

“New beginnings”

December 7, 2008

Text: *Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8*

I.

One of the things we love about Christmas is the security and reassurance of the story. Isn't it true? We LIKE the story.

Every year—no matter what,

- no matter a fractured economy,
- no matter the maddening violence that surrounds us, both here at home and abroad,
- no matter the wars and evils we heap on one another
- —every year we retell the story. And in its retelling, the light of reassurance shines through.

The story is itself a new beginning. Check out the first words from **Mark's** gospel:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Right away, that's powerful stuff. Those are weighty words that bear serious meanings in our traditions. *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

Of course, we already know the ending which, curiously, in Mark's story, ends so abruptly and sends us scurrying back to Galilee, the sight of the beginning.

However, knowing now what we know about the ending (the suffering and death and how LIFE, which cannot be held back, finds its way through) each new beginning (each retelling of the story) overflows with possibilities and power.

The time is fulfilled, said Jesus—his first public words of ministry—and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.

II.

The point of Christmas and Easter, friends, is that the fresh light of God's love cannot be held back. At the end of things, LOVE wins the day. And building on that, the further point, is that *new beginnings* are forever beginning, again, again, and again.

The perennial new beginning. That's what Christmas signals.

Out of whatever mess we make of things ... out of whatever sadness or grief that burdens our spirit ... out of whatever failure, rejection or darkness, God tells us in Jesus Christ that we can start again.

The voice of the prophet sounds out: *a child is born ...a son is given ...*

Prepare the way of the Lord ... make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up ... and every mountain and hill be made low .. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed ... and all people shall see it ... for the mouth of the Lord has spoken (from Isaiah 40).

New beginnings are what we are called to, friends, every day of our lives. About this, Lutheran pastor, John Stendahl observes:

To be at a beginning is to find that we are not prisoners of the past.

This affirmation cannot be stated too strongly. No matter what has come our way in the yesterdays of our lives, the past does NOT have ultimate power in our lives.

That doesn't mean that we are in any way being indifferent or uncaring. It doesn't mean that we are trivializing mistakes that have been made. And it certainly doesn't mean that we've forgotten. God help us; sometimes we need to forget.

But what it does mean is that we can live again. And that we are NOT prisoners of our past.

III.

Friends, we know we live in a flawed and fallen world. The tragic, violent madness in Mumbai reminds us of that. As does the almost daily violence in our schools—even our elementary schools—here in the states.

And everywhere, there's greed and short-term, immediate gratification impulses. Everybody looking out for *number one*. So much of the sin that engulfs us is all about *the self and the moment ... the self and the moment ...* with no consideration for consequences.

Okay, enough of the sordidness of life. We read and hear the news every day; and over time, it wears us down. There's a lot of darkness out there. Fair enough! But you know what? We don't have to live there. We don't have to be prisoners of yesterday.

We can build on the good news of today, the new beginning that today brings. *A child is born; a son is given.*

We can take the best that God gives us today and make something of it—whatever it is. We can start again ... and together we can work to transform the world. Together, we can call people to *high ground*.

THAT'S GOD'S VISION. That we seek the *high ground* in all things. There's freedom on the *high ground*, to be sure. God creates us in freedom. Human freedom is God's great risk in creation. But there's responsibility, too. This is where we fall short.

Where's the responsibility? Which is what a sensitivity to the BIG PICTURE calls us to?

God has created us in freedom, given us all of planet earth to oversee and rejoice in ... and then given us the Christmas story to reassure us and show us the way. And as if that weren't enough, again and again, God says *come and repent ...accept my forgiveness and start again*.

Good grief, what a God!

IV.

Around the world,

- in the mountainous borders of Pakistan ...
- in the devastation and ruin in Darfur, Sudan ...
- in the treeless hillsides and poverty of Haiti ...
- in the inner cities of war-torn Iraq ...
- in the uneasy hallways of our schools here in the states,
- in the repugnant opulence of too many corporate board rooms across the land ...

... wherever it is that darkness looms ... wherever it is that cynicism abounds—the darkness and cynicism that *don't know* love and that *can't hear* the voice of the God of *new beginnings*, God says ...

Come, all of you ...into my presence. No matter your group or your religion ... no matter anything about you. Come ...and repent ...and be forgiven; and start again.

For wherever Christ is born, which is anywhere and everywhere, all things are possible. I close with a woman's poignant Christmas memory ... a reminder of how there is a *warming of the earth* in the birth of the Christ child.

V.

The day was frightfully cold, with swirls of snow in the air, and I was looking out the living room window which faces our church. Workmen had just finished constructing the

annual **Nativity** scene in the church yard when school let out for the day. As children gathered excitedly around the crèche, they didn't stay long. It was far too cold for lingering.

All the children hurried away ... except for a little girl of about six. The wind lashed at her bare legs and caused her coat to fly open in the front, but she was oblivious of the weather. All her attention was riveted on the statues before her. Which one, I couldn't tell. Was it Mary? The **baby Jesus**? The animals? I wondered.

And then I saw her remove her blue woolen head scarf. The wind and cold must have chilled even more her perky, red cheeks. It didn't matter. She had only one thought in mind as she, lovingly, wrapped her scarf around the statue of the **baby Jesus**. After she had covered it, she patted the **baby** and then kissed it on the cheek. Satisfied, she skipped on down the street, her hair frosted by the cold.

New beginnings are in the air, friends ... every time the Christ child comes ... which is every time we dare to open our hearts to the utter magnificence of God's grace and to the wonderful possibilities the new day brings.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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