

FRESH START

Creator God, at the Jordan you proclaimed Jesus to be your own revelation: may we recognize him as our Protector and Guide and know ourselves to be your beloved children; through Jesus Christ our Savior.

A Collect for the Baptism of Christ, based on Additional Collects, Common Worship

THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY:
 THE BAPTISM OF CHRIST
 GENESIS 1:1-5, PSALM 29, ACTS 19:1-7, MARK 1:4-13
 JANUARY 7, 2018

ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

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THE GOSPEL READING: MARK 1:4-13

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him

Last week I stopped in a coffee shop in Santa Barbara and overheard a group of people sharing New Year's greetings that included several mentions of "a fresh start" in the New Year. Those overheard comments resonated with some social media postings I saw from people glad to leave 2017 behind and ready to begin anew in 2018... all, probably, familiar to all of us from

conversations we have had or heard recently with the dawning of still-new 2018....

We long to begin again, to turn the page, to have a blank slate....

The poet W.S. Merwin, in his poem "To the New Year," refers to a dove calling far away and writes:
 so this is the sound of you
 here and now whether or not
 anyone hears it this is

where we have come with our age
 our knowledge such as it is
 and our hopes such as they are
 invisible before us
 untouched and still possible

*...our hopes... untouched and
 still possible.*

In a sense we are always
 beginning again.

We fantasize that who we are
 or what we have done is indelible,
 that the footprints we have left are
 unchangeable, eternal impressions
 on the earth and in the lives around
 us.... Especially, painfully, where we
 have gone astray or when our lives
 have gone awry – or where the
 misimpressions left by others, the
 abuse has impacted us or others, our
 community, our world, we sense
 that hopes are undone, and no
 longer possible, not just maligned,
 but no longer *hopes* at all.

In fact, yesterday and those
 footprints are gone.

And the exhaustingly heavy
 burden we carry from and through
 our previous days is also gone.

All the time.

Not just at New Year's.

Every day, yesterday is gone,
 in fact, if not in our thoughts. And a
 New Year gives a chance to think
 differently, to imagine a little more
 closely to the reality of the matter.

There's an image of this reality
 in baptism, even the somewhat
 confounding baptism of Jesus by
 John the Baptist in the River
 Jordan.

We, our life, our past lives, all
 the previous days go under the
 water... to be cleansed, to be washed
 away, to be refreshed – to let the
 burdens float downstream, out from
 under them, not pinned to the
 riverbed by them.

We go under and then rise to
 retake our place in the breathing
 world, to have hope restored, to
 discover life still possible.

There's wisdom in the practice
 – so here's "good" religion:
 practicing, literally rehearsing,
 repeating something to become
 proficient – as we do with piano or
 basketball – and today it is
 reaffirming our baptismal vows – to
 release what weighs us down, that
 would drown us, and to rise to
 breathing our best identity again,
 our reality as Christ's own forever.

This sort of practice is here to
 disrupt our minds, our clinging to
 illusions of stability that may
 become prisons, but are habits of
 thought we may think will make us
 feel safe, that will push back our
 uncertainties but end up being attics
 and basements stuffed with
 opinions, hurts, prejudices, angers,
 vestiges in our memories of losses
 and griefs.

The recent fires, I think,
 pointed out to a lot of people how
 cluttered our lives are as we create
 fortresses of physical stuff that can
 in fact be gone in an instant. The
 incinerated homes and the threat or
 experience of evacuation, and the

conversations we had about all of that, made many think about what we would keep, what we would let go... and then think more intentionally about what material as well as what inner “stuff” is needed, what is actually just in the way.

I’ve mentioned before the old folk saying: “My barn, having burned to the ground, now I can see the moon.”

And the same goes for whatever next steps on our journey we are making, how we are entering the waters in the New Year.

Often we venture, if we venture at all, one toe at a time because the trek seems insurmountable in our thoughts, in our minds – especially carrying all of our “stuff” of whatever sort.

What if, for this fresh start, this beginning again, we see it as an evacuation – only one carload allowed?

And, imagine, in rising from the waters of baptism there is actually air to breathe.

Think about air for a moment. Have you ever tried to hold your breath – actually hold air from six or ten years ago in your lungs? Or, have you ever tried to breathe the air from six months or a year from now?

Breathing, whether we are

conscious of it or not, is always a fresh start. It’s always this breath..., and this one..., and this one....

We’re still saying “Happy New Year,” and it occurred to me last week that this is the New Year that we’re talking about being happy in... right now. And it occurs to me that we can really say “Happy New Year” any day... any day we and the person we are saying it to are still breathing. So in February: “Happy New Year,” and in July, September, November: “Happy New Year.”

There is only a fresh start. God is always now – not off in a distant future heaven somewhere but here in heaven on earth now, here in life. Reality is always now. The goodness, the giftedness that far exceed our consciousness are now – even with the scars and dents and bruises that have impacted us along the way....

Listen for the dove... and say, with the poet:

so this is the sound of you
here and now whether or not
anyone hears it this is
where we have come with our age
our knowledge such as it is
and our hopes such as they are
invisible before us
untouched and still possible



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