

Today Can be the First Day of Your New Life!

Hebrews 2:10-18 & Matthew 2:13-23

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church

1001 W. Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616

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Hebrews 2:10-18 (NIV)

¹⁰ In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. ¹¹ Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. ¹² He says, "I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises." ¹³ And again, "I will put my trust in him. And again he says, "Here am I, and the children God has given me."

¹⁴ Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil — ¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. ¹⁶ For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants.

¹⁷ For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Matthew 2:13-23 (NIV)

¹³ When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

¹⁴ So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵ where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

¹⁶ When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. ¹⁷ Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: ¹⁸ "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."

¹⁹ After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt ²⁰ and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead."

²¹ So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, ²³ and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: “He will be called a Nazarene.”

Today Can be the First Day of Your New Life!

It's said that in Rome, on New Year's Eve, there is a tradition of literally throwing old things right out the window, so as to start the New Year free from the past. I guess the moral of that is, if you are ever fortunate enough to be in Rome, Italy some New Year's Eve, you best keep an eye skyward. Somebody might be throwing out a heavy piece of furniture just as you are passing by. That's their tradition.

A pastor named Patricia Farris tells about being in Mexico one year with her husband on New Year's Eve. They found themselves in the middle of something they didn't understand at the time, but they discovered it's similar to the tradition in Rome.

It was late in the evening, though not yet midnight, and the central square was full of people, lights, music, kids, old people, families. Stands were set up and people were selling, in addition to all the usual souvenirs and food and so forth, an array of very inexpensive pottery, mostly simple clay plates. What was interesting was that people were buying these simple clay plates and then standing back and throwing them with full force against one wall of the great cathedral in the community square, smashing the plates into smithereens.

It was loud and raucous and exciting, according to Ms. Farris. Only later did she learn that this tradition grew out of a deep human need to throw out the old, to start the New Year free of old resentments, old fears, old prejudices, old sins. “Throw them out!” says Patricia Farris, “Let them smash against the strong fortress of faith and be done with it. God is ready to offer healing and new life.”

Welcome to worship on this first Sunday of a New Year. The theme for our service today is “Today is the first day of the rest of your life!” You've heard that expression before. It is a positive expression about life and I want us to reinforce it today. Today really can be the first day in your new life.

Velma Seawell Daniels in her book *Celebrate Joy!* tells of interviewing a man who had made a trip to Alaska to visit some people who lived above the Arctic Circle. “Never ask an Eskimo how old he is,” the man said. “If you do, [the Eskimo] will say, ‘I don't know and I don't care.’ And,” the man added, “he doesn't.”

He said an Eskimo told him that one time and so he pressed the Eskimo a bit further. He asked him a second time how old he was, and the Eskimo said, “Almost — that's all.”

So he asked, “Almost what?” And the Eskimo said, “Almost one day.” The man didn't have a clue what the Eskimo meant by that until he talked to another person who had lived in the Arctic Circle for

about twenty years. “He was a newspaperman who had written a book about the Eskimos and their customs and beliefs. He said the Eskimos believe that when they go to sleep at night they die — that they are literally dead to the world. Then, when they wake up in the morning, they have been resurrected and are living a new life. Therefore, no Eskimo is more than one day old. So, that is what the Eskimo meant when he said he was ‘almost’ a day old. The day wasn’t over yet.”

“Life above the Arctic Circle is harsh and cruel, and mere survival becomes a major accomplishment,” he explained further. “But, you never see an Eskimo who seems worried or anxious. They have learned to face life one day at a time.”

Have you learned how to put worry and anxiety aside and live one day at a time? It gives new meaning to that familiar admonition that “Today is the first day of the rest of your life,” doesn’t it?

Our Scripture Lesson for the day deals with people who also lived in a harsh and cruel world. It is the concluding portion of the Christmas story. After the shepherds and the wise men have gone, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and says to him, “Herod will be looking for the child in order to kill Him. So get up, take the child and escape to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you to leave.”

It is a scene of darkness and dread, of fear and flight. The humble couple gathers their few belongings and their precious newborn babe, and in the darkness of night they silently make their way toward Egypt.

Life is often like that. Even in the most beautiful story in all of literature — the story of the gift of God’s son being delivered to humankind in the manger of Bethlehem, there is the specter of fear and death.

THIS IS AN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT ON THIS FIRST SUNDAY OF THE NEW YEAR, THAT THERE IS MUCH IN LIFE TO DREAD.

The Bible does not gloss over the very real problems of living in this imperfect world. From the very first family written about in the Bible, with its envy and strife; through the daily battles of God’s own people, the people of Israel, with neighboring tribes, with feast, famine, slavery and wandering through the wilderness — through tears and tribulations, we see in their travails that life is not easy. The Bible portrays no Pollyanna view of life. Life is harsh, demanding, and sometimes cruel. There is much to dread.

So Joseph and Mary and their newborn son must flee for their lives into Egypt. It is a very human drama that has been repeated often through the ages. Even today, around the world and within our own borders, families are packing up their belongings, setting off in the hopes of finding jobs, food, or freedom. Some in places like Syria and even Central America, are actually fleeing for their lives. They have to leave family and friends behind. With a sense of dread and uncertainty they move to new homes in search of a better, more secure life.

Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt, but the story does not end there. Even when Herod dies and they feel free to return to Israel, they dare not return to their former home in the province of Judea. Herod's son Archeleus has succeeded him, and there is still much to fear. Thus they settle in the province of Galilee, in a little town called Nazareth.

The biblical testimony is realistic that there is much in life to fear.

THE PROBLEM BEGINS WHEN WE ALLOW OUR FEARS TO OVERWHELM US. FEAR CAN DO AMAZING THINGS WITH OUR MINDS.

There is an ancient legend that says the specter of Death was walking toward a certain city when a man stopped the specter and asked it what it was going to do there. Death replied, "I am going to kill 10,000 people." The man responded with horror, but Death insisted, "That's the way it is. And that's what I will do."

The day passed, and the man again met Death on his return journey. The man said, "You told me you were going to kill 10,000 people, but I heard that 70,000 in that city were killed." Death shrugged its shoulders, "I did only kill 10,000; the others were killed by fear."

The most basic of all human emotions is fear. And fear in proper doses is healthy. Many people, however, are almost totally dominated by their fears. It may be fear of failure, or fear of ridicule. It may be fear of places, or fear of people. There are as many fears as there are demands upon the human creature. Anything we are asked to be or do can create fear.

Of course, everyone is afraid of something. Actor Spencer Tracy had a fear of flying. So did Judy Garland. Modern actresses Jennifer Aniston and Whoopi Goldberg are also said to be afraid of flying.

Pop star Britney Spears is said to panic on encountering large lizards. Madonna is terrified of thunder. Actress Scarlett Johansson is terrified of birds. I hope she never sees the Alfred Hitchcock movie of that name. She'll never be the same again.

We're told that French philosopher Albert Camus was phobic about driving a car. Ironically, he died in a car accident while a friend was driving. Sigmund Freud had a fear of traveling anywhere outside of Vienna. I wonder what kind of repressed desire explains that?

We all have the capacity to make our lives miserable by giving in to our fears. But there is an antidote to fear, and you can find it in the Scriptures. It is an antidote that allowed the heroes of the Bible to dissolve their fears and fight great battles.

This antidote is more than simply being courageous. Courage is an admirable quality. It allows us to face our fears for a time and do battle. But courage is a somewhat limited ally. It all too easily falls prey to its greatest enemy, an emotion with an interesting name: discouragement. Think about it.

Courage and discouragement. For courage to be lasting and effective, it must be able to see hope. If it sees no hope, it quickly transforms into discouragement. The opposite of fear is not courage, the opposite of fear is faith.

FAITH TELLS US THAT ALTHOUGH THE ODDS ARE AGAINST US, WE ARE NOT ALONE.

That is the Biblical answer to fear. We may see no hope, but we know the One who is the source of hope. That is faith — not in ourselves, but in God. And that kind of faith can always defeat fear.

It is interesting. Joseph and Mary, as they fled to Egypt, could not know that they were fulfilling an Old Testament prophecy made by the prophet Hosea, “I called my son out of Egypt.” And as they headed from Egypt to Nazareth, separating themselves from their families and friends in Judea, they probably were not even aware that, according to a prophecy which had been written centuries before, the Messiah would be called a Nazarene.

Even as the drama of the first Christmas begins with them making their way to Joseph’s home town of Bethlehem because of a ruling by Augustus Caesar that all the world should be taxed, they could not know that, according to a prophecy by the prophet Micah, their son must be born in Bethlehem. Think of it. God had moved a Roman emperor in order to fulfill an isolated piece of Scripture. God even used the jealous rage of Herod and Archeleus to fulfill His purposes.

Do you see the majesty and glory of it all? Even in the darkest times, God was there, just as God is with us in our difficult times. Life was hard for Mary and Joseph, but they were never alone. God was with them. And that is the meaning of faith — not that the way will be made easy for us, but that God will be with us.

So why are you afraid? Why are you dispirited and downcast? God is at work in the life of all of us. As Paul writes in Romans 8:28, “We know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love Him....”

Why not turn your fears and frustrations over to God? As Patricia Farris says, “Throw them out — smash [them] against the strong fortress of faith and be done with [them]. God is ready to offer healing and new life.” The same loving Father who gently guided Mary and Joseph toward Bethlehem, then toward Egypt, and finally toward a little town named Nazareth watches over our lives as well. He can free you from your fears if you will trust Him.

Without faith we are in bondage to our worries and anxieties. But with faith, with trust in God, we can be set free. For the Eskimo each new day is new life. Christ can give us new life as well. And today is the first day of that life.

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