

The Hope of a New Beginning
II Corinthians 5:16-21; Matthew 2:1-12
January 3, 2010

Last week I completed the old year by doing something new. I took an online course. I had always wanted to try one, and I hope to do more, and I trust that future courses will be of greater interest to me. You see, the course I took was traffic school. Last fall I got my first traffic ticket. Before your imagination runs wild, let me assure you that I wasn't talking on my cell phone nor had I been drinking nor was I even speeding. I had come to a complete stop at a red light. I dutifully looked both ways and then proceeded to make a right turn. The motorcycle cop who came out of nowhere had to tell me what I had done wrong: I had not seen the signs which read, "No right turn on red light." Busted! I was on my way to a prayer group with colleagues. My prayer obviously began with confession of why I was late!

Back to the online course. My motivation was to erase the demerit on my driving record to prevent an increase in my insurance premium. In addition to making amends for my error by paying a fine, I also wanted to have a clean slate on my driving record! It also provided an opportunity to become a better driver. The course gave me the hope of a new beginning, a chance to start afresh.

I am always intrigued by the magi who complete the Christmas season for us. They were not Jewish; they were likely Persian. They were not steeped in the prophetic tradition and expectation of a Messiah who would inaugurate God's reign of justice. In those days traveling hundreds of miles was not convenient or quick. Yet for some reason they were drawn to follow the star and find the King of the Jews. It was undoubtedly a transforming experience for them. King Herod had asked for a report on the location of the child. In a dream they received a warning not to return to Herod and so they returned home by another way. They did not reveal the child's identity to Herod for fear of putting Jesus' life in jeopardy. They made an intentional choice to protect the child of God. This action was symbolic of the transformation they experienced in meeting the Christ child. Their lives were forever changed. Their loyalty took a new direction.

In his letter to the church at Corinth Paul writes of the hope of transformation for those who are "in Christ." In Eugene Peterson's *Message*, he says, "Anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life burgeons!" Paul wrote out of his personal experience. Prior to his powerful conversion experience on the Damascus Road, Saul was a persecutor of those who followed Jesus. When he was held accountable by God, Saul came to see himself as an enemy of God. Yet he experienced God's reconciling action, offering forgiveness and reforming him as a new creation. If

enemies of God can be transformed, surely there is hope for those of us who are trying to love God and neighbor, but sometimes fall short.

A new beginning does require ownership and responsibility on our part for what we have been and done. It requires recognition of the need to change. Change! That's often a nasty word! We would rather do anything than change. We like things just the way they are, thank you very much. We like ourselves just the way we are, no improvement necessary. It's everyone else who has a problem. If people would just look at things the way I do, we'd all live happily ever after. They just need an attitude adjustment.

Who needs the attitude adjustment? If we begrudge change, we deny the hope of a new beginning. We close the door to fresh opportunities. We declare broken relationships to be dead. We fail to contribute to healthy change in our society. We, like Saul, fight against God, who continues to create, who makes all things new, who brings life out of death.

A prayer common in several liturgical traditions is this: "Forgive what we have been, amend what we are, direct what we shall be." This prayer speaks to the transformation that is both God's desire for our lives and gift.

Forgiveness is an essential ingredient in transformation. Change will be limited as "long as we are held captive to our pasts, whether those captivities are to sins we have committed (or omitted) or to the sins of others that we will not dismiss. In either case, *what has been* will block efforts to change *what is* and *what still can be*. Transformation hinges on our ability to be set free from elements in our past that would otherwise enslave us. We feel wounded by another, and the wound takes on a life—or death—all its own if not confronted and released. We feel ourselves a failure in some moment in our lives and find ourselves unable to let that one failure go until its influence multiplies and poisons our entire view of self. The inability to forgive or to accept forgiveness stands as a significant hurdle to positive change in our lives."ⁱ

The second phrase of the prayer is "amend what we are." With forgiveness, everything is open for change. God can make a new creation of us, with our participation. We need to make the commitment to change. We must express openness to transformation.

An executive named Mike was surly and offensive to everyone, even mouthing off to his CEO. But he was delivering results, and making more than \$4 million a year. According to *Fast Company* magazine (October 2003), executive coach Marshall Goldsmith had a tough job to perform, since he couldn't challenge Mike's performance. Instead, he sat Mike down and said, "I can't help you make more money. You're already making a lot. But let's talk about your ego. How do you treat people at home?"

Mike insisted that he was totally different outside the office—"a pussycat."

They called his wife, and when she finally stopped laughing at her husband's statement, she concurred that Mike was a jerk at home, too. Then he got his two kids on the line, and they agreed with their mother.

Marshall Goldsmith asked Mike, "Do you really want to have a funeral that no one attends other than for business reasons?"

Mike thought for a minute and then said, "I'm going to change....I'm going to change because I have two sons, and if they were receiving this same feedback from you in 20 years, I'd be ashamed to be their father."ⁱⁱ

"Forgive what we have been, amend what we are, direct what we shall be." With the final phrase, we invite God to work within our lives. Once we've acknowledged our need, God has "grist for the mill." We present our rough edges for God's finishing touch, which may not come without some pain and pressure. Rocks with rough edges spend many days in the tumbler before they come out polished with a lustrous shine. And I find that just when one growing edge softens, another spike emerges presenting itself for refinement. I am constantly in need of God's transforming power.

At Christmas God drew near to us in Jesus Christ to offer us the hope of transformation. We needn't trudge through life with past baggage that continues to wound us and others. We can allow Christ to be born anew within us, guiding us through the challenges of our lives and opening us to fresh beginnings. In the church we live through the life story of Christ annually because we need to be reminded of the hope of new life given to us. We have need for Christ to be born again and again and again in our lives, reshaping, reforming, molding us into his likeness.

This Christmas season, may we seize the hope of a new beginning. Let us invite Jesus to be born anew in us, forgiving our past, softening our rough edges, amending our ways, and shaping us into his very likeness.

We come into your Holy Presence, O God, just as we are, with our hopes and dreams, our gifts and our gaps. We bring with us an earnest desire to be made new. In a moment of silence, reveal to us those growing edges that you would like to polish and refine.....In these places where we struggle, where we are less than holy, we invite you in. Come to push and prod, to bend and shape us into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

We bid your life-giving presence into our communal living where we struggle to respect human life and the natural world. Reveal to us the error of our ways and guide us into wholesome ways of living together.

We seek your healing presence for those whom we know and love. Abide with those in the midst of transition, facing uncertainty. Offer peace to those living with life-changing illness. Shine hope into the heart of one who is despairing.

We pray in the name of the Holy One who brings the hope of new life.
Amen.

ⁱ John Indermark, *Do Not Live Afraid: Faith in a Fearful World* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2009), p. 87.

ⁱⁱ *Homiletics*, March 2004, p. 30.

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