

Easter 4B – April 21, 2024

“The Power to Begin Again – PowerPoints of Life Series”

Read Acts 3: 12 - 19 and or memorize Acts 3: 19

One of the most powerful things we can do is give people the opportunity to begin again. Perhaps this poem by an anonymous teacher reminds us that the power to begin again is actually based in forgiveness.

It's called a “New Sheet”

He came to my desk with quivering lips,

The lesson was done.

"Dear teacher, I want a new sheet," he said,

“I spoiled this one.”

I took the old sheet, stained and blotted

And gave him a new one, all unspotted

And into his sad eyes I smiled,

“Do better now my child.”

Someone continued the thought by applying the same idea to God.

“A New Day”

I came to God with a quivering heart

The life was done.

Dear father, "Have you a new life for me?

I spoiled this one.”

He took the old life, stained and blotted

And gave me a new one, all unspotted,

And into my tired heart He smiled,

"Do better now my child.”

Forgiveness is the power to begin again. As Christians, we want to remember that, because we so often forget it. Such a new beginning happened at Solomon's porch, after a man, crippled from birth, started walking, jumping and praising God when Peter healed him. He was well known because they had often seen him begging by the temple gate and wondered by what power he had been healed.

In response, Peter turns it into an opportunity to proclaim Jesus to people who need this new beginning. First, he brings them to an awareness of what they have done; then will offer a chance for a new beginning. "In Jesus Christ, there is new life for you. This is what you have to do." Peter then offered them three steps to embrace it.

The first step is renouncing the spiritual forces of evil. As Christians we are called to do that each day. In Acts 3, Peter's not afraid to lay at the feet of those who are questioning him, their guilt. "The power of evil killed the author of life and you went along with it. Surely you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders," said Peter.

Evil seeks to diminish us and make us feel that we are unworthy. That's one of the reasons Paul reminds us that, in Jesus, we are a new creation. Our worthiness comes from Jesus, not ourselves. James Russell Lowell reminds us that we have to make a choice when he wrote:

**“Once to every man and nation, comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side.”**

We are accustomed to a great amount of conflict and war in our time. But Billy Graham had quite an insight for us when he said, "The wars among the nations of the earth are mere popgun affairs compared to the fierceness of battle in the spiritual world. "

Paul talks about that spiritual battle in many places, and how he has fought a good fight. You get a sense that it was a battle all the way. He identified that battle was against "the powers of darkness and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." **In that spiritual battle, we have to make a decision between the darkness and the light.**

C. S. Lewis wrote *The Screwtape Letters*. It is the advice of Screwtape, the major devil, to his nephew, Wormwood, an inexperienced devil on how to win back a recent convert from the enemy, who is God. The convert was embracing Christianity.

Screwtape warns Wormwood not to, "try major temptations of the flesh; he's prepared to resist those." Instead, he suggests, "that you get him discouraged. Wear him out doing church work. Help him become friends with superficial Christians who are highly skeptical about everything. Get him on the slippery, sliding, slope of doubt, and mistrust. We'll have him back in no time," reminding us that the spiritual powers of evil are always seeking to deceive us.

Sometimes, they are found in bestselling authors. Do you remember many years ago that a man named Dan Brown wrote a book called *The DaVinci Code*? He said it was fictional, yet erroneously claimed it was based on facts. He created a great deal of misdirection and misinformation, especially for those who are not as knowledgeable about the Christian faith.

Here's one of his characters, "The church is murderous and evil, the Bible is a hoax, Jesus never claimed to be divine, but was a mere mortal married to Mary Magdalene, whose bones composed the Holy Grail because she bore the child of Jesus, who's descendants are still among us." Talk about deception.

Interestingly, enough, Brown relies on many of the teachings of a heresy of the first century, called narcissism. We might think of narcissism as a person problem, loving oneself more than others, but

narcissism is a denial of the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me." A narcissist places himself before God.

Renouncing evil, we take the second step: repenting of our wickedness, giving us a new beginning. We are not likely to reach our desired destination by traveling faster in the wrong direction. Sometimes, the best thing we can do is stop and turn around. That's exactly what the Greek word repent means, to turn around or back towards God. Our sinful inclination is to turn away from Him.

A pastor was returning from a retreat in North Carolina and ran into a horrible traffic jam outside of Knoxville. He was not a patient driver. As he saw the traffic backing up, he whipped off the interstate at the closest exit under the grandiose notion that he could find his way through the Smoky Mountains without a map or GPS to guide him.

You probably already know he got lost. The two-lane blacktop road, narrowed to become a one lane road that devolved into a gravel road and soon became more dirt than gravel. His wife turned to him and said, "I think we are lost." A totally unnecessary observation under the circumstances.

The road ended by a river. He saw a single car parked on the bank. He stepped up onto the bank and said to the lonely, fisherman sitting there, "catching anything?" The man took one look at his pants and black loafers and replied, "You're lost, ain't ya?" The man confessed, "I guess I am. Could you help me find my way back?" Cracking a smile, the fisherman stood up and said, "Turn around. Go back to that bridge, cross it, take the first road to the right and then every time the road forks, keep turning right. You'll eventually get to Pigeon Forge."

Repentance belongs to those who believe in another chance. So, if you never make a mistake and always make the right choices, never fail, then you don't really need to think about repentance, because you don't need it. But if you don't think you need repentance, I'll tell you a truth: The only person you're deceiving is yourself. You probably think it's others, who need to repent and return to God. If we miss the mark of God's high calling and find ourselves on dead-ends, repentance is for us.

Will Willimon, a pastor, tells about visiting a professor at Duke Medical School, who said to him, "I give thanks to God every day that I am a Lutheran, a Missouri Synod Lutheran. We are really big on sin. Every morning when I walk toward the medical school with all its grandiosity, I say, 'A lot of good things are going to happen here today. While we are busy helping people, there will be some mistakes. People will be overlooked and I ask, 'Lord forgive us.'"

Willimon said, "You're thankful for that?" "The doctor replied "Of course I am. I meet a lot of people who are not Lutheran; not religious at all. They think they have to get everything right. When they don't, they have no place to go." What a relief it is to know we can repent.

In repentance, you receive the third step: the opportunity to refresh your soul. In Acts, the author, Luke reminds us that when we repent, we get the opportunity to have our sins forgiven; our souls refreshed by the Lord. A lot of people think the best refreshment is a nice coffee shop.

Our society has gotten more and more involved with refreshment services, which have risen to a whole new level. It's nice for breaks at a conference, where it can wake you up, pick you up, energize your movement, invigorate your spirit and send you along to new heights. Or at least that's what the folks selling the refreshments want you to believe. The good news is that for Christians we know that we can all use spiritual refreshment.

Jim Davis, a cartoonist who draws the cartoon, Garfield, has him lying in a box, trying to coax himself into getting up. "It's time to spring into action," says Garfield to himself. But as his paw pounds the ground, the rest of him stays put. Finally, defeated, Garfield says, "The spirit is willing, but the springer is weak!" Perhaps you have found yourself wanting to spring into action, but having a weak springer. Could you use a little refreshment in your soul?

I have good news for you. Jesus is hosting refreshments right here today. You'll get some bread and a little wine. It may not appear to be much, but it packs a whole lot of power because it is not just bread and wine, but the very body and blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ. **Jesus offers us these communion elements for the forgiveness of sins, so that we might have a new beginning.**

In John 4, Jesus says to a woman by the well that he provides a spring of water welling up to eternal life. And anyone who drinks from it, will never thirst again. In the waters of Baptism God gave us new life; in Holy Communion Jesus is continually renewing that new life through His Body and Blood, shed for us for the forgiveness of sins.

As you come to the table, renounce the forces of evil, repent of your wickedness and find refreshment for your souls. Jesus provides it all for you, without cost because you are a new creation in Him. **Celebrate that newness of life each day in the One who loved you so much that He gave His life for you.**

Count me in: Because of your new beginning, how will you refresh others?