

A Fresh Start
Mark 1:4-11

When I graduated from seminary, back in the last century, I was sent to a church in a small community up in East Texas. When I say small, I mean small. The population of the whole town was about the membership of this church. Everybody knew everybody, and their children, their parents and their grandparents. It was really one large, extended family. One Sunday I saw a fellow in church that I hadn't seen before. He obviously knew everyone though. He was doing a lot of glad handing. I asked my lay leader who he was. He said, "Oh, that's Boo-Hoo Williams. He's a member." I said, "I hadn't seen him before." He said, "No. You won't see much of Boo-Hoo. He's here today because he's running for city council. He's campaigning. He runs for city council every election." I said, "Surely, Boo-Hoo isn't his real name." The lay leader said, "No, of course not. That's his nickname. His name is Jim." I said, "How in the world did he get a nickname like that?" He said, "Well, when he was a baby, he cried a lot. He was a real cry-baby. I guess he still is." I asked if Boo-Hoo had ever won an election. He said, "Nah. Who wants a cry-baby on the city council?" And I thought to myself, "If ever there was a man who needs a fresh start, it's Boo-Hoo Williams." He was having to overcome a reputation he earned when he was baby.

Eventually Boo-Hoo moved to a new community. It was hard for him to give up his hometown. But in this new community, as Jim Williams, he started a successful business and did become a community leader. Boo-Hoo just needed a fresh start.

But then, don't we all need a fresh start from time to time.

Even Jesus did. During the first thirty years of his life Jesus lived a very ordinary life. Certain, he was well regarded in Nazareth. The scriptures tell us he grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and people. I'm sure that all the mothers in Nazareth talked about what a nice young man he was and how nice it would be if he married one of their daughters and settled down to raise a family. The men probably talked about how much they enjoyed conducting business with him. He was always fair and honest and did good work. He would be a leader in Nazareth someday, they would say. The only problem was that Jesus didn't come into the world to be a respected leader and family man in Nazareth. He was sent to save the world.

Before Jesus entered the Jordan River to be baptized by John, he had lived his life as Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary and Joseph. When Jesus left the Jordan River, after being baptized with water and the Holy Spirit, he lived his life as the Christ, the Son of God.

When Jesus was baptized, he got a fresh start. His life moved in a totally different direction. He would never return to living as a carpenter in Nazareth.

Jesus offers us the opportunity for a fresh start. When he invited people to be his disciples, he made it clear that he was calling them to a new life. Some of them knew they needed a fresh start. They knew they were sinners and outcasts. Others were living decent, respectable lives. But they needed a fresh start as much as the others.

But when they accepted Jesus' invitation to follow him, they all got a fresh start on life. Their lives move in a totally different direction—so different that some of them even used new names. Simon the fisherman became Peter the Rock. Saul of Tarsus became Paul the Evangelist.

Jesus told his disciples to embrace this new life with all their hearts and not to be tempted to return to their old life. He said, "Anyone who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is not worthy of the Kingdom of God." Luke 9:62 If you are plowing a field, you had better be looking where you are going, not where you came from. It is a fact that we tend to go in the direction we are looking. If you are trying to go in one direction, and you are looking in another direction, you will probably not plow a straight line.

One of the best pieces of advice my father gave me was when I was learning to drive. He said, "Keep your focus as far down the road as you can see. Don't look at things alongside the road. Don't focus your attention on anything in the car. (This was long before the age of cell phones, so that is really good advice today.) And don't focus your attention on the rearview mirror. Glance, don't focus. Keep your eyes on where you are going, not where you have been."

That's what Jesus was saying. Eyes forward.

This is a time for fresh starts—for the world, for our nation, and for our church. We are eleven days into a new year. We will have new president soon. We have new staff members and some new officers here at Chapelwood. This is a new day. We are moving in a new direction.

We have whole new worlds to explore, new things to learn, new ways of doing things.

Newness can be uncomfortable. You experienced that when we sang the first song, "Today is a Day of New Beginnings." How many of you have ever heard this song before? For all but a few of you this is a brand new song, although it's been in our hymnal for twenty years. And I'll warn you ahead of time that you probably won't know the last song either—"When Jesus Came to Jordan." I know that when we announced this song you were thinking, "Oh, boy. A new song. This is so exciting. I love new songs." You were probably uncomfortable singing that first song, and you will probably be uncomfortable singing the last song.

And that's the way life is. New things are uncomfortable. But they are also exciting.

We have a choice: We can focus on the discomfort of new things and long for the good, old days, driving down the road, looking in the rearview mirror at places we have been and will never be again; or we can focus our attention on the road before us, excited about going places we've never been before and seeing things we've never seen before.

Jesus could have stayed in Nazareth. It would have been pleasant and comfortable. He could have avoided the cross. But he also would have missed out on the Resurrection. He would not be seated on a throne of glory hearing his Father say, "You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." And he would not have brought salvation to a world of lost sinners, including you and me.

So, let's embrace this fresh start. Let's move forward with enthusiasm and excitement—And with faith, our eyes focused on Christ, as he leads us in new directions. Let us celebrate new possibilities and new opportunities. Let us give thanks for fresh starts. There are challenges ahead, to be sure. There will be crosses to bear. No question

about that. But if we will tackle those challenges and carry the crosses, they will lead us to the day of Resurrection. We will hear our God saying to us, “You are my beloved child in whom I am well pleased.” We will join Christ on the throne of glory.

Let us thank God for fresh starts.

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