

“Starting from the Beginning - Again”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
Christmas Morning, December 25, 2016

Scripture Readings: Psalm 98
Luke 2:8-20

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

We have so many beginnings in our life. The first and most significant beginning is the beginning of life in our birth, and so the Christian tradition honours the beginning of the Christian year by starting in Advent, the anticipation of the birth of Jesus. Christmas morning is, in a sense, the culmination of the beginning of the faith honoured and recognized in our lives. Yet a week away we begin a new year, and some of us will celebrate in eager fashion to bring in the new year 2017.

Still others among us will honour a wedding anniversary, and mark the occasion of the anniversary of the death of a loved one with solemn memories and thoughtful reflections.

This year is the 150th anniversary of the founding of Canada, and the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation will be marked in October this year. Catherine and I have significant anniversaries in our careers coming up in May – 30 years and 40 years since ordination, respectively, and we hope to have an opportunity to celebrate all of those milestones in the year ahead.

Yes, new beginnings are not just associated with this time of year. April 30th is a time to wrap up the tax season that has been this year and prepare for the tax reckoning to come. Springtime is a time for planting, and without it, fall would never be a time for harvest.

So how do we prepare for the new beginning of our faith in the culmination of Advent in the birth of the Christ Child, and what does this new beginning mean for us all?

One thing we learn in life is that not all new beginnings are predictable or even easily anticipated.

I want to share with you a video that has become a key message of the season that talks about a dramatic new beginning.

*(Video about a man who is reunited with his family
after he has spent several years in a refugee camp.
At the end, he falls to his knees and praises God.)*

It is a story we can relate to, somewhat, having supported a refugee family, but few of us can imagine being separated from family, including a new born child, for many years.

Few of us remember the challenge of learning to walk, but if we have had knee surgery, or a broken hip repaired or a new hip installed, or a serious leg injury that needed surgery, we may remember learning to walk for a second or even third time. New beginnings are not without their challenges.

No matter how close children are born between one another, most parents forget the work involved when newborns first arrive on the scene. Each new beginning is almost a totally new experience.

While the tasks may seem daunting in such a situation, we also have a new understanding of life and opportunity when we see Christmas as a time of new beginnings. It is not the same old, same old all over again, but it is a time to begin with new energy, new strength, and new determination.

The announcement of the birth of Jesus was seen as an announcement of “good news of great joy.” How often do we hear news as both “good” and “full of joy”?

A six year old European boy with terminal cancer raised 400,000 Euros in 24 hours to help children dying from pneumonia – he was concerned about children worse off than he is, so encouraged people to donate one Euro every time they get their nails done for help with pneumonia.

Amanda Eshelman, a thirteen year old, had been steadily losing her hearing in her left ear, and even a hearing aid did not help. Despite treatment, she also was losing hearing in her right ear, but earlier this month thanks to an implant she could hear her mother for the first time in many years. She crumpled in tears, and so did her mother – it was a magical moment of new beginning for the whole family.

Sarah Clark is a waiter at the Pita Jungle in Phoenix. Nine months pregnant, and about to take maternity leave with an injured fiancé unable to work as he faces knee surgery, she received a \$900 tip from customers she had served before. The woman also is pregnant, and said the money was a gift from God and they wanted to share the money with the waitress.

These are all good news stories of great joy. They still happen. The message of Christmas is still alive if we look for it, patiently.

May you sense that God is with you in new and important ways as you prepare for the new beginning to your life about to emerge in the days and weeks ahead.