

“NEW BABY, NEW YEAR, NEW LIFE”
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John 1:1-18

Not so long ago, there was a commercial running on television that depicted a mother caring for her first baby. She was extra careful about everything she did. Everything was sterilized and spotless, she never took her eyes off of the baby, and the baby looked positively put together and precious. Then the commercial switches to baby number two – the house is a mess, one baby is running one way and the other another, and when the mother leaves the house, it’s a mess and so are she and the kids. It’s a hysterical commercial, but I think it’s got some truth in it.

I like to kid my mother about being neglected because I was the third child to come along. You know Richard was the first, a son; and then Susan came along, a daughter; so there was nothing unique about me. I swear they wore out their cameras on those two, because I didn’t see many pictures of me when I was a baby! Just messing with you Mom!

Seriously, any of you who have children, and even those of us who don’t, but have watched all of you – you know that when children come along, it’s all about them, for a while, at least. It’s amazing that one minute you’re a couple waiting for their child to be born, and the next minute, every single thought in your mind is about that child. For a while, at least, your world is focused on that child.

In much the same way, the past four and a half weeks have been like that for all of us. We’ve been totally focused on a baby. For four weeks, we anticipated his birth. Oh, we didn’t have baby showers or go shopping at Babies ‘r Us, no, we lit candles in an Advent wreath, sang “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” had Christmas programs and cantatas. For four weeks, we were totally focused on a baby.

And then, the other night we celebrated His birth in a wonderful way – with music, and candles, and communion. It’s been wonderful.

And all of that was just within the church, not to mention everything that all of us did to get ready for Him outside of the church. I know you were just like me – making lists, checking them twice – shopping, wrapping, baking, cleaning, writing out cards. It’s been a hectic few weeks, and not a few of us are still tired from it all. I don’t know about you, but it was a struggle for me trying to get everything done. I suspect it might have been the same for most of you, as well.

So now, Christmas is over, so that means the struggle should be over as well, right? Well, in one sense it is – the struggle to prepare for the birth of Jesus is over. But in another sense it's not – because as one wise person put it – the real struggle is to let this baby – Jesus the Christ – become a part of us. Baking cookies, writing out Christmas cards, and wrapping presents was easy – letting Jesus into our hearts – really, truly into our hearts and lives is something altogether different.

Celebrating Jesus' birth is more than just singing carols and lighting candles, it's letting Him be born in your heart, it's letting His will be done in your life, it's seeking to be more like Him and grow closer to Him every single day. That's what Christmas is really about – letting Jesus be born in you.

During the four weeks of Advent, the scripture lessons that we read were from what are called the “synoptic Gospels” – Matthew, Mark and Luke. They were all story tellers, so in their gospels we read John the Baptist's story, Joseph's story and Mary's story. That's how those Gospel writers told us about Jesus.

Today, our Gospel lesson is from John – whose style is totally different from the other three. Whereas the other writers told stories, John's gospel is very theological, and quite beautiful and poetic. From the get-go, John tells us who Jesus is. He doesn't give us a genealogy like Matthew, to prove Jesus' heritage; he doesn't tell the story of the journey to Bethlehem like Luke, he doesn't even start his gospel when Jesus was an adult, like Mark. John uses this beautiful language to tell us right from the start who Jesus is, and why He came.

Listen again to some of his beautiful words: “In the beginning was the Word (Jesus), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen His glory.”

“From His fullness, we have received grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made Him known.”

For John, it wasn't so important that we know the story of how Jesus came, it was important that we be reminded who Jesus is, and what He came to do. From the very beginning of his gospel, he wants us to know that in Jesus is life, abundant, full, eternal life – and it's there for us, and it is there for the asking.

In Jesus is grace, and it's there for us, and it is there when we confess our need for it, and receive it.

In Jesus is light, light that shines in the darkness of life, light that leads us out of it, and it's there for the asking.

That's what John wants us to know – that's what he tells us – who Jesus is, why He came, and that His gifts can be ours – for the asking.

During Advent, we sang “Joy to the World” and every heart prepared him room – the challenge now is to let Him move in. The challenge now is to accept His love, and let Him into our hearts and minds, let Him become part of who we are and how we live. That is the true challenge of Christmas – to let the baby born in Bethlehem into your life, and ask Him to be your Savior.

We're in a time of newness right now – a new baby has been born, and we're about to flip the calendar on a new year. Perhaps it's the time for you to say “yes” to Jesus if you haven't already given him your heart. Or, if you have, perhaps it's a time to say “yes” again – to renew your vow to Him, to recommit yourself to being his faithful disciple.

I know that you all know that this week a lot of New Year's resolutions will be made. They're not all they're cracked up to be, but there's something to be said about starting fresh at the start of a new year. One preacher by the name of Bruce Epperly, when thinking about faith and the new year coming, said this: “In many ways, this is what New Year's is about – the quest for new behaviors, new attitudes, and new visions to mirror the coming of a new year. The New Year's resolutions, even when they last only a few days, remind us that we can be transformed; that we can become new creatures; that we don't have to live by business as usual but can see our lives in a new way. The impact of past and present need not imprison us, we have the freedom to shape our attitudes, first, and then our behaviors. Behold, God is doing a new thing (he concludes) and so can we!” (On-line, “Happy *Sacred* New Year, Bruce Epperly)

I like that. I like when he said that resolutions remind us that we can be transformed and can become new creatures, that we can see our lives in a new way and that we don't have to let the past and present imprison us. And how is it that we can be transformed? How is it that we can live our lives in a new way? How is it that the grip of the past and even the present can be released? In and through Jesus Christ – that's how.

I don't know how many of you read Guideposts magazine, but I do. And in the current issue, there is an incredible story by a man who was in prison for 30 years for a crime he didn't commit! He was arrested because he literally happened to be standing in the wrong place at the wrong time, someone falsely identified him as being involved, and back in that day, there was no such thing as DNA testing. He was found guilty of awful crimes and sentenced to 75 years in prison. No matter what he tried, he couldn't get his case heard again, and over and over again, over the years, he was denied parole, primarily because he wouldn't admit to having committed a crime he never committed. Had he done so, he probably would have gotten parole.

But he just couldn't. And what kept him going, was his faith in Christ. When he could have been freed from prison by admitting to something he had never done, he turned to Christ for strength to do what was right – which sadly, meant he would be staying in prison. Christ gave him the strength, and gave him the strength for every day of that long, tragic journey.

And thanks be to God, finally, finally DNA testing was done, and indeed it was proven he was totally innocent, and after 30 years behind bars, he was set free.

Now, I don't know about you, but I think it would be really easy to be incredibly bitter about that. It would be really easy to spend one's life angry and hating everyone and everything over the injustice done to you.\

Not this man. He walked out of that prison cell with his head held high, and never looked back. He let go of anger and bitterness, he let go of the regret over things missed that he could never get back – he let go of it all, because years earlier, he had let Jesus move into his heart. The light that John talks about in his gospel, is the light that carried that man out of a dark prison cell, a dark and sad situation, and led him into new life.

Now, thankfully, very few of us go through experiences like that, but all of us go through or live in darkness and struggle of some kind at one time or another in our lives. And when we do, Jesus is the light that can lead us through it and out of it. His is the light that can transform our hearts and our lives, His is the light that forgives and sets free, His is the light of life.

So, as we stand at the doorway to a new year, my question to you is this: you've welcomed the baby at Christmas, but have you let him move into your heart? If you haven't, maybe today is the day. It's a new day at the start of a new year as we celebrate a new baby. Perhaps this can be a day of new beginnings for you.

And if you have invited Jesus to be the Lord and Savior of your life, make today a day you recommit to follow him more fully, love him more dearly, live for him more faithfully.

In a moment, we'll sing the beautiful hymn, "In the Bleak Midwinter." The last stanza goes like this: "What can I give him, poor as I am. If I were a shepherd, I would give a lamb. If I were a wise man, I would do my part. But what can I give him, give my heart."

That's all He wants – your heart. Won't you give it to him this day? May it be so.

Amen.

