

## **“ON MAKING A FRESH START”**

**Readings: Isaiah 43:14-21**

**Revelation 2:1-5**

IT'S NOT OFTEN New Year's Day falls on a Sunday, so even though liturgically speaking, it's still Christmas, let's give the carols a rest and see if we can't find something sacred to say about this seemingly most secular of all holidays.

All revelry aside, New Year's Day is primarily about making a new start. Although not specifically mentioned in the Bible the main theme of New Year's – starting over—is mirrored in many passages of scripture including our two lessons for this morning. In the first, from the Prophet Isaiah, God declares, “I am about to do a new thing,” while in the second from the Book of Revelation, a voice from on high proclaims, “Behold, I am making all things new.”

To believe in Jesus is to believe in the Gospel of the second chance. Christianity is primarily a matter of do-overs. I know there are a lot of people out there who think that makes religion seem like a crutch. Well, of course, it's a crutch. But who says we don't all have to limp? The primary theme of Christianity, indeed the primary theme of all religions, isn't salvation—it's transformation.

Isn't that the idea behind all those New Year's resolutions everyone makes but nobody seems able to keep? “This year I'm going to hit the gym more.” “This year I'm going to clean out the garage.” “This year I'm going to go to church more regularly.”

Then about three months into the New Year reality sets in. We get too busy to go to the gym; the garage doesn't get cleaned out; and church takes a back seat to all our other activities, appointments, and obligations.

Still, on New Year's Day, all things seem possible. We look at the time ahead of us like a blank slate. It's the chance to reinvent ourselves. At least for the moment we no longer feel chained to the past. We are free to chart a new course. We may or may not stick to the course but at least we are free to pursue it.

The high school our children attended liked to bill itself as a "second chance school." The idea was that everyone was entitled to at least one screw up. By giving the students a second chance the school was essentially giving them an opportunity to make amends and start over.

Christianity believes everyone deserves a second chance—if not a third or fourth. One of the best sermons I ever heard was preached by a classmate of mine during a seminary chapel service. The title of the sermon was, "Born Again, and Again, and Again."

What is life if not primarily a matter of starting over? Some years ago, I asked a colleague of mine how he had managed to stay so long in his present pastorate. "It hasn't been easy he said. I had to reinvent myself several times."

Don't we all have to reinvent ourselves from time-to-time? Don't we all have to start over occasionally?

New Year's Day reminds us that none of us is a finished product. I used to have a cartoon in my office that showed a caterpillar dangling precariously from the end of a leaf. The caption read, "Please be patient, God isn't finished with me yet."

The truth is God isn't finished with any of us yet. We may think he is but he isn't. H.G. Wells once said of his mother, "My mother went to a finishing school at the age of sixteen and after that she was finished."

To believe in God is to believe he is capable of making all things new—even ourselves. Over a half a century ago, Harry Emerson Fosdick preached a sermon at Riverside Church entitled, "No Man Need Stay the Way He Is." And he was

right. We don't need to stay the way we are at least if today's two scripture readings are to be believed.

I have a friend who was struggling to balance his checkbook. Things got so out of hand that finally he went into the bank and just closed the account. I said to him, "What did you do that for?" He replied, "Sometimes it's just easier to make a fresh start."

That's precisely what New Year's Day does for us. It gives us a chance to make a fresh start. It reminds us that no person needs to stay the way they are for as the writer George Eliot once said, "It's never too late to become the person you are capable of becoming."

This morning as we prepare to come before the table of the Lord for the first time in 2012, let us come in a spirit of gratitude and hope. Moreover, let us come determined to make a fresh start, in our lives, in our relationships with others, and in our quest to usher in God's kingdom of justice and peace.

In the words of Mother Teresa, "Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow has not come. We have only today. Let us begin." Happy New Year to one and all—let us begin indeed!

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