The Land of Beginning Again
Luke 3:15-17, 21-23a

Every New Year I recall the words to a poem I learned many long years ago – a poem by Louisa Fletcher – called The Land of Beginning Again. Perhaps you know it. Fletcher writes,

I wish that there were some wonderful place
Called the Land of Beginning Again,
Where all our mistakes and all our heartaches,
And all of our poor selfish grief
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat at the door
And never put on again.

Don’t those words give voice to the longing we all experience this time of year? Don’t we all look back with a measure of remorse on some aspect of the year gone by – some sin committed or some bad habit embraced? Don’t we look ahead with longing to the New Year, yearning for a fresh start and a new beginning? And don’t we ache in some measure to find a wonderful place called the Land of Beginning Again?

Perhaps that’s why we tend to make resolutions this time of year. We resolve to put away some sin or put off some bad habit and we resolve to begin a healthy habit or renew a holy practice that will make us better people by and by. And in doing this we express our deep-felt desire for a new beginning and a fresh start.

We see just such a new beginning in the sacrament of baptism which we celebrate today. Today, at the beginning of a New Year, we pause to remember Jesus’ baptism and to celebrate our own because baptism is the sign of a new beginning and a fresh start. In baptism we pass from death to life, from darkness to light, from guilt to pardon and forgiveness. Baptism is, you see, the gate that opens into the Land of Beginning Again.

The crowds of John and Jesus’ day knew this to be true. Like us, they were longing for a fresh start and a new beginning. So they went en masse to hear John preach by the muddy Jordan River. John, you see, was declaring the dawn of a new day. God was coming to set things right and John wanted the people to repent of their sins and amend their ways so they could enter this Land of Beginning Again.

So Luke 3:4-6 says, John “…went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’” (Lk. 3:4-6 NRSV)
It was a powerful message and a compelling call. And so hundreds, perhaps thousands heeded John and went into the water of baptism as a sign of repentance, as a pledge to live better, and as a request for admission into the Land of Beginning Again.

And lo and behold, what did they find when they waded into those waters? They found a new friend, they got a fresh start, and they received a new mission.

Who did they find wading into the water with them when they went to the Jordan for baptism? They found Jesus wading into the water with them – Jesus who had come to inaugurate this new era and usher in this new age. But why was he there? He certainly had no wrong to regret...no remorse to confess. And he had no sin for which he needed to repent. In the words of 1 Peter 2:22, “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

So why then was he there, wading into the water with all of those sinners surrounding him? He was there because he loved them!

You see it’s not for naught that Jesus’ enemies called him a friend of sinners. (Mt. 11:16-19) They meant it as an insult but it was a title he gladly embraced. If you look at Jesus’ life you’ll always see him standing in the midst of sinners...sinners like you and me! We see it for the first time, but not the last time, at his baptism. So when we are baptized we get a new friend – Jesus Christ. And what a friend he is! Had they had the hymn in Jesus’ day, the crowds likely would have come up out of the baptismal water singing:

   Jesus! what a friend for sinners!  
   Jesus! Lover of my soul;  
   Friends may fail me, foes assail me,  
   He, my Savior, makes me whole.  
   Hallelujah! what a Savior!  
   Hallelujah! what a friend!  
   Saving, helping, keeping, loving,  
   He is with me to the end.

Yes, when we come to the baptismal water, confessing and repenting of sin, we find a new friend wading in the water with us; a friend who is with us through thick and thin, who doesn’t forsake us because of our sin, a friend who is with us to the very end!

We not only find a new friend, we get a fresh start. You see, we need more than just a friend. We need a Savior! We need someone to forgive all our sin. We need someone to cleanse us and give us a new Spirit to empower us for holy living so our lives will reflect the character of this new era – the Kingdom of God – the Land of Beginning Again! And that’s just what we get when we are baptized. We’re cleansed and given the Holy Spirit to help us.
You see, John said to the crowd, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” (Lk. 3:16 NRSV) Then John used the analogy of a farmer winnowing wheat to illustrate the cleansing that would come through the baptism given to us by Jesus Christ. You see a farmer takes his winnowing fork, tosses the grain into the air, and the wind blows the chaff away. So John, speaking of Jesus, said, “His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” (Lk. 3:17 NRSV)

In baptism, we are not only baptized with water; we are baptized with the Holy Spirit and a cleansing fire. When we come to the water confessing our sin and trusting God’s Son then our sins are burned away and our spirit is inspired by the Holy Spirit who comes to live in us, empowering us for holy living. Yes, all of this is the gift of Jesus Christ. For you see, when he was baptized, the Spirit descended on him like a dove proving that he has power to cleanses us and give us this very same Spirit.

Yes, baptism is gateway to the Land of Beginning Again. In baptism, all things are made new. We find a new friend, we get a fresh start, and we receive a new mission – a new purpose – a new work. That’s what happened to Jesus at his baptism. He started a new work and embarked on a new mission.

Before this time Jesus spent his days as a carpenter in Nazareth. But then he was baptized when he was about thirty and Luke 3:23 says it was then that, “Jesus…began his work.” You see, he left his carpenter’s tools on the carpenter’s bench and went out into the world to pursue God’s purpose for his life. He went out to serve his Father in heaven and his neighbor on earth and to do everything necessary to secure our salvation from sin and our security in heaven.

Likewise for us, baptism marks the beginning of a life of Christian discipleship – a life spent following Jesus Christ – a life spent serving our Father in heaven and our neighbor on earth and carrying the good news of salvation from sin and security in heaven to the ends of the earth and the ends of the age. Shortly after his baptism, Jesus gathered a group of disciples to do just that. And as he ended his time on earth, he told those same disciples to “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved,” he said, “but the one who does not believe will be condemned.” (Mk. 16:15-16 NRSV)

My friend, today we remember Jesus’ baptism and celebrate our own. If you have confessed your sins and been baptized then you have entered the Land of Beginning Again. You have a new friend – Jesus Christ! You’ve received a fresh start – your sins are forgiven and you’ve been given the Holy Spirit to help you live a holy life. And finally, you have a new purpose. You’re not just living for yourself; your living for God and
neighbor – proclaiming the good news that everyone, everywhere, can enter the Land of Beginning Again. So remember your baptism and be grateful!

My friend, if you haven’t been baptized then I invite you to come to the water of baptism and enter the Land of Beginning Again. You’ll be glad you did. The poet said,

I wish that there were some wonderful place
Called the Land of Beginning Again,
Where all our mistakes and all our heartaches,
And all of our poor selfish grief
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat at the door
And never put on again.

There is such a place and its entrance is here in the waters of baptism. Come! Enter in!

Renewal of Baptismal Vows

Now, I invite all who are baptized to join me in the renewal of our baptismal vows as printed on the back of your bulletin. If you have not been baptized but want to be, then you can recite these vows as the first step toward receiving the sacrament of baptism.

Chaplain: In baptism, God calls us out of darkness into his marvelous light. To follow Christ means dying to sin and rising to new life with him. Therefore I ask:

Do you reject the devil and all rebellion against God?
People: I reject them.

Chaplain: Do you renounce the deceit and corruption of evil?
People: I renounce them.

Chaplain: Do you repent of the sins that separate us from God and our neighbor?
People: I repent of them.

Chaplain: Do you turn to Christ as Savior?
People: I turn to Christ.

Chaplain: Do you submit to Christ as Lord?
People: I submit to Christ.

Chaplain: Do you come to Christ, the way, the truth and the life?
People: I come to Christ.
Chaplain: May God, who has given you the desire to follow Christ, give you the strength to continue in the Way. Amen.