

Let us pray... Creator God, gather your Spirit in this place. Open our hearts to your love and grace, so that all we do, may begin in you... Amen.

Can you believe it?! The second month of 2024 is here...

A year that for some has been off to a great start... A year that for some has been off to a difficult start...

And I have been a part of many conversations centered around a desire to have a reset in 2024...

I think these conversations are plentiful this time of year, because the New Year seems to carry a lot of expectations and aspirations...

We look back over the year we have had... And we look forward to the new year with anticipation and hope...

And then January comes, and something terrible or unexpected happens...

Or maybe life continues to unfold just like it has for the last 12 months...

Or maybe you just can't seem to find that umph to do what you dreamed of...

For some January can be hard and downright depressing.

In fact, studies have shown that January is the most depressing month of the year...

And if you think about it, this makes sense...

The high of the holiday season is over... You have to put away all your cheerful Christmas decorations, your bills become due—especially for those extra presents you may have put on your credit card, the dreaded tax season is amping up, and the days are short, dark, and dreary...

And despite how hard January is... Society chooses to ignore this, and instead paints a different reality by sharing slogans like, New Year... New You...

Which isn't necessarily a bad thing... Especially for those who can embrace new rhythms and habits...

But the thing that bothers me about this "new year, new you" slogan is that it discards who you were...

Sure, there are always things that we can work on or towards, but with the "new year, new you" mentality it disregards who you are on a fundamental level.

As Emily McDowell states... "If you feel inspired to use the new year to help you reset or change habits... Great. And yet... The old you has survived every terrible day, every hard thing, every awful circumstance, and every heartbreak you've ever felt. The old you is a fighter. And that's worth celebrating."¹

You are worth celebrating, flaws and all... Because no matter what, you are a beloved child of God...

And you were claimed as a child of God in baptism...

As the ELCA states "Baptism is a significant part of our faith journey as we come from the baptismal waters to live a new life as children of God.

Our baptism sets us out on a lifelong journey that is characterized by our relationship to God, our relationship to our faith community, our relationships in our community and the wider world."²

Which sounds very similar to our mission statement... We are called to serve God, serve each other, serve the community, and serve the wider church...

Which is a huge calling... And is only made possible when we are grounded in God's love...

¹ Fearless and Foxy <http://www.fearlessandfoxy.com/2019/02/12/new-year-new-you/> accessed 2/1/2024

² ELCA <https://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Faith-Practices/Living-Our-Baptismal-Covenant#:~:text=Baptism%20is%20a%20significant%20part,community%20and%20the%20wider%20world.> accessed 2/3/2024

And even when we find this grounding, it doesn't mean it is going to be easy.

And Jesus knows this... Because right after he was baptized the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness for forty days, where he was tested by Satan.

Jesus experienced first hand the evil in the world...

And after his 40 days in the wilderness, what does Jesus do?

He calls his disciples... showing us that we cannot do ministry alone...

Especially when we begin ministry in a world that is broken...

A world that was also created by God... Created not to be broken, but to be good...

Words that we heard in our Genesis reading today.

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good."

I have always loved this passage and I have come to love it even more this week.

As biblical scholars have unveiled a more accurate translation for the start of this passage... Instead of, In the beginning when God created... It should actually be, "When God began to create."

Not only is this more accurate to the original Hebrew, but this translation more accurately embodies who God is.

By saying, when God began to create, it implies that God continues to create...

And a continuously creating God means that we can find new beginnings in any moment... Not just at the dawn of creation or at the start of a new year...

As theologian Cameron Howard states, "Sometimes the beginnings we choose have to be chosen and rechosen again every day, every minute: to stay sober, to choose patience over anger, to live full of hope in the face of despair. Sometimes new beginnings are chosen for us: by hardship or tragedy or opportunity, by luck or by Providence—who knows?"

New beginnings can happen at any moment, but they are not always apparent in the moment. Telling a story imagines the luxury of a narrative framework: looking back and slotting our experiences into a beginning, a middle, and an end.

We love stories, and stories help us define ourselves and our communities. When we are knee-deep in those experiences, though, we do not always see the story. We do not always know when something has begun!³

Because it is hard to get a bird's eye view of life when we are in the midst of all the things...

Which is why I love the image of the Spirit hovering over the deep at the dawn of creation.

Hovering implies that the moment is fleeting, and the deep implies that there is so much there.

And so, God began to create... So, God could continue to create from the vast deep... From the depths of the cosmos... to the depths of all that makes you... You.

God began to create to show us that we too can begin again and again...

³ Working Preacher <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/baptism-of-our-lord-2/commentary-on-genesis-11-5-6> accessed 2/1/2024.

Not to begin over as someone new... But to begin with all that you are...
Rooted in your strengths, hovering over your deep, and discerning where
the Spirit is moving you...

And this is not something we do alone... We do this work together... And
we do this work to discern where the Spirit is calling St. John. This is part of
our baptismal call, and is an ongoing process...

A call that is lived out when we choose love again and again.

When we start each breath beginning with love... Amen.