

“The Gift of New Life”

Isaiah 40:28-31; Romans 7:5-6, 8:1-6;
John 1:29-34 and 6:30-38

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Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Isaiah passage begins with that this morning. The prophet shouting out, “Have you not known, have you not heard that God is present with us?” In many ways, that’s what John the Baptist was saying to his people: you can turn, you can return to God. As we hear those prophets say those words, I am also reminded that we have just come through Christmas and it’s not only a case where we hear that we can turn to God, but Christmas reminds us that God has come to us. It’s not simply us looking for God because God is coming to us, toward us. In the person of Jesus Christ, God comes to be among us.

Last week we talked about that as the gift of light, how God enters into our darkness. Today I would like to talk about the gift of life that God gives us. As we remember and notice God coming, we are also reminded of that first moment that God gave life to everything. God is creator. When I think about all of that—God giving life, God being present as the light that helps us see again, and sometimes it feels like when I enter the light, some of the things I see I am not always so happy about. I see my life differently.

As you think about the human life cycle, there’s a sense that we are born into a creation that God has given us. God gives us life and then in the process of growing up, as our brains take shape and our social relations occur, we begin to be shaped and kind of entangled in the world in which we live. There is a need for getting through that entanglement and finding our way through life. There’s that time when hormones begin to surge and life begins to change and we grow into adulthood. We find sometimes that adulthood wasn’t quite what we expected. There is more complexity, more uncertainty. There are ways we get trapped or entangled in choices we make and paths we take. I don’t think this is unusual. It feels a little like we all encounter this struggle at some point.

I was thinking about some people and as they grew, the place into which they came. There’s this guy named Nate. You often saw him sitting under a tree thinking because he was often lost in the possibilities. He wasn’t sure which way to go. He wanted someone who could see his way clearly. He felt trapped with all those possibilities, pigeonholed there.

Then there was Andy. Andy was stuck in the family business, in the shadow of his brother. He might have had some anger issues he was struggling with over all of that. He felt like he was pigeonholed.

There was Mari. She was worried and distracted by many things. She never felt like she could live up to what she was supposed to be. I think she had some superhuman expectations of herself, and sometimes of others, and she struggled with her life.

There was Matt. He had cut a few corners to be in a really lucrative business. Now he knew what he had done and he didn’t know how to get out of it, how to get away from what he had done. How could he find his way out? He was stuck.

There was Mary. She felt trapped in this role that she thought she was supposed to be in, the way women in her family were expected to be. She felt filed away.

There was Jud. He was sure that the way to solve all life's problems was through a violent revolution. He was just trying to figure out who he should go with, what group it would be that would really create that final solution. Focused on thinking violence must be the way to go.

There was Cy. He always felt like he was an outsider. Whatever group he went to, he was always identified as that guy who just came. He always felt like an outsider wondering how he could ever fit in.

There was Maggie. She had made some really bad choices and gotten into patterns of dependence that were destructive. She wasn't sure what to do. She felt trapped.

Tom was so full of doubt that he could never put his feet down firmly on any foundation. He always thought there was something new or something better that was going to come along. It was hard to commit to one thing.

There was Jim, who was overshadowed by his famous father, not certain of himself. He always felt just a little inadequate. Sometimes, a lot inadequate.

There was Bart. He was loyal, present, but so quiet and reserved and introverted, he always felt overlooked. He wondered what would ever become of him.

Then, Thad comes last because, after all, he felt like obscurity was just his fate. He was sure nothing would ever become of him.

Any clue who all these people were? I took a little bit of license and used nicknames or diminutives instead of the more formal names, but every one of those people are people that ended up following Jesus in scripture. Nate—Nathaniel; Andy—Andrew. Every one of them found that in Jesus they were freed from the place they thought they had been filed in life. Not only did the light come and they could see their situation, they could see that there was something else. They had one they could follow, and they did. It was in the following of Jesus that they became disciples and as they became disciples, they recognized that their life had been freed from the place they thought they had been trapped.

When John talks about the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world, he's talking about the ways we get trapped in the world, the extranea of our lives that I think get us filed away. It is in following Christ, allowing that light to shine, that we recognize his presence with us. As he calls us together we're not trapped by sin any more. We're not trapped in what the world defines us to be. We are his disciples. He gathers us together as a family.

Last week, we read the verse from John, Chapter 6, where he talks about anyone who comes to me will no longer be hungry; anyone who comes to me will no longer be thirsty. That hunger for what we really need and that thirst for what guides us and gives us strength is found as we come in faith to Christ and are joined together, as his

disciples found as they followed him and became his disciples. What did he do? He joined them together and they became a family of faith.

So often I think one of the most difficult things about the world we struggle with is how the world defines us or our decisions cause a self-definition that the world solidifies around us. We need a place where we can be defined differently, where we know that we are valued and loved and part of a family—the very family of God, children of God. That’s why our vision statement reads: We strive to be a welcoming, caring family of faith called to love the Lord and our neighbors. In that, we recognize that’s what Christ has done, invited us to be a caring loving family of faith that loves God and our neighbors and in that, finding that we are renewed. New life is given.

Our statement doesn’t stop there, though. It keeps going because it wasn’t one meeting with Christ for these disciples, nor is it for us. It’s a continual growing with and in Christ. In fact, one of the things I heard recently is that sometimes we think we know something and then we simply move on, but if we go back to the very thing we knew we find that it comes alive in new ways, we begin to understand it more fully and better as we return to it again. So what we do is we keep coming back to Christ, learning again. The second part of our vision statement says we are growing in Christ through worship, teaching, fellowship, and service. We are growing in Christ because it is reencountering again, coming together, worshiping, learning, teaching, serving, and fellowship—all of those fit together.

When it says Christ is the bread of heaven, that’s where we find sustenance. Bread gives us sustenance and energy. We’re not expected to simply live in the world and struggle with its definitions of who we are all the time. We get to come to the table, we get to come and grow in Christ, to be reenergized, to be sustained, and to be able to enter back in to the world.

I think we have a wonderful vision statement because it talks both about the importance of being a family of faith, loving one another and loving God, and in growing in Christ.

Christmas is that time which says, in a way, “Do you not know? Have you not heard? God comes to us.” And we can come to him. As we do, we are given new life, not just once, but a life that sustains through ongoing learning together, worshiping together, fellowship, and service. In all of that, the presence of God is with us. We become different people than wherever we might be filed.

Let’s pray:

Gracious God, however each of us might feel that life files us away, whatever mistakes we’ve made, uncertainties we bear that shape our lives in ways that limit who we can be, limit the life we know, let us again open our hearts to you, be aware of your grace, become as you have called us to be your disciples that we might worship and learn and fellowship and serve together and find the life you give us and a joy that is beyond understanding. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.