

"ALL BEGINNINGS ARE HARD"
(New Year's sermon by Rev. Don Parsons)

Scripture Lessons:- Jeremiah 31: 7 - 14; John 1: 1 - 18

Well, friends, how are you doing with your new year's resolutions?

If one of those resolutions was that you would be here in church on the first Sunday of 2010, well congratulations - that's an important one that you can celebrate, and check off.

This first Sunday of the new year is often a reflective time, is it not?

And I suppose that is not a bad thing - taking time to think back over our experiences of the past year, before we muster the energy to move into whatever lies ahead for us.

// Some among us will be relieved that 2009, what one newspaper described as "a silly year"* , is now behind us. (* The Hamilton Spectator, Dec. 26/09). Oh there was a serious side to the year past:- the tentative, sputtering recovery of our roller-coaster economy, the fearful challenge of severe unemployment, the threat of an H1N1 pandemic, the far-too-frequent image of flag-draped caskets beginning the journey home from Kandahar, the historic election of an African-American President, Susan Boyle captivating us with her solo from Les Mis, the game-playing on Parliament Hill, the embarrassment of our country being awarded Fossil of the Year at the Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen.

Those moments, and many others gave us "pause", in the year past.

And then there were those silly, embarrassing events that served as a distraction from the important stuff:- the Tiger Woods and David Letterman soap operas, the White House party-crashers, the charade of what we were led to believe was a five year old flying around in a flimsy homemade balloon, Kanye West's rude interruption of the Video Music Awards. So it was quite a year. //

// Here at Eglinton St. George's, even though many imagined that 2009 would simply be an "in-between" year, while we waited anxiously for the white smoke announcing that a new minister had been chosen, it has been I think far more than merely a "marking time" kind of year. A wonderful smorgasbord of worship experiences from the traditional to lively jazz and Reel Theology continued to offer us spiritual stimulation week after week; discussion groups, health and wellness, and pastoral care and outreach initiatives stimulated our thought and action; incredible music consistently lifted us to the very throne of grace; we had fun sharing in a Rummage Sale Fashion Show, and the Gala, and a Silent Movie Night, and a Sing-Along Messiah, and so many other events that became part of the fabric of ESG life in 2009.

No one can accuse us of putting our congregational life on hold while we waited... //

// What do you think it is that defines us as a congregation?

In the ESG video that comes to your mind, what do you see? I suspect that what you see are faces – faces in the Eglinton St. George’s United Church collage through the years:- infants who have been marked with a watery cross, and thereby through the Sacrament of Baptism have been officially received into the Christian family; faces of the thousands of children who have walked up these aisles, and gone off to classes to learn, and listen, and squirm, and squeal as children are supposed to do.

Think of the faces of young men and women, the teens who have gathered here for the Laying On of Hands, only slightly understanding in their adolescent innocence, what it is to be confirmed. What of the faces of the thousands who have gathered at this Table to receive the gifts of grain and grape.

We think of how many heart-thumping expressions of love given and received here, as nervous couples are married; or the sadness of this church as you have mourned your dead.

And what of the faces of those who have had the privilege of preaching in this sanctuary through the years – a flood of words – more words than you probably wanted to hear, complemented by a rich, inspiring tapestry of music... //

A collage of faces – women and men, teens and children – representing the uniqueness of this terrific congregation. Now, when you ponder that image, is there any other way to respond except with gratitude? What else can we do but be very, very grateful?

That then perhaps becomes the hinge that helps us move from a reflection on the past, to the challenging hard work of stepping into the new year stretching now before us with all of its hope and promise. Let gratitude define who we are, as we face the coming year.

// The opening of Chaim Potok’s novel *“In The Beginning”* may help us identify what we are feeling as we face this new year. We are introduced to David Lurie thinking back to his childhood, remembering that when he was ill, his mother would hold him, stroke his head, and soothe him with the words:- *“This is often the way it is with young children. All beginnings are hard...”*

So as David grows into adulthood, these words become for him a kind of mantra whenever he faces a new challenge, a new beginning in his life – the reminder that *“All beginnings are hard...”* //

Sometimes we fail to acknowledge the significance of that.

// I remember when we moved my 90 year old mother out of her apartment into a Retirement Residence how we over-emphasized the positives of this move, and thereby played down how difficult this new beginning might be.

“Just think, you won’t have to worry about groceries anymore, or getting your own meals,” we tried to reassure her. *“They’ll do your laundry for you every week, change your bed for you, look after you if you’re not feeling well...”*

To which my mother said, *“I think I’m going to be bored...”*

Do you know what we were doing? We were clinging to the positive not only for my mother’s sake, but for ours. We were trying to avoid dealing with the ache in our hearts that someone we loved had reached the time when she would have to leave the independence of her

apartment, and move into a more supportive, caring, much safer environment.

3.

In spite of the positive spin we like to put on such things, "all beginnings *are* hard," if we are honest with each other. //

Think of the beginning of Jesus' life.

In John's reference to the birth of Jesus he writes, "In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being."

There is here in John no hint of the pain of delivering a child without benefit of anesthetic, or sterile clinic, or mid-wife. But we know that child-birth is not called "labour" for nothing.

This birth of God in our midst, this beginning too was hard as "she brought forth her firstborn son", and he shrieked in his first drink of air.

Notice too how John, when he says "He was in the beginning with God," turns us towards the writings of the Genesis poet about the beginning of life as we know it.

Remember the ebb and flow of that beautiful creation story - "In the beginning when God created... And God said 'Let there be...' and God saw that it was good..."

Most of us know the litany by heart, and for us the scene is idyllic - the deep that is water, placid and calm, the emergence of light like the sun slipping silently above the eastern edge of earth, the world yawning itself awake in tones that are hushed and mellow.

And yet that beginning could just as easily have been one of a seething, tempestuous ocean, angry waves writhing in the dramatic work of birthing creation, the darkness exploding as shards of lightning pierce the sky...

If "all beginnings *are* hard", maybe the labour of creating life was more akin to the violence of storm than to the "green pastures and still waters" painted by the psalmist.

Well it was only days ago we were gathered with shepherds in that soft and warm and slightly out-of-focus Innkeeper's barn. Ten days ago Jesus was so small, and dependent, and fragile...

And we would prefer to linger there would we not? For the baby in the manger does not seem to demand that much of us, while we know that the adult Christ demands everything.

Even this beginning is hard. Read the whole story and you see the Holy Family fleeing for their lives from Herod's wrath, escaping like refugees into Egypt. How quickly the Thomas Kincaid Christmas scene is shattered by the brutal reality of life in this real world.

Sadly that's the way it is. Things do not stay the same.

We find ourselves shoved out of the safe and comfortable into the unknown.

Relationships shift. Ministers move on and are elected to the House of Commons.

Search Committees, like Magi trying to find their way to the promised one, follow lead after lead in hopes of coming up with a new minister who will be a great "fit" for this congregation. And that will be a joy for us.

And yet it will also be a new beginning, and we know that sometimes beginnings are hard...

So it is good that we kept our New Year's resolution to begin 2010 with worship.

Because deep down we know that woven through the promise and hope and celebration of the

4.

new year that stretches before us, there will also be challenges to be faced,
and hurts to be forgiven,
and wounds to tend,
and fears to climb on top of.

And worship reassures us that because "the Word did become flesh and dwell among us..." we believe that "we are not alone, God is with us."

And with the power of that love in our soul, there is nothing we cannot face.

// Paul Scherer, well-known Lutheran preacher wrote these challenging words several years ago:-
"That is why we have so little of the spirit of pioneers, pushing on into undiscovered country:
we are too much under the *tyranny* of the *possible*; and then we hope to have some fellowship
with this Jesus of Nazareth, who when a thing is possible loses interest in it almost at once,
and looks at you breathlessly with his eyes all kindling to see if you are going to
stop with what you *can* and sit down there by yourself,
or come over where he is, and start what's beyond you."

(*Love Is A Spendthrift* p. 51) //

Friends, at the threshold of this brand new year, knowing that all beginnings are hard,
- let us not be satisfied with what we *can* and sit down by ourselves,
but let us come over to where Jesus is,
so we can start what's beyond us...

Amen.