

9/13/09 Sermon

"The River of Life"
Ingathering Water Service
Rev. Paul D. Daniel, Minister

What is it about new beginnings that fascinate us so? Surely, today is a new beginning, the official start of the church year, although in truth this community serves you year round. The life of this congregation is ongoing and the call to justice – our central religious imperative – takes no holiday.

This morning is about both reconnecting and new beginning. We are at a place we recognize as familiar and loved as home, yet somehow new, with different challenges, but with a renewed sense of hope and optimism.

Fred Muir in a **Heretics Faith**, writes, "Americans have a love affair with the automobile, and close behind would have to be something far less tangible, more prosaic, but equally as liberating: our love of beginning, especially new beginnings."

Here are just a few of the more familiar and pithy ways that we canonize this almost religious faith in beginnings:

- Live each day as if it were the first day of the rest of your life.
- If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.
- A journey of a thousand miles begins with but a single step.
- It is never too late to start over.

The notion of starting over has become a sort of mantra that everybody can begin again:

Get a makeover or a new job ... move to a different city ... a new home, spouse, baby ... new hairdo, diet, wardrobe ... or how about a new look, cosmetic surgery, Botox ... or, thankfully, a new President.

Yes, we have a love affair with starting over, but is it really starting the circle of life over again?

We begin in a familiar, if not always well-respected place, the Bible. Ecclesiastes (1:5,9) tells us:

The sun rises and the sun goes down,

*and hurries in the place where it rises ...
what has been is what will be,
and what has been is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.*

And so it goes. Life is on a continuum, where the edges of new experiences are always shaded with their predecessors – we live on the cusp of existence, one experience shading the next. Not particularly sexy sounding, but perhaps more accurate, closer to real life. The waning summer yields and overlaps with the coming autumn.

Some beginnings and endings may feel sharp and abrupt but most, I suspect, are a continuation, a building on past experiences without sharp edges.

I like the idea of a periodic fresh start, beginning with a clean slate, living today as if it were the first day of the rest of my life. Today feels like a new beginning. I moved across the country to a new home, am beginning a new ministry in a sparkling light-filled building. I like the excitement I feel.

Yet with every fresh start, we also bring along a trunk load of psychological and spiritual baggage. We never leave any part of ourselves behind.

What is it about new beginnings that hold such an attraction? Is it escape? Why is the message of Ecclesiastes such a difficult one to hear? If our life is circular, there is no beginning but also no end. We control when or even if we leave the circle. Perhaps we can avoid death all together. Immortality. Is that the goal of constantly beginning again?

Is all this emphasis on starting over really about the denial of death? As long as we can start over, can set the conditions of this new life, we are reborn, reincarnated over and over again. Just think of how long you can put off the inevitable. If you can just keep changing jobs, divorcing and remarrying, building a new home, finding Jesus, Karma, enlightenment, a “new truth.”

And what about boredom? “What has gone on is what shall go on, and there is nothing new under the sun.”

Boredom, for some, is nothing more than a small, daily kind of death, to be avoided at all costs. What better way to deal with boredom than to start over, to begin anew, the taking of the first step in a journey of a thousand miles?

And of course there is frustration, a dissatisfaction – if you don't succeed, keep trying. Why? Because you want to get it right. Before I die, I will finally get it right! It is as if to suggest to the gods above, "When I am satisfied, then and only then you can take me!" – as if we really had any control of our living and dying. Ah, to start over again, to make a new beginning, and this time to get it right – no mistakes, no problems, no regrets.

It is probably impossible to live with a sense of freshness all of the time. There is in fact, something safe and secure in a daily routine, a comfort in the daily sameness of our lives. I get up in the morning, make my coffee, read the newspaper, watch "The Today Show," shower, dress and go to work by the same route I always take. Continuity, a continuation of our daily life is not always the last refuge of the unimaginative. There is still room for the new challenges you will face each day. Thornton Wilder put it this way: "We can only be said to be alive, fully awake in a Buddhist understanding, in those moments when our hearts are both conscious of our treasures and grateful for what is, for our hearts are not strong enough to love every moment."

Just to maintain consciousness of what could be – not necessarily to love it or live it – although that might happen occasionally, require us to remain open to engaging serendipity with an open and grateful heart. But to be conscious, may just as likely be the best we can hope for.

Awareness, consciousness, sensing these, I think are the tools that will give us what we need – these coupled with desire and willingness. Scott Sanders, in **Staying Put**, explains: "All there is to see can be seen from anywhere in the universe, if you know how and where to look, and the influence of the entire universe converges on every spot. Look around you for a minute; in your neighbors eyes are whole universes. Look deeply and, in so doing, renew your faith in the holiness, goodness and beauty of life in an unbroken line from one generation to the next." Within our ongoing communal life, we reaffirm the way of the open mind and a full heart, rekindling the flame of memory and hope.

What we need is to recognize that from where we are we can achieve satisfaction, the sense that comes from a beginning; from where we are, we can feel the freshness of life continuing, of this community once again reunited. So whether we are beginning or continuing, we are together and we welcome you to this very special homecoming, this place of the healing waters of community.

May it be so!