

## Starting Anew

Isaiah 9:1-4; Matthew 4:12-23

Third Sunday after Epiphany, (Jan. 23) 2011

Kyle Childress

Anthropologist and writer Loren Eiseley once suffered a serious setback in the middle of his career at the University of Pennsylvania. As he looked back, he said that sometimes the kaleidoscope through which we peer at life shifts suddenly and everything is reordered. And then he added, “Every now and then there comes an experience so shaking that the kaleidoscope never quite shifts back to where it was. We must simply deny the experience or adjust our vision” (Loren Eiseley, *All the Strange Hours*, pp. 99-100).

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus comes along and shakes our kaleidoscope and we have to decide whether we’re going to deny it or adjust our vision to it.

Jesus walks the shore of the Sea of Galilee and calls these fishermen to become disciples of his, to drop their nets and follow. Somehow or another, his call, his person, his vision, something of God in him and through him, called them and they immediately dropped everything and followed. They immediately started life anew. They adjust their vision and see life in new ways. Starting life over with Jesus was more powerful and more attractive and more provocative than the prospect of staying where they were.

Notice how many times Matthew uses the word “immediately.” Jesus walks up to Andrew and Peter where they are working for the family fishing business and says, “Follow me.” And Matthew says, “Immediately they left their nets and followed him.” Then Jesus walks up to James and John who are fishing with their

father, Zebedee. “Immediately,” Matthew insists, “they left the boat and their father and followed him.”

Somehow the call of Jesus compelled them immediately. And immediately they turned their backs on their old lives and embarked on something new.

This story is full of new beginnings. Jesus himself hasn’t been on this new journey all that long either. Matthew tells us that he had just left home in Nazareth and made his new home in Capernaum, which was a small village right on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is beginning his new life but he’s no lone ranger in this endeavor. He calls others to join him. He calls us to join him in starting over; in a new beginning.

French writer and philosopher Paul Valery said, “Every beginning is a consequence – every beginning ends something.” William Bridges, a consultant on change and transition, insists, “We resist transition not because we cannot accept change, but because we can’t accept letting go of that piece of ourselves that we have to give up when and because the situation has changed... After being more or less the same person for months and years, it occurs to us one day that something has happened inside us... You start with an ending... One of the first things a person needs to ask is, ‘*What is it time for me to let go of?*’”

The way the Bible puts it is that we have to die. Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously said, “When Jesus calls us, he bids us come and die.” We have to let go of the status quo, however much we love it. Says French critic Charles DuBos, “The important thing is this: at any moment to sacrifice what we are, for what we could become.” The call out there in front of us is greater than the pull of where we are. The pull of the resurrected life is in front of us but we have to die to get there.

All change is experienced as loss, even change for the better, even change we want. We leave behind the precious, what is familiar, what is beloved. We grieve. It is a dying. So Abram and Sarai, in old age, leave their comfortable home and retirement in Genesis 12, as God begins again after the flood. Moses leaves being a prince in Egypt and spends 40 years taking care of sheep in Midian so God can prepare him. He goes on to lead the people out of bondage in Egypt through the Red Sea and even though it was bondage, it was also their home. David gives up being a shepherd boy and leaves his father and brothers, because God has chosen him to be king. Jesus was baptized, gave up his old life and began a new one as God's Messiah. He left Nazareth, moves to Capernaum, and calls fishermen to drop their nets, leave their family business, leave their families, and leave their way of life.

Betsy Smith moved to Tyler on Friday amidst tears – both hers and ours – and frustration – both hers and ours. She had so much to give up and get rid of and it was so hard. Over 40 years of memories of Nacogdoches and more than that with Steve. Every item was a memory. There is much grief. But the possibility of a new life is something that compels her forward. She is starting anew.

What is it time to let go of? What baggage are you carrying and what stuff are you stacking and storing that you need to leave behind?

The second stage of starting anew is the between the old and the new. This is the liminal space, the threshold, the mean-time. Biblically it is called the wilderness. We also remember it as Holy Saturday; as Advent; it is 40 days of Lent. It is the time of burial, wandering, exile, and fatigue; the time of waiting, patience, and perseverance. We have left the old but the new has not yet come. This is when the testing comes, the refining, discerning, and deciding. This is

when we are tempted to go back – like the Israelites in the wilderness wanting to go back to Egypt. Sometimes the wilderness is where we get stuck, paralyzed, knowing that we can't go back but not knowing how to move forward. We wander, we rebel, we fight and argue, we send scouts out ahead but we don't trust their reports.

Paul Tournier, a pastoral theologian from a generation ago, said that we live our lives either leaving a place that was our home or arriving at a place that will be our new home, with the result that most of our lives are lived in between leaving and arriving. The wilderness.

But the wilderness is always a time of grace, if we'll pay attention to it. It is where we are stripped of all of our old presumptions and securities; where we get down to our raw, unfiltered selves and learn that the only thing we have is God and one another in God. It is in the wilderness that God is most clearly present leading, sustaining, and guiding us forward. As God told the Jews in exile, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who have lived in a land of deep darkness – on them the light has shined" (Is. 9:2b).

In starting anew, there is the hope of the third stage – the promised land. Resurrection. It is where it all begins to make sense, everything comes together and fits. We have new ways and new habits which feel awkward at first, then familiar, then perfectly natural. We have a new identity and see things in new ways – even our past. We are able to look back and see it more clearly for what it was. This is not to say the resurrected life is easy, because it's not. It is full of new work, and learning to embrace these new ways and including people like never before.

What makes all this interesting as a congregation is that any number of us are in different places on this journey. Some of us are just starting off and we're grieving at what we're leaving behind while others of us are wandering in the wilderness, and others breaking into the life of resurrection. Yet somehow or another, with the presence of the Holy Spirit among, God leads us, helps us care and be patient with one another and leads us in the direction he would have us go.

As a congregation we are at the place of starting anew. After several months in a kind of exile, we are now back in our newly renovated building. Next month we'll have a rededication service to highlight our new place and our renewed commitment to follow Jesus Christ. We're back in the building and picking up steam on all the things going on. We're ready to get moving on aspects of the Long-Range Plan like the playground. The Earth Care Mission Team is up and running full speed ahead and the Faith and Trauma Team is already moving fast on plans for next year. The Missions Committee is putting together a series beginning in Feb. that we're calling "Embracing All God's People" and the first session will be on immigration and will be led by Mary Catherine Nino. We have a new youth minister, Paige Beasley, and have even hired a new custodian, Brandi Altmann. There is much vitality bubbling up and I can't keep up with everything.

Additionally, next October I'm to give the endowed annual Hoover Lectures at the Baptist Seminary of Richmond, Virginia. My hope is that these lectures will be the core of a book, probably written with seminarians in mind.

All this is partly why I want to highlight something that we first talked about in our Long-Range Plan: hiring another staff person. I believe that in two years we need to be ready to hire an associate pastor, a younger, seminary trained minister with skills which will compliment mine own. We need someone who can lead in

both outreach and education to the younger generations: young adult, college, youth, and children. And in order to hire someone in this position, we need to raise \$3000 a month more than we are currently giving. This is very doable and I hope we do so in two years.

So where do we start? How do we start? Rene Descartes said *cogito ergo sum* – “I think, therefore I am.” Others prefer *fervio ergo sum* – “I feel, therefore I am.” And some of us might even believe *mando ergo sum* – “I eat, therefore I am.” But the Christian answer has always been *credo ergo sum* – “I trust, therefore I am.” The place to start anew is with the God we know in Jesus, who comes to us, calls us to drop everything and follow him. It takes trust to step out and follow him.

Notice I said trust and not belief. Following Jesus is about trusting him enough that we participate in his life together. We can stay where we are and believe. We can remain who we are and believe. Believing is like dating; following and trusting is like marriage. Believing is being a tourist; following and trusting is making a home. Believing is watching sports; following is playing sports. Austin Heights is a church of trust and following. You can't sit back and watch and you can't be a spectator. Here it's all about participation.

God is the God of movement. God's very name is a verb: “I AM” which means among others, “I am the One out Front of You;” “I am the One on the Move.” To know this God we have to run to stay up. We have to be on the move.

This is why Jesus calls to start a new life and follow him. William Sloane Coffin used to say that God's most persistent enemies are those unwilling to move in new directions. He said that if we choose, we're sometimes wrong; but if we never choose, we're always wrong.

So come on, trust God, and choose to act on the best invitation you'll ever get! – to be a disciple; to be a follower of Jesus. It is an invitation to grow your soul, to learn how to love, to live with mercy. It is the call to “get a life.” It is an invitation to join the greatest adventure in history – where God is your constant companion, and your destination is ultimate and eternal. It is the invitation to shed your pettiness, your caution, your anger, and your growth-stunting fear and step out in the bracing experience of trust and faith. It is the invitation to find yourself by losing yourself; it will cost everything and you will lose everything but the promise is that you will gain everything.

Amen and amen!