

New Beginnings

By: Keith Holste

January 3, 2016. A new year is a time for new beginnings. We make resolutions -- to have better behavior, to lead a healthier lifestyle. It's a time to start over. Pastor Keith preaches on how Jesus coming into the world was a new beginning too, and how this is relevant to our world today. We may not be optimistic in the new year, given the terrorist attacks, refugee crisis, racial violence, floods, and other struggles we've faced in the past year. But we're reminded again of God's love for us, and how his word is stronger.

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We continue to talk about our reading from John in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, this week a typical greeting has been "Happy New Year." It's the proper thing to say this week as we've turned the calendar page and started a new year. We've drawn the previous year to a close and now we start dating things with a new number -- that time when you have to remember not to write 2015 anymore, but to start to write 2016 when you date something, the time for new beginnings. Not just for pages in account books, but as we consider the difference that the new year will make for us, we're more likely to think perhaps of better behaviors we could have for our own care. We figure out ways to maybe lead a more healthy lifestyle in the new year. We want to get started on the right track, and so we resolve that we're going to do this, and call those resolutions -- things that we're going to do differently in the new year, because it's a new beginning, a new time to start over.

In our gospel today, the first verses of John we've heard are about new beginnings also. We hear John write, "In the beginning was the Word." And as we hear that, we remember that we've heard some words like that before. If we go back to the very first page of the Bible it says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." So, John seems to be making a bold statement here, quoting from the ancient scriptures to start writing his gospel. But it's no accident. He's being bold, because the occasion calls for it. He's quoting Genesis as he talks about the beginning of the ministry in the life of Jesus, because this is a new beginning for the world. History is starting over here. Humanity is starting over here. This is a new beginning of God's involvement in the creation. John doesn't just want to tell us this. He wants us to have a deeper knowledge, a feeling for what it means to have a whole new beginning to the world. It's a new promise, a new living promise from God for a new beginning of human history. And so, just as the whole physical being of the world came at the first word of God, when God spoke and the world was created, now a re-creation for the world and for humanity comes in the person of Jesus. This is the new word of God.

Bible scholars have noticed for a while now how the first part of the book of John is structured as seven different signs. The first sign you know is when Jesus turned the water into wine at Cana in Galilee. And the last sign, the seventh one, is when he raises Lazarus from the dead, who was the brother of Mary and Martha. That last sign though so angered the priests and the authorities of his day that they start to plot to kill him from that point. And they do. But Jesus rises from the dead, and that's the eighth sign. It's a sign of a brand new beginning. Jews typically thought of things coming in groups of seven. Seven was a complete kind of number. There were seven days in the week, capped by the Sabbath day. So, a week was complete after the seventh day. Now Jesus was raised on the eighth day, which meant that John is telling us that this is the first day of the week, and it's a brand new beginning. It's a sign that

his resurrection is on par with the creation of the world. This is a new creation happening. There was a creation and the world came to be. Now, there's a creation of the new world because Jesus has not only come and died, but he's also risen for all of us. This is indeed new life for the world.

And in John's writing, the place of creation is the same as well. I don't think it's just any accident. We usually think of the Garden of Eden as the place where things were beginning, and where creation happened as humanity came into the world. But where was Jesus raised from the dead, where did Jesus talk with the women, where did the disciples go to see the empty tomb? It was in a garden. This likely again is by intention. John wants us to know Jesus is the beginning of the new creation of the world. So we have these meaningful signs of a new creation, and we're at the beginning of a new year, but we may not be all that optimistic, even though it talks here about new beginnings. After the difficulty we've had the past year or so with troubles, with terrorist attacks, and hearing the plight of refugees, and unparalleled gun violence, and racial injustice, and major floods now in our area to end the year, we're ready for a new year and a new beginning.

But here we are on the 3rd of January already, and we wonder how will it go? Will it be so new or will it just be more of the same? Our resolutions may be intact so far, but after three days into the year, we know that almost always it's just a matter of time until we break them. We know we don't let the resurrection and the new beginning of Jesus influence us all the time. So where are we at then, in these beginning days of 2016? Does John have relevancy for us? Or is what he says just some sort of a mystical hope that comes from his sometimes-sounding, kind of "otherworldly" dreams? And is John just kind of giving what's more dream talk that really doesn't hit us where we are?

Well, we take two things in particular from John to remind us that the word still has bearing for us. For one thing, the fact that it is the word that comes to us is a good thing. The word is the essence of God. The powerful word that created the world is incarnated in Jesus. Jesus is that very power of God in the world. Jesus is also the language of God. We communicate through words. And so Jesus is there, in with our communications. We use words to talk, and they convey meanings between us. We have Jesus, who allows us to know the meaning of God. Because we have words, we can talk with people. We can have meaningful discussions. We can work on things together. When God wanted to thwart human beings, when they were about to build the tower so high that God was not pleased, the way God stopped them was to stop letting people understand one another, and he messed up their languages so that they couldn't understand one another anymore and allow them to communicate. Now in Jesus is the correction for that. Jesus is the Word. Jesus shows us that God is still communicating with us. A couple of years ago, you likely noticed that many of the UCC churches had banners in front of their churches saying "God is still speaking," comma, then an ellipse. It ended in that way to show that indeed God, the word of God, is ongoing. We need to remember that in Jesus, God is still speaking to us. He has shown us a way to change the world. The signs Jesus did when he was on earth were about healing, restoring life, and bringing goodness and wholeness to life. Jesus is still about that as we are his people in the world. God is still speaking, as we let God speak through us and bring healing and life and goodness to the world around us.

The second way that connection is made between God and these words to bring hope and goodness to our world in our times is to remember that word from the lesson that "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." God didn't just beam out some radio signals, hoping that we would have the right kind of radio to know that he loves us. God sent his son in the flesh to say: I love you. Jesus was saying that in his ministry, but it wasn't always received very well. As we said before, the greater response to him was to be rid of him and to try to silence him permanently. And they did that with all their might, and they killed him. In doing that, he received the brunt of our human sinful tendency to want to go on

our own way. Our sin rejected Jesus and put him on a cross, even as he was trying to bring life to us. But he was God's word in the flesh on the cross. In the flesh he died, and he died for us. He was God's communication to us of the depth and extent of God's love for us. He was the new word of God to us. He showed us that there's nothing that God wouldn't do, no place God wouldn't go, no suffering God wouldn't endure, to make the point of God's deep love for us. It was God's word in the flesh that showed the extent of God's thorough love for us. He wants there to be no doubt that we are God's beloved children, worthy of honor and love.

We need to know this good, saving, loving word of God. But sometimes words come in one ear and go out the other, so we need more than words. We need a sign for it also, so we can be reminded of it again and again and again, when we forget and go our own way, that God's love is so deep for us. So as this morning we receive Leah Elise in baptism, in her baptism we are reminded of the baptism of each one of us. That's the sign that God became flesh, comes to us through the waters of new creation, to make us part of his new creation as well. Baptism is that sign, and it's a way to remember that God indeed has loved us so much. We think back to that sign: "I was baptized. That's true for me." Just as we witness it for Leah today, it's a reminder too for all of us that God in the flesh has come to love me that much.

Water seems to have always been key to God. In the beginning, water and earth had to be separated. When the world went bad, God used water to destroy it with the great flood. When God chose the take it back then, he had Noah in the ark with his family to be the ones to start creation and humanity over again. Our fonts now have eight sides normally, to remember the number of people in Noah's family, to remember how God's water recreates the world and brings a new world to us. God's word is stronger than any floodwaters. It can even hold back the Red Sea when necessary, as Moses found out. God is stronger than all things in creation, and uses those things in creation like water as a sign of life, not a thing of destruction.

It's that power of God that's shown in the first creation, and in the second creation with Jesus, that's with us by virtue of baptism. That's why we can have hope, even when it seems like the new year is daunting. That's why we can have faith, when a little one is born into it. The one who created the world will continue to create and give new life. All the baptized have been sealed with the mark of baptism, according to John, to receive the inheritance from God. He claims Leah and all of us who are baptized, to be receivers of this inheritance of goodness and grace, and then to be speakers and assurers of this word, as we are the bearers of this hope to the people around us in the world.

God's word became flesh in Jesus, but God's word becomes flesh in us also. As we act on his behalf, doing the kind of good that Jesus did on earth, God is showing that God isn't ephemeral, out there, distant somewhere. But God is in the world, bringing about the new creation. And the God who created the world in the beginning has created again in Jesus, and God continues to create in our time. We have that hope as we encounter challenges. And the promised now have an enduring relationship that God has made by the sign of baptism for all of us. Amen.

Now, may the peace of God which passes all human understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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