply no more money left.

Yet the church’s leadership is trying in this new environment to begin afresh. Looking at the issues of membership and finances from a different perspective. There’s a growing movement to make the church respond to the needs of people of today, much in the way our own First Church has done in worship, in ministry, in music, in service, in a message that is relevant to our complex world, making our larger church indeed “Deep and Wide.”

The denomination’s leadership has just commissioned a panel to look into the ways the church has been functioning for decades and can no longer afford, and figure out perhaps a new approach, a new way. Beginning afresh. Mission areas and ministries not just looking to the church with hands out for money, doing things the way they’ve always been done, but an increased focus on effectiveness and sustainability, programmatically and financially. Developing the skills and the approaches and the programs and the staff, that ensure that we, and the church, can still do God’s work, especially in trying times when the church and its ministry are so much more sorely needed.

This beginning afresh is happening in congregations, in Presbyteries, in camp and conference centers, in non-profits of all kinds. It’s no longer about just waiting for the manna from heaven. It’s maybe more like Joseph storing up the grain for the seven years of drought, or the faithful steward working to put his master’s money to good use, or a new way – open to challenging the assumptions of the past – a new way shown to us by the One who is The Way.

God certainly wants us to thrive, yes, but by using all our resources: our heart, our head, our faith, our intellect, our skills – perhaps even more, our empathy, our selflessness, our compassion, our focus on what really does matter in life. Beginning afresh.

These are drastic shifts, sea changes, really, and the current situation is, on a personal level, so very traumatic, devastating so many people and families and communities.

But can you see, can you feel it? At the same time, there seems also to be more hope and love and connectedness than we've experienced in a long, long time.

So many times throughout the Bible, in the midst of the most horrific conditions and deepest despair, God steps in and begins afresh, sometimes in unexpected ways. Look at the history of God's people: Even through drought and starvation, genocide and mass slaughter, exile and defeat – God's people get manna from heaven, led through the wilderness to the promised land, and are given the gift of One who makes God's endless love so real – the greatest hope we could ever imagine – God's presence among us. Our creator, our sustainer, our redeemer: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The triumph, time and time and time again, the triumph of God over nature, God over death, God over the worst humanity can do to itself.

And so, as we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus, today and this Sunday every year, this first Sunday after Epiphany, as we remember who we are and more importantly whose we are, we are all children of the covenant. Through baptism we are marked as God's own forever. We belong to God, and remember in good times and in the times that test our souls, we are reminded in every baptism that God's love for us is everlasting and unconditional, and that we are part of the community of Christians.

That's the core of our faith. We remember what is important, what is at the center of our being, what is at the center of our values, our very lives. And for that, even in the depths of deepest darkness and despair, we can respond in no way other than with gratitude and joy.

Alleluia! AMEN.

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¹Ed Spivey Jr., Sojourners Magazine, December 2008, p58.