

Happy New Year! As I mentioned at the beginning of the service, today is the first Sunday of Advent. And, as such, it is the beginning of a new church year. But why does the church year begin with Advent?

Well, there's a lot of history and tradition behind it but, theologically, it comes down to the simple reality that Jesus Christ is the center of everything the church does. Everything the church has ever done. Christ was even the center of everything when God's people weren't called "Christians", but instead "Israelites." All of scripture points to Christ.

And so Advent is our time to remember that fact. To remember that through thousands of years of world history, God through His prophets was continually pointing forward to the coming of His Son. That all the way back at the beginning of the world, God promised that a son of Eve would come and crush the serpent's head, undoing the ravages of sin and death. And so our church year begins in the same way that the world began. Awaiting the birth of the Savior. Our Advent paraments spell it out for us: "Behold, He Comes."

And that's good for us, I think. It's good to have a church year that is cyclical. That has a beginning and an end and a new beginning, every 365 days. Because new beginnings play a prominent role in Scripture. In fact, I don't think it's far fetched to say that we have a God of new beginnings.

I mentioned last week that God likes new things, just like we like new things. But God doesn't just like to take the old, throw it in the trash, and make something entirely new. He also likes to take the old, the broken, the dirty, and renew it. Fix it. Wash it and make it like new once again. In other words, God likes to start over. He's a creator and he's a recreator. He is a God of beginnings and a God of new beginnings.

We see him do it time and time again throughout the Bible. The first time is with the flood. Within just a few generations after humanity's fall into sin, we become violent and murderous and wholly corrupt. So God starts over. He takes the one righteous family left on the planets, packs them and a sampling of earth's animals into an ark, and washes everything away with water. Wipes the slate clean.

He does it again with Abraham. Up until that point, God really hadn't carved out a nation or church from humanity. There were just some people who were righteous and some who were unrighteous. And God only revealed himself to the very few who were righteous.

So with Abraham, he starts over. He tells Abraham, "I'm going to make a new covenant with you and with your descendants. I am going to make you into a great nation. And it will be a nation specially favored with my protection and my guidance and my presence. They will be my people and I will be their God."

That works for a while. But then the Israelites go to Egypt. And they become Egyptian. They worship Egyptian gods in the Egyptian way. And so God begins yet again. He says, "If you're going to be my people then you can't worship other gods. It doesn't work that way. If you worship other gods, then you are their people, not my people.

"So we're going to have to start over. And we're going to have some new ground rules. Some new laws. Some new commandments. And I expect you to follow these laws. Because I am still your God."

Over and over again, God starts over. He is a God of new beginnings. And in our Old Testament Lesson, we see God promising yet another new beginning. A new beginning in which God's good promise to Israel and Judah would be fulfilled. The promise he had made to Abraham centuries before. To make him into a great nation in a great land. A nation of peace and joy and prosperity and everything that God had always wanted for mankind.

A new beginning in which a righteous branch would sprout from David's line. A man who would be just and right to His people. A king so perfect, He would remind the people of the height of Israel's glory in the days of David and Solomon.

A new beginning in which the people of Judah and Jerusalem would live with safety and security. Because the Lord, our righteous Savior, would live among them. Emmanuel, God with us, would be with them. And everything would be made right.

It's a wonderful new beginning that God reveals to Jeremiah. Something that lifts our spirits and brings joy to our hearts and makes us grateful to have this wonderful God promising His people such wonderful things. There's just one little problem.

Jeremiah wasn't grateful. In fact, at one point, Jeremiah absolutely yells at God, "You lied to me. You deceived me. You bullied me. Into becoming your prophet. And sharing your word with the people. And I know I'm stuck with this job. But I don't want it."

Why is Jeremiah so angry with God over being His prophet and delivering this wonderful message? Well, because Jeremiah knows why God creates all these new beginnings and he knows what happens when they occur. You see, God only starts over because we screw things up. We fill the world with sin and death and corruption.

And when God starts over – when he makes this new beginning – it's not a pleasant experience. It means thousands upon thousands of people drowning in a flood. It means being ripped from your home and told to wander into a far off land. It means slavery in Egypt. And conquering cities. And fighting giants. It means a lot of pain and suffering.

And for Jeremiah, it means telling his fellow countrymen that they are a bunch of worthless, unjust, idol worshipping pagans. Thousands of whom are just one year away from either being killed in a war with Babylon or rounded up and exiled hundreds of miles from their homes for the next 70 years. But don't worry. God just wants to give us a new beginning. Right... that's comforting.

You know the expression, "Don't kill the messenger." Well, it was something that Jeremiah had to say on several occasions. Twice they actually tried to lynch him for the message he was delivering. Twice he escaped death by the skin of his teeth. And as great as the prophecy in our lesson today sounds, I'm pretty sure Jeremiah very much wished that he did not have a God of new beginnings.

And it's something we have to struggle with as well. New beginnings sound like a great thing at first. A second chance. A fresh start. A clean slate. A New Year with a new resolution. Who doesn't like that?

But then we think about what it means. Settling our debts. Swallowing our lumps. Accepting our punishments. Just as God swept away the old before he brought in the new, he does the same with us. He sweeps away our mortal flesh. Cleans the slate of not just the sin, but the sinfulness inside us that caused us to sin in the first place. He gives us a fresh start, but only after we've suffered a painful end.

Death. Death is God hitting the reset button on our lives. Death is the culmination of all that we did wrong in our lives that caused God to finally say, "Forget it. We're gonna start over here." Which means that death is not a good thing. It is the worst possible thing.

Because not only is death painful and frightening and final. But it is proof of your failure in God's eyes. Just as the flood was proof that the earth had failed in its violence and the exile was proof that Israel had failed in its faithfulness, death is proof that you have failed at... being a human being.

And yet, it's not a failure that's final. Because God does fulfill his good promises and we do have the promise of a new beginning. We know we have a new beginning because Christ had a new beginning. Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of the very prophecy Jeremiah was making here. Who suffered like one who had failed in God's eyes, even though he had succeeded in every way. Who died like one who needed to wipe the slate clean and get a new beginning, even though he had done nothing wrong.

And who rose again and proved, once and for all, that there's a new beginning for everyone. That God never abandons his people. That his mercies are new every morning. And that, as Jeremiah knew so well, death is awful. But, thankfully, it is not in vain. It does bring us something new.

It brings us the fulfillment of God's good promise. It brings a king like David, with justice and righteousness. It brings the safety and security of living in God's new heaven and new earth, with the Lord our righteous Savior standing there among us.

Death is failure. But in Christ we have victory. And a new beginning. And for the very first time, it will be a new beginning that has no end. Amen.