

January 8, 2017 (Journey worship)

TEXT: Matthew 3

TITLE: Starting Over

By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf

Most of the New Year's Eve's in my childhood were spent with my Gram and Pap Tunney—my Dad's parents. My sisters and I were granted special privileges each 12/31: we could stay up until Midnight so that we could watch the ball drop; we could stand on the front porch and bang pots and pans with a wooden spoon; and we could eat chips and dip on TV trays in the *living room* as we watched a movie with my grandparents. (We were NEVER allowed to eat in the living room!)

It is common for people around the world to adopt some sort of tradition as we ring in the New Year—from eating pork and black eyed peas to singing “Auld Lang Syne.” Some tradition focus on the year ahead: According to a Boston newspaper, in Spain, people eat 12 white grapes—one for each of the months of the New Year; and in Chile people eat lentils to usher in a prosperous new year. Other traditions suggest the chasing away of any bad vibes lingering from the old year: in Ireland people are said to bang a loaf of bread against a wall to chase away bad luck, while in Ecuador people burn a scarecrow to get rid of the negativity of the past year and make way for positivity in the year ahead.¹

When the clock strikes midnight, many feel as if we have been given the gift of an automatic reset button. A new calendar goes up on the refrigerator and is unmarked—awaiting the plans of the New Year...which could be, well, *anything*. There is fresh possibility. There is the opportunity to reach new professional goals, to shed a few pounds, to manage money more wisely, to connect with old friends. The metaphorical slate has been wiped clean, burdens are lifted, and we are given a fresh start.

But as we begin a new year—as we start over—we are all too aware that starting over does not erase the past. The reality is, unless we have done the hard work already, we do not enter the New Year with our debt erased, the extra weight we put on from Christmas cookies automatically shed our winter colds are not automatically cured. The worries of yesterday do not disappear. But rather we're given a new promise about what the future can hold, in light of the past. *We are reminded that we can keep on keeping on*. Somehow the limitations of what has been are loosened a bit as we shift our focus to what can be. There is hope. Starting over is like setting the trip odometer in your car. We cannot erase the overall mileage, but we can start counting again with our sights set on where we're headed.

It is interesting as we begin a new calendar year that our first encounter with an adult Jesus is at the waters of the Jordan. We meet him here, in Matthew's gospel, caught up in a debate with John the Baptist, where Jesus *insists* that he must get into these waters

¹ <http://www.boston.com/culture/travel/2014/12/31/10-quirky-new-years-eve-traditions-around-the-world>

and be baptized by John—waters named as waters of repentance, a cool bath in which one's sins are forgiven. And frankly, John is just as puzzled as we might be too. If Jesus is without sin, why does he rush to these waters? Why does he push? Why does he step into the river with crowds of sinners, as if he is one of them?

Won't the river waters muddy his message? Won't people treat him like he's one of *them* instead of recognizing that Jesus is, in fact, the Messiah? It just doesn't seem right to John, maybe it doesn't quite seem right even to us.

But Jesus is *certain* that as he starts out in his ministry, he must swim in these waters. He is certain that he belongs right there with all of the sinners and low-lives and ordinary people. He is positive that as he takes on the mantle of his public ministry that he must take on the full mantle of the humanity he has come to save—warts and all.

Jesus, son of God, *one with God*, starts out anew when he enters the waters of the Jordan. He shows the people around him—and he shows US—that in him God took on the fullness of humanity, bearing, in Christ, even our sins. Jesus shows us the extent of his solidarity with us—demonstrating in tangible terms that he will not shy away from our ugliness, but will wade in the waters of our sin and complexity.

But this sacred swim is not just about proving that he is with us. *In the waters of his baptism, Jesus shows us that now, WE are with HIM.* Yes, in Jesus' baptism we learn that he has entered into the fullness of our humanity—but we likewise learn that in OUR baptism we are made new. We are washed clean because he took on our sin; we are given a new identity: because through him God has claimed each of us as a beloved child; we are given a new call: kingdom builders; we are given a new family: body of Christ. *Jesus' baptism has pushed the reset button for us, today.*

See, Jesus' baptism is not so much about HIM starting over or starting out. It is about OUR hope to start over because of him. Although we sin and fall short, we are reminded that in Christ we are given a new chance—a new chance at being our best selves, a new chance to be in relationship with God, a new chance to love. By entering the Jordan, Jesus makes the impossible possible for us. He takes one step closer to Calvary, and draws us one step closer to heaven.

And as a people of faith, we respond to Jesus' baptism in the Jordan through the sacrament of baptism ourselves. Whether we were sprinkled on the forehead as a baby, or immersed in a pool in a white robe as an adult, we enter the waters of baptism repenting of our sins—responding with thanksgiving to the truth we have trusted: that in Christ, God has already granted us the grace of forgiveness, the grace of adoption, the grace of eternal life.

Paul reminds us in his letter to the Galatians:

“The law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith....In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized

into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus....So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are God's child, God has made you also an heir." (Gal 3:24,26–4:7)

In Christ, God has given us the opportunity to start over—as much as we need to, as often as we want. God's grace to us in Christ *goes before us*—it precedes us and our choices. It is waiting for us. In Christ God has given us a lens through which we can look at our past and learn while giving us a lens through which we can look to the future and find sure and living hope.

Starting over can be messy business. It can leave us soggy, muddy, vulnerable, and with water in our ears. It can bring us into the company of some interesting characters who we might not fully understand—sinners and saviors a like. But starting over is holy work, initiated by a God who, in Christ, makes all things new.

Remember the promises of our faith: in Christ, God has broken the bondage of all that has hindered us in and held us down in the past: sins we have committed, and sins that have been committed against us; our brokenness and frailty; the limitations of our station in life; the perception people have of us; the oppression in which we have participated, and the oppression we have encountered ourselves....In Christ God has even broken the bondage of death once and for all! Nothing, *nothing* can separate us from God's love for us in Christ. Nothing can hold us back from the new life that God has offered us in Christ.

And so as you begin a new year, have hope. Step out in faith. Cling to the God's promise—the promise of our baptism. Remember that God in Christ is with us and God is for us, and has given us all new life.

And maybe, just maybe, we too can extend some grace, offer some hope, and cultivate new life in the world all around. Everyone needs a chance at a fresh start too.

Thanks be to God.