

BEGIN AGAIN

Isaiah 11.1-9; Matthew 3.1-6 & 11-12

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Lesson: Isaiah 11.1-9

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. ²The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. ³His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; ⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth ... ⁵ Justice shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. ⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. ⁹They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

Lesson: Matthew 3.1-6 & 11-12 (Isaiah 40.3)

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” ⁴Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Sermon: Begin Again

I want to thank Pastor Ned for leading us in prayer this morning. Given my health issues over the last six months – as of Thursday I have been told that I am apparently cancer-free – but even if the news had been different, I am very aware of the energy of prayer and the gift it is that we give to each other. Whatever you think prayer is or isn't, the fact that we do it, in whatever form we do, is a gift. And I am grateful.

So thank you and good morning.

I am reminded of the last lines of the poem, “On the Pulse of Morning,” by Maya Angelou which, like our text this morning, also references a river. Her poem ends:

*Here on the pulse of this new day
You may have the grace to look up and out
And into your sister's eyes,
And into your brother's face,
Your country,
And say simply
Very simply
With hope –
Good morning.*

That's the good morning I am talking about – having that grace to look up and out into my sister's eyes and into my brother's face with hope. What a powerful thing to look into each other's faces *with hope*.

Earlier in that poem, written for the inauguration of Bill Clinton, Maya Angelou writes:

*Lift up your eyes
Upon this day breaking for you.
Give birth again
To the dream.
Women, children, men,
Take it into the palms of your hands,*

*Mold it into the shape of your most
Private need. Sculpt it into
The image of your most public self.
Lift up your hearts
Each new day holds new chances
For a new beginning.*

It's in that spirit that I say "good morning" to you from the banks of the Jordan River.

I was telling our group when we were there that, when it comes to the baptism by John in the Jordan, realtors are right. It's location, location, location. After all, there are any number of places that John could have been baptizing people: in the beautiful Sea of Galilee; in the clear cool headwaters of the Jordan in the ancient city of Dan where it is believed that Abraham and Sarah made their way into the land God had called them to. Why not one of the luxurious pools in Jerusalem or in the mighty ocean, as our ancestors did here before us?

Of course we know that John wouldn't have made the mistake of trying to baptize people in the Dead Sea because the mechanics of trying to immerse people in that salty water would never have worked.

That makes sense. But why the muddy, sluggish water of the Jordan?

I have to remind people that John may have been a Baptist but he was not a Christian. You realize that, right? John's baptism was not an initiation into the Christian community because neither John, nor Jesus for that matter, were Christians. They were Jews and they would all know the significance of the Jordan River.

It was through the Jordan that the people crossed over into the Promised Land. So this strange character, John, is calling people away from the seat of religious and political power that had developed in Jerusalem over the last several hundred years, back to the place where it all began.

He is inviting the people to commit themselves to begin the promise of the Promised Land all over again – or, as Maya Angelou says, to “give birth again to the dream;” that dream of a place where justice reigns and the wolf can live with the lamb; where a little child will lead us and no one will hurt or destroy – a vision, in fact, for the whole earth in the spirit of wisdom and understanding and knowledge and reverence and wonder.

John was baptizing people in the Jordan as a way of inviting them to begin again.

And as people to come to him at the Jordan, he says:
“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Sometimes in order to begin again, there is some chaff that needs to be burned off; some things that need to be cleared out; some beliefs that may need to be blown away.

That’s what repentance is all about, I think – being open to the spirit that sweeps away our cynicism so that we can have hope – the voice that comes from some deep wisdom inside us that says it’s “one day at a time” when other voices are saying “Why bother? What difference does it make? Who cares?”

It’s that voice that says: Begin again.

It’s being open to a spirit that clears out our pre-conceived ideas so that we can truly look into our sister’s eyes and into our brother’s face with reverence and wonder and hope. Did you blow it already?

Begin again.

It's being open to a spirit that burns down our pretenses and privilege so that we can simply be who we are.

That's a hard one. Let me tell you that when the spirit did its number on me and I had to give up that projected image of myself as the "best little boy in the world," that was hard. And I realized in that moment I had a choice to try to keep propping up that image or to let it go and to just be me.

And just so you know, I've discovered that decision wasn't a once and for all proposition. Every day, I have to make that decision. Every day, I have to begin again.

Now maybe this doesn't sound like good news to you. Maybe you are saying to yourself: I don't want to begin again; I don't want to start over. I finally have things figured out. At last my life is in order.

And that's great.

But I'm telling you this because I can assure you that the day will come when the only way forward is to begin again. You can't go back. You can't count on all that lovely nostalgia to get you anywhere you need to go. While it is absolutely true that you can learn from the past, you can't live there.

You will have to begin again.

Let me say that this election is call to begin again – to do the labor necessary to give birth again to the dream. It's another chance to begin again the promise that this is a place of justice for all and welcome to all those huddled masses yearning to breathe free. Whatever we think we have accomplished up till now, it's time to begin again.

It may take some repentance – some openness to the spirit that, for our own good, sweeps things away and clears things out that we thought we had to hold on to and burns down our pretense and our sense of privilege so that we can be the truth of who we are.

We are, right now, at the River Jordan. And it's time to begin again.

And here is good news from the shores of that River. When Jesus was baptized, the Spirit descended like a dove and a voice from heaven said: "This is my Beloved One, in whom I am well pleased."

And I like to point out that all four gospels have this story at the beginning of their stories of Jesus. In other words, this voice came to him before he had done anything – no sermons, no healings, no calling disciples, no pat on the back for all his good work. Nothing.

And what happened next, right after that powerful baptism experience, was the temptation: "*If* you are this beloved one, prove it; do something to make people believe it."

I have to believe that every day, Jesus had to begin again. And every day he had to go back to the Jordan and listen again for that voice that said, no matter what, "You are my beloved one."

I keep holding on to those words of Dr. King: "When you are staggered by the chilly winds of adversity and battered by the raging storms of disappointment . . . we need to know that there is Someone who loves us, cares for us, understands us, and will give us another chance" – some voice that says: I know there are things you have to let go of, but just know that you are beloved and, no matter how hard it is, today you can begin again.

Now maybe the biggest problem we face with beginning again is having the faith to believe it's even possible. Maybe there's too much water over the dam or under the bridge or wherever it is that water goes to swamp our hope.

So I come back to that gift of prayer I was talking about at the beginning and I want to invite you to pray with me a prayer for help by Ted Loder.

Settle into your bodies. Take a deep breath. Center your hearts. Focus your thoughts. And join me in prayer.

God of history and of my heart,

so much has happened to me during these whirlwind days:

I've known death and birth;

I've been brave and scared;

I've hurt. I've helped;

I've destroyed. I've created;

I've been with people. I've been lonely;

I've been loyal. I've betrayed;

I've decided. I've waffled;

I've laughed and I've cried.

*You know my frail heart and my frayed history –
and now another day begins.*

*O God, help me to believe in beginnings
and in my beginning again,
no matter how often I've failed before.*

Help me make beginnings ...

to begin forgiving

that I may experience mercy;

to begin questioning the unquestionable

that I may know truth;

to begin risking

that I may make peace;

to begin loving

that I may realize joy.

*Help me to be a beginning for others,
to be a singer to the songless,
a storyteller to the aimless,
a befriender of the friendless;
to become a beginning of hope for the despairing ...
a beginning of freedom for the oppressed ...
a beginning of beauty for the forlorn,
of sweetness for the soured,
of gentleness for the angry,
of wholeness for the broken,
of peace for the frightened and violent of the earth.*

*Help me to believe in beginnings,
to make a beginning,
to be a beginning,
so that I may not just grow old,
but grow new
each day of this wild, amazing life
you call me to live.*

And today, as we hear your voice, help us not to harden our hearts but to begin again.

NOTES

On the Pulse of Morning by Maya Angelou (Random House, 1993). Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "A tough mind and a tender heart," in the collection of sermons, *Strength to Love* (Fortress Press, 1963), p.20. "Help Me to Believe in Beginnings," Ted Loder in *Guerrillas of Grace* (LuraMedia, 1984), pp. 98-99.