

The turning of the calendar year has a way of instilling an expectation of new beginnings, a promise of hope that life and present circumstances will get better. And, quite frankly, as we think of the suffering the world has experienced this past year, the horror of this pandemic, the hundreds of thousands of people who have died and will die before the pandemic is over, the millions of job losses, the businesses that have been impacted, the racial injustice and political unrest, **many of us** begin this year with a deep longing and yearning for renewed hope, a hope that 2021 **will** be better than 2020. Yes, the turning of the year has a way of offering us a sense of rekindled hope and the beginning of a new chapter in life.

Our readings today **also** provide us with words of hope, new life, and new beginnings. Jeremiah proclaims a message of hope to people scattered and displaced in exile. Jeremiah says God **will** save the people, God **will gather** the people together and bring them back to their homeland. God **will recreate** God's people and turn their mourning into joy. For each one of us, **we** presently feel as though we have been scattered because of this pandemic. We feel a certain kind of displacement and we deeply long to gather again. While we now have a renewed sense of hope with the development of a vaccine, Jeremiah's

words **also** provide **us** with hope of new beginnings. You see, **God** is the one who will ultimately gather **us**, bring **us** together again as a community of faith, recreate **us** as God's very own and make **us** new. In fact, that has been something God has been doing from the beginning of time. We hear more about that in today's gospel reading where we receive a word that is all about newness and new beginnings as we hear John's telling of the Jesus story. We find the author of this gospel introducing a daring, audacious, bold message that tells of a whole **new** beginning for humankind, a whole new beginning for the world.

The writer of John's gospel begins presenting the Jesus story in a very lofty, grand manner. And, in doing so, he is so gutsy in his telling of this new beginning through the person of Jesus that his first words to us are "*In the beginning...*" If we have any understanding of Biblical literature, we will recognize that these three words are also the beginning words in the book of Genesis. You will remember that in that first book of the Hebrew Bible we read, "*In the beginning* God created the heavens and the earth." John's use of these three words is **very** intentional. John wants his readers to know that in Jesus, we live into the beginning of a whole **new** creation. The writer of John's gospel is intentionally connecting us to the book of Genesis because, in the person of Jesus, he sees a new beginning

of **history**, of **humanity** and of God's involvement in **all of creation**. In John's telling of the Jesus story, he wants us to understand that, through the incarnate Word, Jesus the Christ, the Word made flesh, we **will** find a very living, breathing promise of new life. John's story about Jesus is designed from beginning to end not just to tell us, but to evoke for us, the living, breathing promise of a new beginning to **all** of human history in and through the incarnate Word, Jesus the Christ. That's why he patterns his opening after Genesis. By connecting the Jesus story to Genesis, John is stipulating nothing less than this: God poured God's own self into human form. Jesus **is** the eternal Word, the eternal Word that was God's proactive agent in the creation of all things – even life itself. And, this eternal Word continues to create and make all things new!

For all of us, as much as we want and deeply desire to see God, we cannot literally do so. Our inability to literally see God seems much more apparent in times of great need, in times when the darkness of life seems to overwhelm life itself, in times like this present pandemic experience. That darkness might come to us **personally** through illness, death, job loss, depression, loneliness, or tragedy. At times like these, we are keenly aware that we are simply unable to literally see God. As our country experiences so much illness, suffering, racial injustice, and the many forms

of hatred espoused upon others, we **collectively** experience darkness and are keenly aware of our limitations when it comes to seeing God. So, **because** of our limitations, **God** becomes **human** in the person of Jesus. God becomes human that we **may** see God. In the person of Jesus, God becomes accessible to **us**. In Jesus, the eternal God becomes finite and vulnerable, all for **our** sake so that we may see the very **heart** of God. No longer is God a disembodied voice from some distant place. The incarnation enables **us** to see that not only is Jesus like God, **God is like Jesus, and has always been!** God loves us so deeply that God is lovingly and graciously present to us even in the darkest places and times of life. And, all of the darkness that ever existed, that is present now, or that will exist in the future is unable to overcome the light of the eternal Word, the Word that creates and recreates the world, the Word made flesh, the very life force that continually animates the entire created order – even you and me.

Oh yes, John wants us to fully understand that, in the person of Jesus, God is doing something very, very new. **God is not finished creating.** God **continues** to create because God is the Creator, and there is always new beginning, as John begins his Jesus story by saying, “In the beginning.” The need for new creation is lodged in God’s truth that new

creation is essential to the world, essential to God's character, and essential to how God wants to be **in** the world. "In the beginning" is God as Creator, then and now, in the past, in the present and in the future. "In the beginning" is the memory of God making all things new. "In the beginning" is the promise of God's steadfast love, there, then, here, and now. "In the beginning" is the promise that God will never let us go, no matter what happens, no matter what the future brings. This is the meaning of those three words: God says new things. God **is** new things. **God becoming human** is "in the beginning" in its fullest form. It is light once again. It is the goodness of humanity once again. It is God recreating God's very self because that is who God is and that is what we are and will continue to be as believers – reborn children of God. "The Word became flesh and lived among us." This flesh. Skin and bones. God pitched a tent among us in flesh and bones. God becoming flesh means God gets flesh! God **understands** what it feels like and what it means to be human. And because of that, God will **never** give up on what God has created. **Nothing** is beyond God's reach. God realized that we human beings, God's beautiful creations, we need to experience re-creation on a regular basis. Otherwise, life is too much about death. We **need** this promise – the promise of God's commitment to recreating God's very self, our selves, and

the world. It's the creation story all over again: God created the heavens and the earth, God created humankind in God's own image, **and God created you!**

Friends, the coming of the Word made flesh has enabled those who follow Jesus, each one of us, to **embody** God's creative Word. Jesus is not alone in this Word made flesh business. The creative, living Word is still at work in and through **us**. Because of God's decision to come to us in a form we recognize, in Jesus the Christ, we are empowered to reach out to those around **us**. By the grace of God and, through baptism, through bread and wine, and through the work of the Spirit, God is at work putting skin on God's Word through us. And, we are called to continually bear God's creative and redeeming Word in this world and carry God's Word of life to others through all that we do and the way in which we live. In the person of Jesus, God has invaded this broken world and God is working through God's people, shining the light of God's presence even in the darkest places of the world, even right here and right now.

So, on this first Sunday of the new year, the message we are given is all about newness, all about hope, all about recreation and all about being made new. God **is** at work and about the business of making **us** new and **making all things new.**