

New Beginnings

Lent Week 2, 3-5-23

John 3:1-17, Gen. 12:1-4a

In today's scriptures we see two men confronted with new beginnings.

First, we saw Nicodemus come to Jesus in the dark of night to ask him questions. He snuck there, away from the eyes of the other Pharisees because Jesus was saying and doing things that was stirring Nicodemus' soul... but he still wasn't ready to be seen with Jesus.

He had some questions, and Jesus said, "you have to be born again." You have to start over fresh. You have to let go of what you think you know and be reborn into the world with the eyes of God. You need a new beginning.

In our Old Testament scripture Abram, not yet Abraham, was told by God to up and leave everything he knew. His father's house, his family, his nation, EVERYTHING... and Abram just did. No questions, no complaints, no follow-ups, just went. A new beginning.

In thinking about these scriptures this week, I was reminded of a couple of stories from my own life about new beginnings that I'd like to tell you.

In 2020, when the world was shut down from the global pandemic, I was, like most people, at home trying to figure out how to fill my now ample time. I started going on walks around my neighborhood, not really engaging others, but just walking around.

As you start to walk more and more usually you find that you're able to walk further and further distances without getting fatigued... but I found the opposite to be true for me. In the weeks and months after I started walking, I was able to do less and less without getting out of breath.

This culminated one day as I went up the stairs of my home and got so out of breath that I felt dizzy. I sat down on my bed to catch my breath and the next thing I remember I woke up covered in sweat. I had passed out.

This was the final straw for my wife who wasn't there at the time, but when she got home and I told her about it, she took me to the emergency room.

After many tests and scans they determined that I had massive pulmonary embolisms, or blood clots in the lungs for those of us who don't speak doctor. These were apparently so massive that the right side of my heart was essentially in failure.

I was in the hospital for a full week, which I was not very happy about, but after an operation and a stint in the ICU, I was prescribed blood thinners and allowed to go home.

In the months leading up to this hospital stay, I couldn't physically do normal everyday things, walk more than 20 yards, go upstairs, etc.

During my hospital stay it was really hammered into me just how close I was to death. My hematologist, blood doctor, kept saying, MASSIVE, MASSIVE blood clots! You're the kind of story where you're healthy and then one day you're dead.

Also, sometime during my hospital stay my left vocal cord became paralyzed. It got better, but it took a few weeks before I could talk normally, and months before I could sing again.

Being that close to dying, not really knowing what's going on, losing ability to move and talk and then coming out on the other side of it healthy again. Even though it's literally going back to what you were or had before, it feels like a complete rebirth.

When I was able to walk further again, go upstairs without being out of breath, sing my first song to my wife after I wondered if I would ever be able to again... I was new.

This kind of rebirth and renewal put life into perspective for me. Chasing things that don't matter, worrying about what might happen if..., allowing myself to stay in life's draining situations because I'm afraid of the unknown alternative. I was suddenly done with all that.

I think that Jesus knew that this kind of renewal frees you to let go. Jesus telling Nicodemus to be reborn was an invitation to see the world through the Spirit.

Nicodemus who was so afraid of what his fellow Pharisees would say that he snuck to see Jesus at night, Nicodemus who was holding on so tightly to his knowledge that he couldn't even comprehend what Jesus was talking about. Imagine the freedom he would feel if he let go of those worldly expectations and held on to God's.

There's freedom in rebirth, and it shifts your perspective.

The second story I want to tell you is from 2016.

In the summer of 2016 my now wife, but then fiancé and I took a two-week road trip together to the Grand Canyon. While we were at the Grand Canyon, we found this thing called a National Park Passport.

It was this tiny book that had maps of different regions of the US, and outlined where all the National Parks, all the National Monuments, all the National Historical sites, and so on where located.

The part that got us though was that at each of these sites were stamps and half of the passport was blank pages for you to put your stamps on. Collecting stamps from awesome places sounded like a fun game to us!

So, we collected all the Grand Canyon stamps we could, missing only one, and then started looking along our route home to see if we could pass by any other National anything's where we could get more stamps and lo and behold! We could!

One day, our starting point and ending point were a mere 1 ½ hours away from each other, but we made a large backwards 6 around all of Arizona, so that we could hit several National Parks, and one In-N-Out Burger.

Now all of these stops were cool, and I would recommend you go to any and all of them, but I want to focus on Sunset Crater Volcano National Monument.

The story of Sunset Crater is that sometime in 1065 Sunset Crater Volcano erupted.

The eruption formed a 1,120 foot cone in the air, lava flowed 1.6 miles northwest, 6 miles northeast, and 4 miles southeast, and produced a blanket of ash covering 810 square miles, and about 1 billion tons of material (magma, ash, etc.) was extruded from the volcano.

The Sinagua people who lived around the volcano at the time had to quickly evacuate their homes, and most of them never saw their homes again.

Between the lava burning the vegetation around the mountain and the ash covering and choking out the life that wasn't burned, the area became a mountain devoid of life. No foliage grew there, and because there were no plants, no animals lived there.

Now maybe it's because I'm a pastor and this is quite literally my career, or maybe it's because I try to look for these moments, but while Ellen and I were in Sunset Crater I saw a specific tree and I had to stop. One tree amongst the ash stood out. This tree was dead, well, it was half dead.

From the ground shooting up for about 20 feet was a completely dead tree, rotted, dry, dead; but about two feet off the ground, from the trunk of that dead tree shooting sideways and slowly curving upwards and reaching up past the tip of the dead tree was a vibrant living pine tree.

I spent a long time looking at this tree. I studied the trunk. Was it two trees that just happened to share a similar space? No. It was one tree, one trunk, one being.

A tree that had lived a fully grown, 20-foot tree life, died... but that wasn't the ending. New life shot out of that dry wood! Where there was no life sprang forth vibrant new life.

This caused me to start to look around at the rest of Sunset Crater, a place that had been devastated by a volcano 950 years prior. There were still many scars of that event, lava rivers dried into rock, the ground covered in black ash and soot still, riverbeds running dry with sand.

But there was something else, something I didn't see when I first looked. There was life. There was life in this place of death. There were flowers springing up out of the rock rivers, trees and bushes shooting out of the black ash, birds singing in those trees. Beautiful things made from dust.

As I saw all of this in one place I was nearly brought to tears. This, I thought, this is us, this is God working in us.

There are moments in life where it feels like a volcano has erupted.

Grief covers us in ash when we lose a loved one, our heart burns with lava when we see injustices, the sky is black with soot when we hear of yet another school shooting, another unarmed black man shot by the police, another war in another part of the world costing the lives of our siblings, we feel dried up and rotted when we give into that vice we have that we just can't seem to shake.

Our world shakes and crumbles and burns and we ask "How? How can I possibly go on? How can we endure this?" We think to ourselves, "This is it... I'm done, I'm dead, I'm over."

It is in these moments that my sister comes into my mind. Mostly, because she is one of those people in my life who I can always turn to and she is a wonderfully empathetic and compassionate person, but also, more specifically, because of her tattoo.

My sister has words from an Alice Walker poem tattooed on her left forearm. The poem is called "My Friend Yeshi" and I would like to read a portion of it to you all now.

Sometimes life seizes up
Nothing stirs, nothing flows
We think: Climbing this rough tree
& all this time, the rope looped
over a rotten branch!

We think: why did I choose
This path anyway?
Nothing at the end
but sheer cliff & rock filled sea.

We do not know have no clue
What more might come.

It is the same though
With Earth: Everyday she makes all she can

It is all she knows it is all
She can possibly do.

And then, empty, the only
Time she is flat, She thinks: I am
Used up. It is winter all the time
Now. Nothing much to do but self-destruct.

But then, in the night, in the darkness
We love so much she lies down
Like the rest of us, to sleep & angels come
as they do to us & give her
Fresh dreams (They are really always the old ones, blooming further.)

She rises, rolls over, gives herself a couple of
new kinds of grain, a few dozen unusual
flowers, a playful spin on the spider's web called the internet.

Who knows where the newness to old life comes from?

Suddenly it appears.

Babies are caught by hands they assumed

were always waiting.

Ink streaks from the pen left dusty on the shelf.

This is the true wine of astonishment:

We are not over

When we think we Are.

-Alice Walker

We are not over when we think we are. Those are the words on my sister's arm.

We are not over when we think we are. Those are the words that ring in my head when life becomes more than I can bear.

We are not over when we think we are. Those are the words that allow Abram to leave all he's known and follow this unknown God.

We are not over when we think we are. Those are the words that came alive for me in Sunset Crater.

You are not over when you think you are. Those are God's words to you! When you are covered in grief, burned out on this world, when pain and terror have come to your door and you don't think you can go on.

When you think all you are is your job and then you lose that job and in doing so feel like you have lost yourself, when you're living with disappointment because you didn't turn out to be who you thought or who someone else thought that you should be, when you're beating yourself up because you did it again... whatever it may be, and you say to yourself, "why can't I just stop? Why can't I be better?"...

When you think that there is no redemption for you, there is no new life for you, there is no hope for you, You are NOT over when you think you are.

Now I don't want you to mishear me. Don't get it twisted. I'm not saying that God will wipe away the hurt, that God will make it as though this pain never happened. God does not wave a magical wand and make everything perfect.

What I'm saying is that God works for new life, God works for renewal and rebirth and redemption, but it is work!

There will be scars from these moments, you will forever be changed by the eruption of your personal volcano, but God will continue to work in you and with you to remind you that no matter how much ash has fallen, no matter how much lava has flowed, that you are not over when you think you are!

Now this isn't something I have done here yet, but I've gotten to do it once or twice before, and I have a feeling that you all need to hear this message from more than just me. So, I need you to turn to your neighbor right now. Yes, turn and look at the people sitting next you, look into their eyes, look at them and say "Neighbor, you are not over when you think you are."

Alright, now find another neighbor, someone else in your row or on the bench behind or in front of you. Look at them, look them in the eye and say, "Neighbor, you are NOT over when you think you are."

That's right, because we have a God who believes in redemption, we have a God who believes in hope, we have a God who believes in new life, we have a God who believes in YOU!

God believes that you are not over when you think you are. God is constantly working in your life, with you not against you. God wants to take that dust, that ash, that volcanic rock and make something beautiful out of it.

God sees you in your pain and your sorrow and wants to bring splendor and joy. God sees you saying, "I'm an old tree that has ran its course, I'm dried up, I'm dead," and God says, "Not yet! Let's shoot out and go a new way!"

God is constantly saying, "Look I am doing a new thing in you... I will make a way in your wilderness and rivers in your desert."

Yes, we have a God that believes so much in life and in hope that not even death can separate us from the love of God, not even death can stop the eternal life we have with God, death does not win, death does not have the final word, no that belongs to God and God's word is hope, God's word is life, God's word is rebirth, God's word is love.

Let us believe these words and know that God is always working for life in our lives and that we are not over when we think we are! Amen.