

New Beginnings

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[0 : 00] Good morning.

Each year leading up to New Year's Day, about one-third or so of Americans will make some kind of New Year's resolution.

And you can probably guess what some of the most popular resolutions are, right? Eat less, exercise more, and usually take up some kind of new hobby.

Last week, however, I read a column in the New York Times in which somebody described a different approach to New Year's resolutions. The author and a group of friends would get together for brunch every New Year's Day, and at the end of the meal, they would write a resolution down on a piece of paper, and then they would put it in a hat, and then everyone would draw from the hat, receiving a random resolution, and that would be their assignment for the coming year.

And she writes that usually these resolutions were practical, like fold your clothes at night instead of putting them over a chair. Or sometimes they might be aspirational, like sign up for voice lessons.

[1 : 30] She writes that one year, however, I drew the following resolution out of the hat. Every morning, when you wake up, stick your arms out at your sides, wiggle your fingers, and say, it's showtime.

She says she actually did this faithfully for the month of January before it fell off, but she says that even now, years later, she will occasionally still start her day with, it's showtime.

Now, even if they are not as unique as that, there are good reasons why people make New Year's resolutions.

And one of those reasons, research shows, is that a key component of change in a person's life is what behavioral scientists call the fresh start effect.

People are more likely to pursue positive change in their life at key markers that provide a kind of psychological do-over.

[2 : 38] And they allow them to put some distance between themselves and their past failures of the previous year and to be sort of newly optimistic about the future.

And so studies show that people are more likely to visit the gym after New Year's Day in January and also after a birthday at the start of a new semester and on Mondays.

Sometimes those fresh starts that we need that provide us that kind of opportunity for a fresh start, sometimes we don't choose them.

Sometimes they find us. There's a unique thing, if it's okay here in January, to talk a little bit early about baseball. I know spring training hasn't even happened. But there's a unique thing that happens when Major League Baseball players get traded from one team to another in the middle of a season.

If you get traded to a team in a different league, so if you're playing for a team in the National League and you get traded mid-season to a team in the American League, all of your stats for the year, like your batting average, are reset to zero.

[4 : 02] And they are calculated afresh from the moment of that trade. It's like the season has just like suddenly started over anew for you. On the other hand, if you get traded to a team in the same league, nothing changes.

Your stats just continue as they were through the season. And a recent study looked at over 40 years of data and discovered something fascinating for players who were not having a great season.

And they got traded to a team in the other league allowing their stats to be reset. What happened? Their performance got a major boost.

Their batting averages improved. They got on base more often. They played better defense. Why? Because they got the chance of a fresh start. They had a new beginning. And today's gospel reading from Luke, where John the Baptist is baptizing in the Jordan River, it's a story about new beginnings.

[5 : 13] People have heard John's preaching out in the desert, calling them to change their lives, to live more generously, to care for those in need, to be more honest.

And they have come to the water's edge to get a fresh start. Luke 3 verse 15 says, the people were in expectation.

These were folks that did not have great stats. Their moral batting averages had taken a hit. Their relational integrity was slumping.

And here on the banks of the Jordan River, they had an opportunity in the middle of the season to begin again. And so as each person waded in and as John the Baptist lowered them below the water, they might have been recalling stories that they had heard the rabbis talking about in the synagogue.

They might have thought about the story of Naaman, who had been instructed by the prophet Elisha to go and wash himself seven times right there in the River Jordan to be healed, to be cleansed from his leprosy.

[6 : 32] Or they might have reflected on the fact that in the Old Testament, water is a symbol of both destruction and judgment. And they might have remembered Noah being kept safe from the destructive waters of the flood or how Pharaoh's army as they were pursuing the Israelites out of Egypt were drowned in the Red Sea.

And so as John the Baptist would lift each person out of the water and as they step back onto dry land, they would have done so with a sense that their sins had been judged and cleansed and they had the opportunity for a fresh start.

I think it is entirely possible that no one even noticed when Jesus got in line.

Probably no one would have known him or if they did, they knew this was John the Baptist's cousin from Nazareth, 50 miles away, who had been working in construction.

But in the parallel accounts from Matthew's gospel, we do know that John the Baptist noticed and he says to Jesus effectively, you got in the wrong line.

[7 : 52] If anything, I need you to baptize me. And I think when we read that, John the Baptist's reaction kind of captures our reaction as well.

Our instinctive thought, even if we've read this passage a hundred times before, is that it's a little bit disorienting, it's a little bit jarring when we see Jesus standing in line with everybody else to see somebody who has nothing to repent of standing in line for a baptism of repentance.

But this is what we have to remember. Jesus is not in line for his sins but for ours. And this scene is not just a scene of a new beginning for those who are getting baptized.

It is also a beginning for Jesus because this is his, this is the beginning of his ministry. This is the inauguration of his ministry.

And it is a ministry that is characterized right from the start by him identifying with us. The theologian Carl Barth who was writing just before he died in the final volume of his massive church dogmatics, he wrote that when Jesus stood in line to be baptized with the others, Jesus was not quote being theatrical.

[9 : 28] Barth writes when Jesus was baptized he needed to be washed of sin. Not his sin but our sin.

When faced with the sins of others he did not let those sins remain theirs but as the one ordained from all eternity to be their brother took their sins as his own.

And therefore no one who came to the Jordan was as laden and afflicted as he. Jesus' ministry then and now is one in which he identifies with us and accompanies us.

Wherever we are no matter how far away from God we might be or we might feel no matter how low at any one time our moral or relational batting average might be Jesus gets in line and stands with us.

Even now Paul writes in Romans 8 Jesus prays and intercedes for us before the Father. in all of our shortcomings in all of our failures in all of our struggles nothing can change the fact that Jesus is with us that he accompanies us that he does not leave.

[11:07] And in this scene at this inauguration of his public ministry a ministry that is going to be carried out at dinners with partiers and prostitutes and greedy financial analysts known as tax collectors what happens?

We see Jesus being empowered by the Spirit and affirmed by the Father in this ministry right there at his baptism. Luke says that the Holy Spirit came down on Jesus in the form of a dove and the voice of God the Father is heard to say you are my beloved son with you I am well pleased.

This is by the way the first and perhaps clearest expression of the Trinity in Scripture. And right here we see that the entire Godhead is all in on this ministry of Jesus' solidarity with us.

There's also something else for us to consider when we read of Jesus' baptism and that is we're reminded of our own baptism. And just as Jesus' baptism is a means of his solidarity with us our baptism brings us into solidarity with him.

Starting in the 300s or so when Christianity was growing and expanding across the Roman Empire the church began this massive building campaign which included constructing these beautiful baptisteries some of which we can still see today.

[12:51] And when you look at them and you see the baptismal pools designed around those baptismal pools were vivid frescoes or mosaics of Jesus' baptism.

So that as converts go down into the pool of water they do so against a backdrop of Jesus standing in the Jordan with John while the dove of the Spirit is coming down.

And so at their own baptism of adult believers they are themselves literally entering into the story of Jesus' baptism. And then just before they're baptized they would make baptismal vows using words very similar to the words that we use in our baptismal vows today.

They would say I renounce the devil and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God. I renounce the empty promises and deadly deceits of this world that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God.

I renounce the sinful desires of the flesh that draw me from the love of God. I turn to Jesus Christ and confess him as my Lord and Savior. I joyfully receive the Christian faith.

[14:07] I will keep God's holy will and commandments and walk in them all the days of my life. And then they were baptized.

And they understood that they were being baptized not just with water but baptized in the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist himself said of Christ I baptize you with water but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

And so scripture is clear that baptism is not just a outward ritual or a kind of institutional formality.

A person who is baptized in water whether that person can remember it or not whether it seemed momentous or not whether they were adults or adolescents or an infant that person is also baptized into the Holy Spirit and then immersed into a new realm the realm of Christ.

In Galatians 3 Paul writes that the believers there he says all of you have been baptized into Christ. In Romans 6 Paul writes do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death.

[15:37] In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul says for in one spirit we were all baptized into one body. What might that mean for us today?

Let me suggest two things. baptism first some of us may come from traditions in which baptism doesn't feature as prominently.

We may be inclined to talk about decisions we make for Christ or accepting certain truths and all of that is important. All of that is valid.

But throughout church history and from the very start of the early church onward baptism was of great importance. At baptism we are immersed or doused in a new reality.

The reality of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And understood in this way salvation is not just the forgiveness of sins.

[16:51] It is that. but salvation is also about human persons entering into a new reality, the relational dynamic of the Trinity.

And over time we begin to undertake certain activities such as learning to pray without ceasing that enable us to participate in that relational dynamic in increasingly deep ways.

second, there are opportunities at various points in the church calendar for congregations to renew or reaffirm their baptismal vows.

Often that's done at Easter but it can also occur on other feast days such as Pentecost Sunday or All Saints Day. But there is another way that the church fathers say that our baptism can be brought into the present and that they say is through the practice of repentance.

One of the desert fathers was known as Mark the ascetic. He was a disciple of St. John Chrysostom. He lived in Egypt in the 400s and Mark writes this at baptism Christ comes to live in the innermost part of our being without our realizing it at first.

[18 : 31] And we only become conscious of it over the course of our gradual transformation. And a key component of that transformation he writes is repentance which he calls the renewal of our baptism.

and he writes that there are two kinds of repentance. The first he calls liturgical repentance such as what we do here on Sundays or what we would pray in the daily office from the book of common prayer.

And the second kind of repentance is a repentance that becomes increasingly habitual in our hearts. where we become more aware of our shortcomings and failures and we experience greater humility in our efforts to grow and we become more attentive to the slow often imperceptible work of God's grace in our lives.

And over time we develop a posture of repentance in our hearts that gives God more space to work. But here's what's interesting.

The fathers say that the second type of repentance the habitual heart level repentance is built on and depends on the first type of repentance which is formal and liturgical.

[20 : 00] Regular formal repentance they say can create space for deeper work to occur. prayer.

So what this means practically is that when I pray the morning office when I open up the app on my phone with morning prayer on it and the confession of sin is right there at the beginning every single morning in morning prayer that confession of sin is something I can kind of rush through as a rote prayer.

Almighty and merciful God we have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts we have offended against your holy laws I can do that as a rote prayer or it's an opportunity to slow down and reflect to repent specifically and daily of what may sometimes be just simply hidden selfishness but which creates barriers to me becoming more like Christ using liturgical prayer thoughtfully and reflectively can over time create space in our hearts in which deeper transformation can occur and where Christ begins to shine in our lives that much more brightly repentance is a way of bringing our baptismal vows forward and activating the grace of baptism given to us with the Holy

Spirit right in the present and in this respect then new beginnings are not just limited to New Year's Day or birthdays or new semesters or Mondays the gift of daily repentance which begins and remains liturgical but increasingly becomes habitual and from the heart is one way of putting into practice that reminder from Saint Benedict always we begin again always we begin again and so perhaps we can ask ourselves at this start of the new year as we reflect on Jesus' baptism and our own where do I want to grow this year where do I want to become more free where do I long to become more like Christ and then we seek to live out our baptismal vows with the power of the Holy Spirit through the practice of daily repentance we know that we'll fail we know that the path to transformation is long and slow but we will also remembering with each faltering step that Jesus who began his ministry standing in line with sinners is standing right there beside us amen

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