

TIME TO RENEW

Genesis 1:1-5; Revelation 21:1-5

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PROLOGUE

Genesis tells the story of God who loves to create out of chaos. God loves to create life, calling into existence that which did not exist before. Revelation affirms that God still brings new beginnings out of chaos. Furthermore, God is not only the composer of creation, but the conductor as well.

SCRIPTURE

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, {2} 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. {3} Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. {4} And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. {5} God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day (Genesis 1:1-5 NRSV).

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. {2} And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. {3} And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; {4} he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." {5} And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true" (Rev 21:1-5 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

The notices come by mail or email or even by text messages. On the envelope or in the subject line it says, "Time to Renew." The magazine subscription is about to expire, and it is time to renew. The membership period is coming to a close, and it is time to renew. The warranty is ending, and it is time to renew.

Different times of the year also convey the same message. January 1 is an obvious one – a new calendar year, new hopes and resolutions. For most Americans, September also has

that same sense of newness since it marks the beginning of a new school year. Churches follow suit with September being the beginning of a new program year.

As it happens, sunset this evening marks the beginning of Rosh Hashana – the Jewish New Year (September 9-11, 2018). The term literally means the “head of the year.” It is described as a time of inner renewal and divine atonement. In the Bible it is called the “Festival of Trumpets” as the sound of trumpets reminded people of God’s faithfulness and signaled important events to come (see Lev 23:23-25).

In many churches, the beginning of the new program year is called “Rally Day.” It is a day set aside to reassemble or “rally” after the relatively quiet summer of vacations, camps, and so on. Today is Rally Day for First Presbyterian Church. What this year will bring only God knows, but if God be with us then the possibilities are unlimited. It is time to renew.

MAIN MESSAGE

I suggest we live this year with a “What if?” attitude. What if we approached this year with the expectation that life truly can be renewed? The Gospel is about beginning again. It is about renewal. We can walk away from yesterday into the freshness of tomorrow. This is good news.

The story of creation is the drama of renewal. Seasons change, time passes, and through it all the cycle of life brings forth the things that make possible the existence of life on earth. It is as if the physical world teaches us a lesson—renewal is at the heart of everything. There is a dynamic of endings and beginnings.

In a sense every Sunday is an opportunity to begin again. We believe that the grace of Christ brings the possibility of renewal. On this Rally Day Sunday we are invited to let that grace wash over our lives so that like fresh-washed children we can begin again. After all, we are the people of Easter. We believe in the radical grace of life defeating death. We are the people who say to one another, “Hear the Good News: in the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!” That powerful statement applies to your life and to mine on this Lord’s day. I pray that we can hear the Gospel today and know that—as in the beginning, so now—God is creating, and the possibilities of that creation are unlimited.

According to the Washington Post, on December 10, 1978, Charles Dederich, was the first to utter the now oft quoted phrase, “Today is the first day of the rest of your life.” I confess I used to hate that phrase. While it is technically accurate, I did not find it particularly helpful, especially if I was having a bad day. “Just great,” I’d say to myself, “Does this mean I’m going to have 20,000 more days like today?!”

Of course, the idea of “20,000 more days” is a rounded number based on the average life expectancy of an American male and also assuming I made the statement in my 20's. If I made the statement today I would have to use a number considerably less than 20,000. Do you suppose that is what the psalmist meant when he prayed, “Lord, teach us to number our days” (Ps 90:12)?

But really, the only day that matters is today. Yesterday is passed. Tomorrow is yet to come. But today is the day that matters. Today is the only day we need to number and everyone can count to one. Today is the first day of the rest of your life.

But there is more than just technical truth to this saying, if we recognize that in God's hands, our lives can be renewed. Today is the day your relationship with God can be renewed. Today is the day you can know an eternal hope.

Think of the moments in the life of Jesus when he was confronted by seemingly permanent dead ends. Bartimaeus, sitting blind by the side of the road, had his sight restored (Mk 10:46-52). He was renewed. The woman at the well, living with the burden of a past that grew heavier with each passing day, was introduced to the living water of grace (Jn 4:1-26). She ran back to her tormentors to tell them to come see a man who has seen her life as no one else ever had; she was renewed. Miserable Zacchaeus sat in a tree just to get a glimpse; Jesus goes home with him, and Zacchaeus becomes a different man (Lk 19:1-10). Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the dark of the night and is invited to be born anew as the dawn of grace breaks over his rule-driven life (Jn 3:1-15). On and on the story goes of God's grace coming to us, restoring our lives, renewing our days, recharging our spiritual batteries, giving us the chance to begin again.

Of course, not everyone believes in second chances. A small county airport also housed an adventure business that taught people how to parachute. However, the sign above the counter was rather intimidating:

“If at first you don't succeed, then skydiving is definitely not for you!”

Today is the first Sunday of a new program year and the rich grace of God is given to us in such a way that we don't have to be who we were when we walked into this place of worship. We can be different people. We don't have to be like snails who drag the shell of their past around with them. No, ours is a Gospel of renewal. We believe in the God of the second chance, and third chance and hundredth chance. We have seen God's revelation in the one whose touch is always renewing, whose word is always redemptive and whose love is powerful enough to let us begin again. May this grace embrace you on this day. It is time to renew!

CONCLUSION

Somewhere in Paradise a man is grinning big. He once hung on a cross next to another man and must have thought his life was over. All he had was a prayer that went something like this: “Jesus, remember me.” All he had was a prayer, and it was all he needed. A thief was given a second chance. If that could happen for him, it can happen for you. In the beginning God created, and in your life God is creating. It’s time to turn over a new leaf, and Jesus is here to help you begin anew. “Jesus, remember me. Come into my life and make me new.” It is time to renew!