

On Friday, I shared a prayer with our Morning Prayer group from a profound little book by John McQuistin, II called, *Always We Begin Again: The Benedictine Way of Living*. Over the past couple of years, “Always We Begin Again” has nestled itself into my consciousness as a useful mantra. When I start thinking to myself that life is supposed to be a certain way and, at some point, that certain way settles down into a predictable pattern, “Always We Begin Again” is there to remind me that that understanding of life is a falsehood.

Sure, there are some norms of life that we can often count on, but when those are disrupted, we must also remind ourselves that these are the ways of life – ***disruptions come along***. Many students are experiencing a disruption in their daily schedules as they end one grade level and prepare to begin another. Seniors—whether in high school, college, or graduate school—are going through major transitions to whatever might be next for them. There is a reason the end-of-year ceremonies are called “Commencements,” because once something has ended, something new is about to commence/begin. Always we begin again. Whether you are 11 or 18 or 21 or 33 or 67 or 90, we can all count on something occurring in our lives that initiates a restart of sorts.

Sometimes we easily glide into the transition of something new – it is the next logical progression in life, and we, that is to say our life experience, has prepared us to do this new thing. But sometimes, and often *too often*(!), a life circumstance thrusts us into moving into something new on the fly, and it can take a fair amount of time to settle into the new thing – and, sometimes a shift asks too much of us and we never fully settle into it. This is the nature of life.

It also seems to be the nature of the church – Big C Church, and little c church. Next Sunday will mark the 3rd anniversary of our previous congregations beginning to worship together on the way to becoming Lyndhurst Community of Faith Church. For all the work we have done to get a constitution written, and sort out our staffing pattern, and create working groups, and plan events, and create policies and procedures for how to operate our life together, there are still things that crop up to remind us that we're not yet fully formed; things that aren't quite working the way some folks feel they should, and so we find ourselves talking through them. The Council had a three hour meeting this past Wednesday. And, yes, it was long, but we also were able to tick off some important items from our fiduciary checklist:

- Looking backwards, we examined a list of folks who were once active in the church but have been inactive for a long time now as we discerned who could easily be taken off our roles, and whom we deemed necessary to send a letter inviting them to let us know if they were opting in or out of our ministry.
- Looking forward, we discussed a new discernment tool that can help us systematically approach community partners who may be looking for a space to do their work, and seeing if our facility would be a good match for them.

Who knows how the Holy Spirit may stir things up around here, but we can be sure that She will and we will be asked to do some things in new ways in order for our ministry to progress. There might be ways we are called to begin again in how we live into the Resurrected Christ's call to us.

The text Donna read speaks to how the Big C Church wrestled with the very question of beginning again. It's a continuation of where we left off last week with the new guard apostle, Paul, at loggerheads with old guard apostles back in Jerusalem. They are stuck on the requirements for who can be an authentic follower of the Resurrected Christ. Do gentiles need to take on Jewish cultic traditions, such a circumcision, in order to be genuine members of the budding Church? Or, is being led by the Holy Spirit to have faith in the risen Christ enough to qualify them as members of the Church?

As you recall last week, Paul says it is ridiculous to force these old school expectations on people for whom the rituals have no significance or relevance. Especially since something like circumcision is a stumbling block for most Jews to begin with! It's hypocritical.

In today's reading Paul has moved on to utilizing a new tool of persuasion, and he has decided to take it back to the beginning.

Show image from the Webb Telescope



Okay, not quite the geologic beginning – the beginning of the universe.
But in Theologic time, not so long after that.

Keep the image of the stars up!!

As the Hebrew narrative goes, there were the six days of creation and a day of sabbath rest. Then, a second creation story introduces the couple we call “Adam” and “Eve.” Ten generations after them came a fellow named Noah – you might recall Noah and his big boat. Then, ten generations later came another man we know well, named Abraham (well, Abram at the beginning of the story). While The God* was present with the folks who came 20 generations before Abram, something new was initiated with Abram.

* It might be an interesting note for you that “The God” is identified in Genesis as “Yahweh.” But, of course, we aren’t introduced to that designation until Moses learns of it by the burning bush in Exodus. This God who is speaking to Abram does seem to be The God – a monotheistic being, so for the purpose of narrative integrity I’m going to continue to call the deity “The God.”

There was something about Abram that attracted The God. Genesis 12 opens up with The God speaking to Abram:

Now (The God) said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 2 I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

4 So Abram went, as (The God) had told him...

Here we have the beginnings of a relationship; a promise is made to Abram, and his wife Sarai, that if they trust in this God, The God will be an important part of their lives. Abram indeed trusted in the promise of This God, and packed up his substantial household, and he and Sarai and their nephew, Lot, roamed until they came to the place The God wanted them to stop.

Keep the image of the stars up!!

After they had travelled a long way, Abram continued to remember The God's promise that he and Sarai would be the progenitors of a great nation. Abram stopped walking long enough to ask The God about this, because after all this time, he and Sarai had not been able to conceive and bear any children. The God assured Abram that even in their older age, they would have children and many heirs. Genesis 15 tells us that as an illustration, The God took Abram out one clear night and invited him to look up into the heavens. Who knows, maybe it was so clear that the stars looked like what we're seeing on the screen?

The God said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then The God said to Abram, 'So shall your descendants be.'

"6 And Abram believed The God, and The God reckoned it to Abram as righteousness."

This profound moment of belief was indeed the beginning of the relationship this God has with three major religious groups—Judaism and Islam, the former, of course, branching off into Christianity: The Abrahamic Faiths.

Remove the image of the stars

And that is where we find ourselves today. The Apostle Paul uses the story of Abraham to further his argument..... Remember, The God said to Abram, “I will bless you and make your name great...” And continuing,

3 I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you *all the families of the earth* shall be blessed.”

Paul jumps on this last phrase, and uses it as primary reasoning that all along The God had it in mind to create a relationship with not just the Hebrew people, but, eventually, with all peoples of the earth. First, a deep abiding relationship needed to be formed with a particular community, a long-lasting relationship, and then *through them* God’s Word would filter out to the rest of the world. Paul’s point is that the Jews, of which he is one(!), would bear the message of Yahweh God to the world. But, it was not necessary for successive people-groups to endure the same laws and restrictions as the Jews. I’m paraphrasing Paul’s words, “Because we showed ourselves to be a stiff-necked people, we needed a disciplinarian, we needed an accountability partner to do what God invited us to do. The Law served that purpose. But through the Resurrection of Christ Jesus, God has done a new thing. Christ Jesus embodied the Law and the Prophets, and now it is The Christ’s Spirit that has been unleashed in the world, and it is the Spirit of the Resurrection that guides people’s hearts and minds.” Paul might have concluded, “And it is not just ‘enough’ for people to live their lives out of faith in The Christ’s grace. It is everything! Everything God desires for the world was found in Christ Jesus. And what is required of you, as was exhibited by Abram in the beginning, is belief.”

Is belief really enough? If someone says, “I believe in Jesus,” is that all it takes? It feels a bit simplistic to me. And indeed, for me, the answer is “Yes and No.” On the one hand, who am I to question anyone’s religious integrity? On the other, I would want to follow up with a few questions:

How is it that you came to your decision to “believe in Jesus?”

Or, maybe better asked, “What is it about what you know about how Jesus lived and died, what Jesus taught and exhibited, that makes you want to pattern your life after the Risen Christ?”

And finally, “How does learning about and believing in Jesus impact the way you choose to live your life moving forward?”

And before I ask those questions of someone else – I had better be darn sure I can answer them for myself with integrity. Not in order to pass any kind of legitimacy test, but rather to check my understanding of the gospel with others.

Ultimately, I believe, that is what Paul was doing – he was testing his understanding against that of the OG Apostles, and he was testing his understanding with the people he had encountered in Galatia...and Corinth...and Ephesus... and Thessaloniki... etc. For us, it is what we do whenever we gather for bible study, or presbytery and association meetings, and General Synod or General Assembly – other occasions for theological conversation – we are sharing our beliefs with each other so that we may hone them into a deeper understanding of who God is calling us to be.

And that is where the rubber meets the road – discerning who God is calling us to be, and then living our lives accordingly.

Why did The God choose Abram and Sarai to begin with? Some would tell you that God knew they would be fully trusting. I'm not so sure. Abram and Sarai were willing to step off into a journey with God – but they each had their moments of doubt – just like the rest of us.

Why did The Christ choose the violent zealot Saul to be the one to carry the message of the gospel to the furthest reaches of the known world? Some would tell you the Spirit of Christ knew *Paul* would be successful. I'm not so sure. Paul received a hospitable welcome from a follower of Jesus and that was enough to incubate what became a deep, abiding faith and get him going on his way.

Why have each of us been chosen to bear the love of God, the peace of Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit? God knows none of us is perfectly suited for that job ... unless we are willing to accept the grace of God that was a free gift in the beginning and has been all the way up to now, and will continue to be until the new heaven and new earth spoken of in Revelation are inaugurated.

Until then, we lean into the new life in Christ we received in our baptism, and we regularly return to this table to be reminded of the depth of God's love for us. And we are reassured that through God's grace we are always prepared to begin again. Amen.