

Sermon – “Beginning Anew”
Scripture Readings – Psalm 147:12-20, John 1:1-18
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On this twelfth day of Christmas, our Psalm reading is chapter 147:12-20. This psalm of praise celebrates the power of God’s word. The wordplay goes undetected in most English translations. The Hebrew behind “command” in verse 15a literally means “utterance.” This term is paralleled by “word” in 15b, and the effect is to remind the reader that God is in an ongoing conversation with creation. God’s word voices winter into being and God’s word announces springtime. Hear now what God is saying.

Praise the LORD, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion!
13 For God strengthens the bars of your gates; God blesses your children within you.
14 God grants peace^[a] within your borders; God fills you with the finest of wheat.
15 God sends out God’s command (God’s utterance) to the earth; God’s word runs swiftly.
16 God gives snow like wool; God scatters frost like ashes.
17 God hurls down hail like crumbs— who can stand before God’s cold?
18 God sends out God’s word, and melts them; God makes God’s wind blow, and the waters flow.
19 God declares God’s word to Jacob, God statutes and ordinances to Israel.
20 God has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know God’s ordinances.
Praise the LORD! Amen.

Our gospel reading is John 1:1-18. In anticipation of Epiphany, the journey of the wise men from the East and the season of lights which reminds us that the good news of Christ’s birth is for all people; John introduces the Christmas story to the Greek world using language familiar to his listeners. The “word” or “logos” was their understanding of the mind of God. Philosophers, for centuries, wrote about the “logos,” the impersonal power, which made the world and kept order in it. And so, unlike Matthew and Luke, we don’t read about a census, the house of David and the trip of a virgin and her fiancée to Jerusalem. This would have little meaning to John’s listeners who lived in the rational world and who were unfamiliar with the Judea heritage. Instead, we read that *the word became flesh and lived among us*. In Jesus Christ, the invisible, impersonal God becomes visible and wonderfully personal. John shares the Good News and then invites his listeners to a life of faith. Hear now the word of God.

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 The Word was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through the Word, and without the Word not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in the Word was life,^[a] and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.^[b] 10 The Word was in the world, and the world came into being through the Word; yet the world did not know him. 11 The Word came to what was his own,^[a] and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. 14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen God’s glory, the glory as of a father’s only son,^[a] full of grace and truth. 5 (John testified to him and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’”) 16 From Christ’s fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son,^[a] who is close to the Father’s heart,^[b] who has made God known. Amen.

The title of the sermon: “Beginning Anew”

Text: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. John 1:1

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, we give you thanks for the joy and wonder of beginning anew and for your steadfast presence in all our beginnings. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The New Year presents the prospect of “beginning anew” as we open our hearts, ears and eyes to the fresh ways God will speak to us with vision and clarity in 2020. The psalmist reminds us that God’s Word runs swiftly through creation uttering in the stillness of winter and then speaking into being the newness of spring. John announces that God’s Word became flesh and dwelt among us, the same Word that was with God, in the beginning, creating the world.

On this twelfth day of Christmas our scripture readings affirm that although God has been in conversation with creation from the beginning and the Word that was with God in the beginning became flesh and dwelt among us, no one has seen God. As we begin anew this year, let us reflect together on the gift of faith.

The author of Hebrews, in chapter eleven, defines faith as *the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*. Sometimes we forget about the element of risk involved in having faith. When our religion becomes something we take for granted, when it becomes too predictable or something of which we are so sure; when we no longer experience the awe and wonder of faith, we have lost our understanding of what it means to have faith.

John reminds us in his prologue, in his confessional statement: No one has seen God. The very nature of faith consists of an element of uncertainty with a willingness to participate wholeheartedly; to believe the unlikely and improbable without proof or guarantee.

According to theologian Fred Craddock: *Faith hears, sees, and testifies, but faith is not arrogant or imperialistic as though its views were so obvious as to be embraced by all but the very obstinate. Faith involves a searching, a response to an offer, a commitment, a willingness to obey. Nothing about Jesus Christ is so publicly apparent as to rob faith of its risk, its choice, and its courage. Faith exists among alternatives.* (Preaching the New Common Lectionary, pg. 100)

Therefore, as we begin anew we need not criticize or condemn those who have made choices other than faith. Likewise, let us not forget the risk and the courage of those who have chosen faith in Christ. To some, faith appears simple or naive –a blind belief. However, in actuality faith takes a higher level of thinking to the extent that it involves trust and our emotions, a willingness to make a commitment to something without guarantees. Faith calls us to go beyond our world of rational thought.

Our faith affirms the God who was in the beginning, the God who makes all our beginnings possible, and the God who will see our beginnings through to the end time and time again. The God who calls forth the spring, beginning anew following the stillness of winter, is the God who reliably renews our individual lives and the life of our community, from death to life, from desolation to hope, and from meaninglessness to purpose.

Just as the book of Genesis tells the story of the beginning of the world and humanity, the gospel of John tells the story of a new beginning, a new epiphany of the God whom no one has ever seen. The author will declare at every point in his Gospel that God has done something new by making God's self-known through Jesus Christ. John nowhere attempts to prove what he declares to be "truth and grace" in our midst. This is what his community believes... this is what changed their lives.

To have faith in Jesus Christ, the word made flesh, our glimpse of the "God no one has seen" is to embrace our humanity in all its wonder and frailties, but it is more than this. Jesus calls us to embrace the humanity of others, to recognize all God's children as brothers and sisters in Christ, to treat them with respect and civility and to make allowances for their frailty and shortcomings, even as Christ has made allowances for ours.

As we begin another year together during this Christmas season looking into the face of the child whom we believe has made God known to us, as we contemplate our individual hopes and resolutions for what lies ahead and the hopes and resolutions of Westminster Presbyterian Church, and as we ordain and install new church officers, may we resolve to risk faith in this time of beginning anew, the faith God calls us to in Jesus Christ and the faith that challenges us to reach beyond ourselves and to risk doing something for someone else, even when it doesn't make sense. This is what Christ did, this is what Christ call us to do, and this is the Word of God with which we begin anew. Amen.