



“The Promise of Beginnings”

Text: John 1:1-18

a sermon by the Rev. Kevin Scott Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

I can still remember the first days in seminary, when we began to learn just enough Hebrew to make us dangerous. Our professor was using an inductive method of teaching us Biblical Hebrew, which means she was throwing us into the deep end of the pool and hoping we would learn to swim. Many of us sank like rocks.

Genesis, chapter one, verse one. Letters we had never seen. Vowels reduced to points beneath the word. Reading from right to left. Was God really calling me to ministry?

“Barasheit bara Elohim...” “In the beginning, God...” It was a miracle.

Fast forward to the second year of seminary. This semester, Koine Greek. More familiar looking letters. Reading left to right. How bad could it be?

John, chapter one, verse one. “Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος...” “In the beginning was the Word...” Strange. Both Hebrew Scriptures and Christian Scriptures (at least John’s gospel) begin in the same place. “In the beginning...”

Beginnings are tricky places. There is uncertainty. There is anxiety. There is excitement. There is the unknown. Will this beginning lead to something good or something disastrous?

I remember being taught in a long-forgotten physics class that it takes more energy to get something into motion than to keep something in motion. Initiating movement is more difficult than to keep something moving. Which means that beginnings take far more energy and oomph than continued progress.

Think of any pattern of living you've ever changed. Maybe it was when you stopped smoking, or drinking, or over-eating, or being a couch potato. Getting things going was hard work. Not reaching for the cigarette, or the cocktail, or the chips and cookies, or simply taking a walk around the block was extremely difficult and sapped you of strength. But, as time went on, it got easier. The appetites changed. Success brought forth more success. You started "riding the wave." And soon, you had changed the way you were living.

Beginnings are places of promise. Beginnings offer us new doors, new opportunities, new possibilities. Beginnings are invitations to change, to grow, to take shape.

The turning of the year is a time that is overflowing with new opportunities and new discoveries. Now, if your email in-box looks anything like mine, it is filled each day with opportunities to lose weight, get in shape, adopt a new way of eating, learn a language, or take up a new career.

So, let me add one more to the possibilities of beginnings.

First, let me take you into a little surprise that's hidden in our lesson from John. We read these words:

But to all who received him, who believed in his name,
he gave power to become children of God..."

It is interesting that the author of John's gospel never uses the word "faith" or "belief." Those words are nouns. Instead, the gospel always uses a verb "to believe" and it uses it a whopping 98 times! Faith is an active verb and not an inactive noun. As Robert Kysar writes in *John, the Maverick Gospel*,

Faith as a verb means that believing is a decision made once only to have to be made over again and again, or a gift accepted not once but again and again. Faith is a continuing dynamic, not a state of being.

Faith, you see, is not something that someone has. Faith is in constant motion, being refined, expanded, deepened, and developed. Faith is not static. Faith is always in motion.

Second, the gospel also has a funny little grammatical item. It happens 36 times, as it does in our little verse, If we were translating it literally, we would read:

But to all who received him, who believed *into* Jesus, he gave power to become children of God...

"Believed *into* Jesus." We often hear, or maybe even use, the expression of being "into someone or something." It means were deeply connected to it, we are committed to it, we are invested in it, we have a passion for it.

This is exactly the kind of believing that the gospel of John is advocating. It involves, as Roger Gench suggests, "deep personal engagement with and allegiance to Jesus, entailing trust and intimacy." It means moving beyond our intellectual assent and allowing the message and mission of Jesus Christ to flow within us and to flow through us into the world. It means doing the same things Jesus did: feeding the hungry, healing the sick, befriending the outcast, and speaking out against oppression and injustice. It means challenging authority when it is in the wrong and defending the powerless when they are attacked. It means using whatever power we may have or receive to achieve the common good by working together, instead of feathering our own nests.

I'll tell you the truth. If you can't explain the Doctrine of the Trinity with complete clarity, or describe the presence of Jesus Christ in the Lord's Supper, or debate the infallibility of Scripture, it doesn't really matter. If you can't argue predestination like a good Calvinist, you won't be damned or dismissed. If you can't meet the intellectual standard set by some to prove your Christian faith, don't sweat it.

If you are into Jesus in a big way, if you allow his life to be your life, if your commitment is to Jesus Christ, if your first and foremost allegiance is to Jesus Christ - you have nothing to worry about. You are living "into Jesus," and that is a life that is well worth living. The life of Jesus will flow in you and through you. The love of God that took on flesh in Bethlehem long ago will take on your flesh and you will live into Jesus as he lives more and more in you.

Now, I know full well that that lesson can - and probably does - sound a little corny to Presbyterians. We're not quite comfortable with lots of Jesus talk and we're even less comfortable with the idea of putting our believing into action. But that is exactly what we are called to do. We don't have to make it shlocky, or super-sweet. We don't have to make a big fuss about it. As Presbyterians, we tend to do things quietly and shy away from the spotlight, lest we take the focus off of God's goodness.

But, in this new year, I want to challenge all of us to make faith a verb. Let believing become doing. Let God's love flow in you and through you. Let it touch the most hurting places of the world in which you move. Let it lift up the downtrodden and give hope to the downhearted.

The hardest part is getting started. That's the way it is with everything. Give yourself some grace to get moving in that direction. There will be some false starts but keep going. And before you know it, it will be - not "second-nature" - but "first-nature" to you.

And the world around you will begin to change.

There's good news.

For now and evermore. Amen.



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