

Chapel Hill United Church of Christ

Sunday Sermon

# A New Heart, A New Start

John 1: 1-10  
Jeremiah 31: 7-17

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*“See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here.”*

Prayer: Amen.

Happy New Year, everyone! May God’s blessings be upon us as we embark on this new beginning. Amen!

I’ve always found it interesting that the most significant holidays in our culture come at a time when we have the longest nights of the year, making these days the darkest of the year. But, because the ending of 2009 is really the ending of the first decade of the 2000’s, many commentators and list-makers have focused on the highlights of the decade. One such list was dubbed the worst tragedies of the decade. Of course, the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 topped the list of five. This was followed by the tsunami in 2004 that killed almost 240,000 people. Wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the political turmoil in Iran also were on the list, as were Hurricanes Katrina and Jeanne. I wonder where the recession would fall on this list?

For every tragedy, every heart break, every situation that devastates humanity, either as a whole people or as an individual, I believe God's heart breaks. For every act of terror, every circumstance where fairness and justice are thwarted, God, I believe, feels our agony. For every situation that holds humanity captive, whether it's the literal captivity of soldiers caught as prisoners in a war zone, or the figurative captivity of approximately 46 million people in our country who don't have health care insurance, God's compassion and tender care are ignited.

Friends, humanity is God's ultimate creation, and we are loved by God ultimately. When tragedy strikes, or when captivities burden the heart, conscience, and soul of human beings, God's love for humanity and God's desire for humanity's well-being, I believe, inspire God to have a new heart for people and enact a redemptive plan.

In Jeremiah's day, the Babylonians from the north had captured both Israelite nations and taken them captive in Babylon. God's word to Jeremiah was for him to tell the people that this was going to happen, but he also told them to have hope because God's redemptive plan was at work. There will come a day when the people held captive would be brought back from the north and wherever else they were taken. And, God would bring EVERYONE back, including the healthy and the infirm, the oldest and the youngest. "Hear the word of the Lord, O nations and

declare it in the coastlands far away—He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock!”

Isaiah also shouted a similar refrain that we’ve heard this past two weeks: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined” (Isaiah 9:2). The darkness is Babylonian exile. But, the darkness of any captivity is always subject to the light that pierces it. Christ is the light, and this light shines in the darkness.

You see, just like Isaac Newton’s third law of motion which says, “for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction” (<http://csep10.phys.utk.edu/astr161/lect/history/newton3laws.html>, retrieved December 31, 2009), the same thing might be considered true for dire circumstances. For whatever is dire, for whatever darkness of captivity we might face, such darkness is always subject to the light of our redemptive God that can pierce the darkness. Theologian Robert Alden writes that “There is not enough darkness in all the world to put out the light of even one small candle.” How true!

Some of you may recall this story by Ellen Bergh from the *Upper Room* a few years ago. Amtrak’s Coast Starlight train was filled with excited passengers, craning their necks to enjoy the Oregon scenery as the train rolled through green forests. A shining lake gleamed through the trees, and cheerful conversation filled

the air. Suddenly, the light, airy feeling was gone, like a candle blown out in a draft as they entered a tunnel. Expecting the sun to reappear quickly, Ellen was uncomfortable as it became even darker. The happy sounds faded out until they were a thing of the past. Everyone sat in the inky blackness. The longer they traveled in the tunnel, the harder it was to remain calm without any visual cues to reassure them. Even the movement of the train seemed to fall away into pitch darkness. When they came out of the tunnel, laughter and relief filled the compartment. “My life in Christ is like that unforgettable train ride,” Ellen reflects. “Events may plunge me into darkness where I have no clues to sense the Lord’s presence. Yet I can trust God is with me even when I can’t see what lies ahead” (Bergh, Ellen, “What Lies Ahead?” *Upper Room*, September/October 1993, 65,

[http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration\\_search.asp?item\\_topic\\_id=2396](http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?item_topic_id=2396), retrieved December 31, 2009).

I think we can trust God not only to be with us in dire moments but also to work with us making for a better world, a better circumstance. God’s new heart-inspired, redemptive plan creates a new reality for us. Notice in the text how the returning people “shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord.” Notice how their mourning shall be turned into joy, and they “shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the Lord.”

God's new heart in Christ will lead us to a new start. Right now. This moment. This new year. Better than before. Presbyterian Pastor, Dr. Joel Hunter wrote, "We are people of a redemptive God who works the kind of redemption that doesn't just minimize the damage... [our redemption from God] creates a better reality than the one before the damage" (Hunter, Joel, "A More Noble Way," *Sojourners*, September-October 2009, p. 16).

In some ways, with a keen eye, we can look at all our dire circumstances and see the new start. In response to 9-11, to the tsunami, to the hurricanes, we saw people rally out of compassionate hearts, tending to the wounded, helping people to rebuild. We saw people step up to the plate and be human with each other, praying for troops in violent areas of the world. We saw the spirit of love coalescing humanity together. Even right here, in dire economic circumstances we saw several people of our congregation increase their faith commitments, and we saw a couple of people make very large contributions to get us to finish the year in the black.

Take this to heart, church... God's new heart shown in Jesus Christ gives us a new start. Whatever the circumstances that you will face this new year, whether personally or in your family, whatever the situations we will face at Chapel Hill this new year, whatever will go on in our world, right here or overseas, God is in it

with us, God will bring us through it. God's redemptive plan of love, which is the Christ coming into the world, is the true light, which enlightens everyone. Progress will be made. With God's new heart, we have a new start. Amen.