

Probably all of us, at times in our lives, have had something happen where we've felt like it was kind of a new beginning. Or maybe, literally, you got a new beginning in some facet of life. Maybe it was a second chance or do-over...maybe it was just a change in direction that wasn't such a radical turn around as a second chance, but still felt like a new beginning, like a new job or a new home or the birth of a child into your life...These are all "new beginnings" in their own way.

And as you've probably experienced: A new beginning can be a little messy: new relationships to forge, new habits to develop, new city to find your way around in...**Any "new beginning" always has a learning curve and the associated mis-steps in the process.** Friends of mine from Chehalis have experienced this recently, in their own new beginning of sorts, when they bought a fixer-upper house with the intent of renovating it and selling it. They've never done this before. In fact, they had a new beginning not long ago as Stan had a career change and became a realtor. Part way into the remodel, Stan ended up in the ER with staples in his arm from a severe cut he got while doing demo work. His wife, Lee, documented that and recently gave an update Facebook that I'd like to share with you:

"So when last we left our caped crusaders, they'd taken a quick trip to urgent care where Stan was the recipient of multiple staples for his little boo boo. Fast forward to today when he had to leave for the title company for a closing [on a house]. Demo in the bathroom was going swimmingly until somehow the vanity being removed managed to snap off some water line thingy and all hell broke loose. AC, our trusty and amazing helper extraordinaire, bellers to me from inside the house, which was a fairly good hint that all was not well. I walk in to see AC, who is drenched, and water spewing upwards from here to breakfast. So, short story long, an after hours visit from the water department to turn the very old, very stubborn water line thingy off, a quick call to my brother and sister in law for towels, and all is better than it was. At least until tomorrow morning when Stan crawls under the house to assess exactly how much water was diverted underneath in the

30 minutes the water was diverted so as not to ruin the wood floors. On a positive note though, the bathroom ceiling is like really clean! Livin' the dream folks. Livin' the dream.

Oh, and the bonus picture is my feet. I'm always taking accidental pictures of my feet. You're welcome..."

Look, I could've been inspired by this to share a story from my own home remodel, but that new beginning of our own was much smoother and not nearly as funny as theirs. And this just happened this week...the timing was perfect for my sermon, and I think God providentially orchestrated their messy new beginning to benefit us and this sermon. (Just kidding ☺.)

The Book of Acts is a book of new beginnings, and many of them are unexpected, and many of them are messy. Scripture begins with it's own unexpected "in the beginning" in Genesis 1:1, comes to what seemed to be an unexpected and tragic end in death of Jesus Christ, but with his unexpected resurrection, things continue on with a new beginning. And let's be honest: besides new beginnings and unexpected stuff, there's messiness throughout the Old Testament, and in the gospels, too. But as the narrative continues here in Acts, things are different once again, and so Acts is again a kind of new beginning – with it's own messiness and unexpected events.

Acts is written by Luke, the author of the gospel account that bears his name. As with the Gospel account, Acts is also written to his friend, Theophilus. So what I want to do is just read/summarize and comment briefly on some of the new beginnings and the unexpected and sometimes messy nature of them that we read about in Acts, because there are a bunch...and then tie this all up together at the end.

Let's start with this morning's passage, where we see the resurrected Jesus conversing with some of the disciples. At this point they are referred to as "Apostles" which is just the English alliteration of the Greek word "apostolos" which means "messengers" or "sent ones." And **Jesus tells these "sent ones" that they will be baptized with the Holy Spirit – so that's a kind of a new beginning, and an unexpected thing.** He also tells them that

they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them, so that's another kind of new beginning, or maybe it's more of an extension or result of the new beginning of being baptized by the Holy Spirit. They'll have power...a different kind of power than normal human power. And we see the power of the Holy Spirit throughout the book of Acts. In fact, the Book of Acts' full title is "The Acts of the Apostles" but it really should be titled, "The Acts of the Holy Spirit" because the Spirit moves in powerful ways, starting with the baptism of the Apostles, and then other acts of power, as well.

Speaking of Baptism and power (and this is really an aside): did you hear about the mother on the East Coast who last Sunday was trying to get her teenage son out of bed to go to Easter services at church, but he just was not budging? This is a true story. She had a tazer – you know, those stun guns that are for self-defense? She had one and so she used it to get him out of bed. I heard about that and in light of thinking about this idea of being baptized in the power of the Holy Spirit, my immediate reaction, was, "She just baptized him!" Talk about a jolt of power coming into your life, right? I'm not advocating using that, however, and her son called the police, and it appears that she may get in trouble with the law for using it as she did.

Anyway, this baptism is a new beginning. **And that's what baptism is: a new beginning.** Water never stopped being used in baptisms, but it is seen as a sign and a symbol of what God is doing...a sign of God's covenant much as circumcision was in the Old Testament...and water baptism is a sign of the Holy Spirit washing over that person and coming into their life, giving this new beginning.

Jesus tells them that the message is to be taken to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. It's not just for certain people; it's for everyone. And this inclusion of people beyond the Jewish faith is a struggle for some of them. The Gospel is also for people who aren't like them. This is another new beginning, and it's messy.

Then when the Holy Spirit comes upon those first disciples as recorded in Acts 2 at the day of Pentecost, it's quite unexpected, and there's some

messiness around it too, when people observe what's going on and accuse the early Christians of being drunk with wine at 9:00 in the morning. So Peter explains what's going on, connects this outpouring of the Holy Spirit to Old Testament prophecies that speak of God pouring out his spirit, and the upshot of it all is a big surprise: 3,000 people got new beginnings in their life as they became Christians that day because of Peter's preaching and the moving of God's Spirit.

The messiness continues with Jewish religious leaders who are reactionary toward the fledgling church, which actually grows rather than shrinking away and fading into oblivion. We see them in Acts 4 commanding the early Christians not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. We see a number of people get healed and have a personal, physical new beginning. We see the church get persecuted and then scattered, which really only ends up being yet another new beginning by spreading the church and their message of Jesus out beyond Jerusalem and the immediate towns around it (just as Jesus commanded them to in 1:8).

Acts tells us the story of Saul, who a bit later became known as Paul, getting his own "new beginning" as he is transformed from lead persecutor of Christians to becoming a Christian and championing the cause of Jesus. That was messy: When he first was transformed, the early believers didn't know if they should believe that he really was changed, because he had such a vicious reputation for persecuting Christians. There was a lot of wariness toward him, and he had to earn their trust.

So this new beginning of the Church had a lot of unexpected movements of God, and a lot of messiness. And that still happens. The Church is a collection of sinners saved by grace. We're not perfect human beings. Things can get messy. **But God continues to be a God of New Beginnings and unexpected movement in our lives and in His people across the globe.**

And in spite of the messiness, we should not let that deter us from trusting in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We humans have a way of making messes out of God's perfection, and creating obstacles to belief where there really should be a clear path. But we can continue forward in faith that God is

real, He is good, He loves us, and he wants us to be with Him...in relationship with him – no matter how messy we may make things some times.

I want to share a story that I think kind of ties this all together: new beginnings, messiness, and the unexpected nature of it all. You have to suspend reality a bit, as we do with a lot of stories (superhero movies, anyone?)...so just go with the flow here. In a mother's womb were two babies. One asked the other: "Do you believe in life after delivery?" The other replied, "Why, of course. There has to be something after delivery. Maybe we are here to prepare ourselves for what we will be later."

"Nonsense" said the first. "There is no life after delivery. What kind of life would that be?"

The second said, "I don't know, but there will be more light than here. Maybe we will walk with our legs and eat from our mouths. Maybe we will have other senses that we can't understand now."

The first replied, "That is absurd. Walking is impossible. And eating with our mouths? Ridiculous! The umbilical cord supplies nutrition and everything we need. But the umbilical cord is so short. Life after delivery is to be logically excluded."

The second insisted, "Well I think there is something and maybe it's different than it is here. Maybe we won't need this physical cord anymore."

The first replied, "Nonsense. And moreover if there is life, then why has no one ever come back from there? Delivery is the end of life, and in the after-delivery there is nothing but darkness and silence and oblivion. It takes us nowhere."

"Well, I don't know," said the second, "but certainly we will meet Mother and she will take care of us."

The first replied "Mother? You actually believe in Mother? That's laughable.

If Mother exists then where is She now?”

The second said, “She is all around us. We are surrounded by her. We are of Her. It is in Her that we live and move and have our being. Without Her this world would not and could not exist.”

Said the first: “Well I don’t see Her, so it is only logical that She doesn’t exist.”

To which the second replied, “Sometimes, when you’re in silence and you focus and listen, you can perceive Her presence, and you can hear Her loving voice, calling down from above.”

Birth is a new beginning, right? It’s messy, it’s kind of unexpected – for the baby, for sure, and occasionally for the mother and father, too. But it’s a new beginning of something beautiful and beyond what the baby in the womb could imagine. That’s not unlike the new beginning that Jesus offers through faith in Him, and that we experience through the power of the Holy Spirit. In fact “born again” is exactly the metaphor Jesus used to talk about this new beginning of life with Jesus when he spoke with Nicodemus about it in John 3. Nick was like, “You mean, enter the womb and be born again? No way” And Jesus was like, “Yah-weh ☺But you don’t re-enter the womb. It’s a spiritual rebirth.” **We can be born again, and sometimes it’s messy, sometimes it’s unexpected: but it’s a gift from God that comes to us through the power of the Holy Spirit.**

And with that come all kinds of new beginnings and unexpected ways in which God moves and if we’re quiet enough and focused and listening carefully, we can perceive God’s presence. His Spirit is moving amongst us. You may be able to hear God’s loving voice, calling down from above. Maybe audibly. It happens to some – some of you have told me about hearing God’s voice...I know others who are clear-headed, sane, normal people who would stand here and tell you they’ve heard the voice of God. Maybe through some other way...just a sense you have, or through Scripture.

This week I was scheduled to have lunch with a pastor at Red Robin in

Renton, which is almost exactly in the middle between our churches. About an hour before the time we'd set, I had this sense that I should just confirm the appointment. I don't usually confirm those things, because with smart phones and laptops and tablets and all the reminders they give us for our appointments when we use their calendaring capabilities, it's like almost impossible to completely blow through an appointment, though it happens occasionally. So I rarely confirm something like this. And so I ignored that sense I had, and a bit later drove down to Renton. He, however, never made it. I actually finally sent him a text message through Facebook (I didn't have his phone number, or I might've confirmed the appointment that way beforehand) after I waited about 15 minutes and asked if we were still on, and he got the message and immediately apologized profusely that he and his wife were moving boxes into the house they'd bought and he completely spaced our lunch but really felt he should keep at this project he was in the midst of. And I wasn't going to wait another 25 minutes at that point, anyway.

And the first thought that went through my head was: I should have listened to that still, small voice, that said, "Confirm the appointment." Was that the Holy Spirit speaking to me, knowing that I had a really full day and did not need to waste 50 minutes on the road needlessly driving to Renton and back? I was already stressed that I even had the lunch appointment because I was short on time. So the cancellation was kind of a blessing...I just wished I'd found out before getting in my car. And maybe that was the Holy Spirit trying to nudge me and speak to me.

So if we listen carefully, we may very well hear God's Spirit speaking to us. And eventually, when our day comes, we will be reborn in a whole new way, when we leave this world and get birthed into the next. It's one last "new beginning" that will undoubtedly be surprising because I don't think heaven is going to be anything like what any of us think it will be like. It will be as different from this world as going from the womb to the world of the air. We'll go from the world of the air to the realm of the Spirit, and as much as I'd like to think heaven is a 45 degree slope with 2 feet of new snow every day and no lift lines, it will probably be something completely different than what we know here. It will be a truly new beginning, with all kinds of

surprises.

And it will lack the messiness of earthly new beginnings, I'm sure of that. Scripture makes that clear. And so just as Jesus ascended and was hidden from their sight, so will we one day enter into a new realm in the presence of God, for a glorious new beginning. It will continue and exceed all the new beginnings God gives in the Bible, in Acts and still today in our lives. I pray you'll know the new beginnings that God offers you through faith in Jesus and through the power of the Holy Spirit - even if that new beginning leads to some messiness initially, or is unexpected. Because God is a God of New Beginnings and that, my friends, is really Good News. Let's pray...Amen.

ⁱ Today's sermon correlates to Chapter 28 in "The Story." We took orders for copies of the book, "The Story" at church, but now you can get a copy of the book on your own online through many websites (Amazon.com, cbd.com, etc.). In fact, cbd.com (Christian Book Distributors) has them for \$5, hardback. Just search for "NIV The Story Bible" at their website.