

Children of God
January 4, 2015
John 1.1-18
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Unmarked calendars, clean slate, a crisp new work journal. Resolutions to do better, work smarter, eat cleaner. We love a new leaf, a fresh start. In the Church calendar, and in the ordinary calendar, we get to officially do this quite a lot. Today's the first Sunday of a new year. Maybe you've resolved to be more committed to attendance and service in this place. Or you're here today to symbolically mark a new beginning. This is a good place to begin again.

We also talk about fresh starts and new beginnings throughout Lent with the biggest new beginning of all at Easter. And Easter's 50 days lead us to Pentecost, the birthday of the Church, and that's another new beginning, a fresh start, a time to make commitments to God and to each other. Then Summer comes, travel and leisure distract us, and Labor Day becomes a fresh start. Back to school, back to work, back to routine and those habits we meant to cultivate.

Things get started yet again in the Church in November. Here at St. Charles we have an anniversary. We'll mark 117 years as a community of faith this year. We'll remind each other that this place matters and our relationships here matter, and we'll make new vows to God and to each other. And if that isn't enough, the Church's New Year begins on November 29 with the first Sunday of Advent.

Today's a fresh start. We'll need a few more. We need to be reminded of who we really are. We need numerous opportunities to return to that true identity.

And so it is that the Bible is laid out in precisely the same way. Perhaps your resolution is to read the entire Bible in one year; start to finish. If that's the case, I hope you'll pay attention to the fresh starts of scripture. The author of John's gospel today is reminding us of The Beginning of all beginnings...In the beginning, God created. A first. Some new thing being breathed into existence. Water, sky, plants, animals, a man, a woman, forbidden fruit of a mysterious tree. We know how that story ended, right? "If you eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you will surely die."

But they didn't die. Things changed. There were consequences. But there was also a new beginning. Immediately a new chance to live as God's children, made in the image of God. If you're the Bible reading start to finish, hold onto that thread from the first page of scripture and follow it through to the last. How many times does God try again? How many times does God whisper to us of The Beginning of all beginnings that reminds us of who we really are? Every time we are made new or have the opportunity to start again, tie a knot. Mark that point in the thread.

There are tablets and covenants and prophets and discoveries. There are pledges, oaths and dedications, and prayers and psalms. There is much talk of new moons and the

dedications made when the moon disappears, leaving darkness in the sky. Scripture likes NEW. Keep following that thread through the sacred text:

Sing a new song to the Lord.

This is the day the Lord has made, I will rejoice and be glad in it.

See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

John uses poetry and writes with the flourish of his contemporaries to say that a New Beginning is here again. And *this* new beginning is as big as the very first beginning of all things when God created. This is really, really a beginning to John.

If light was light when God separated it from darkness, then light is REALLY light now. If God's very self was Light for the world, then Jesus is REALLY, REALLY Light of the world.

If people were already children of God before; Jesus makes them really, really children of God.¹

Methodist pastor Rob McCoy notes that this prologue to John is the writer's attempt to recapitulate the new works of God. Jesus is the summary of all of those new beginnings, all of those new things, all of those new ways of moving and being. For John, Jesus gathers all of the new-ness up into the MOST NEW thing. If we're still following that thread through scripture, John wants us to tie a really big knot here. Don't miss what is happening through Jesus, he is saying.

But now we do have to be careful. Is this a new beginning that undoes all of the others? Do we cut the thread and discard all of those knots we've already made from Genesis to Matthew? Some Christians say yes, I say not at all. We need not allow John's words to discredit the words that came before him. Instead. All of the other starts and beginnings and attempts from God to get our attention inform how we understand what Jesus invites us to consider. God is endlessly creative. God wants to know us. God wants to be known by us. To accept that a powerful thing has begun **again** through the birth of Jesus is to accept **again** that we are children of God. Really, really.

Just as the creation story of Genesis is poetry and not scientific theory, the prologue of John is writing in an artful, poetic style to persuade his readers. This is a creative act by "a literary artist"² and not a history lesson. If the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) tell us what Jesus did and said, John sets out to tell us what those words and actions mean.

¹ Some thoughts about recapitulation prompted by Rob McCoy in his *Pulpit Fiction* podcast on John 1 for January 4, 2015. This is the same for thoughts he shared around "Poetry is not easily interpreted."

² see *Interpretation: John* by Gerard Sloyan, pp. 7-9

Poetry is not easily interpreted. Sometimes we hear it and the words just move us in a way that prose does not. Like a great painting or remarkable sculpture. Like an unusually vivid sunset at the beach with one who you love tucked tightly beneath your arm. Sometimes the moment is the moment and cannot be unpacked or deconstructed without losing its essence. It's not the way the sun turned pink or the number of grains of sand beneath your toes or the angle of your arm around that loved one. It's the whole thing coming together as a moment worth marking.

"In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

This is a moment that John finds so breathtaking, he wants to make sure his readers are just as stirred and amazed. He wants them to choose the new beginning made possible through Jesus. He wants them to say "yes" to God in this wild, illogical new way. He wants them to understand that God is the Source of all things: light, truth, self, power. To choose God, to choose to walk in the Way of Jesus, is to return to your truest self.

We realize that talking about God becoming human is illogical. Sometimes we hesitate to describe what happened in Jesus' birth either because we fear we'll get it wrong, sound like heretics, or sound naive. The gospel writers and early church leaders knew this was a shocking assertion to make about a man; that Jesus was God in the flesh. And when we are trying to describe a spiritual phenomenon that is beyond the rational language of our human experience, we must think as creatively as the Creator. With poetry and metaphor and flourish, we get at the idea that something new, something unprecedented, happened through the life and birth of Jesus.

Perhaps my favorite image for Jesus comes from St. Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*. Writing in the 4th century he uses this metaphor: "You know what happens when a portrait that has been painted on a panel becomes obliterated through external stains. The artist does not throw away the panel, but the subject of the portrait has to come and sit for it again, and then the likeness is re-drawn on the same material. Even so was it for the All-holy Son of God. He, the Image of the Father, came and dwelt in our midst".³

Today is the beginning. Maybe you've heard this story many times before. You've been walking through these doors into worship for years. The music, the friends, the comfort of it all is balm for the soul. But there's the part about receiving Jesus and believing Jesus...well, we don't often talk that way. Or we just don't get into that part. But there's this thread that weaves through each story, remember? The thread that is calling us back to God, calling us back to ourselves. And those callings are connected. We can find strength and direction and power through the person of Jesus Christ. Today is a new beginning. He is a new beginning.

³ St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, pp. 41-42

In a moment I will invite you to meet me at this Table. The bread and the cup are a new beginning. On this first Sunday of this new calendar year, I pray you will be made new. I pray you will believe in the name of Jesus and newly embrace the truth that you are children of God. Amen.