



The Beginning

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given on the First Sunday after Christmas, December 31, 2017

John 1:1-18

Every tradition has its story about the beginning of time. About the vast unimaginable reaches of the past when literally everything was brand new, the cosmos was fresh, and everything was possible. The Hindu tradition, for example, teaches that the world began when God spoke the cosmic word OM, and the vibrations from that sound created everything that is. Hindus believe that those vibrations still pulse in our heartbeats, in the tides of the oceans, in the rhythms of day and night and summer and winter, and in our own breathing, inhale and exhale.

The Greeks also had concepts about the beginning—one called the *Logos*, which means the Word. In particular the Stoics thought that there was a divine word, the *Logos*, which was the animating principle of the world; the power of creativity and life itself. Hellenistic Jews adopted this idea of the *Logos*, and called it Wisdom, which was seen as the divine feminine principle through which God made the world.

And we see the *Logos*, the Word, in today's scripture from John's gospel. It says that the Word is God and that the world is created through this *Logos*. But then Christians take it a step further and say that this creative Word became a human baby in the person of Jesus the Christ. God comes to us in many forms, but during the twelve days of Christmas, in the darkest time of the year, Christians affirm the mystery of God as a human baby—a baby full of beginning and beauty and possibility. A baby, who is completely helpless and vulnerable.

My husband Jeff had a pretty rough childhood. He had lost four members of his immediate family by the time he was thirteen years old, including his mother. Because of this he swore that he would never have a family of his own—because even the risk of losing another family would be greater than he could bear. But love is one force that is greater than fear, and he and I got married. Then our beautiful daughter Carly was born. And so there the three of us were, ten years ago, at St. Joseph's Hospital in St. Paul. Carly was born at 7pm on a Saturday night, and after a few hours of delighting in Carly and family visits and hospital routines, I was exhausted and fell asleep. But Jeff sat in an overstuffed chair in our hospital room and held Carly, for hours. I don't think he slept. He just stared at her, split wide open by the hope and risk she brought to him.

For us Carly was an incredible new beginning, but Carly can't be reduced to a meaning she gives to her parents. She is a human being in her own right, and it is our delight and privilege to continue to get to know who she is over time.

God is like that. For Christians, there is no symbol, sound, or single word to which God can be reduced. There is no image, picture, doctrine, or formula that captures the essence of God. For Christians, seeking to know God during the twelve days of Christmas, only a baby will do: a perfect, tiny, absolutely helpless human being who cannot even speak or hold up her head. This is God. The God of new beginnings, the God who so yearns to be near us that God is willing to relinquish all power and become utterly dependent on us.

We're used to thinking about God through the lens of the adult Jesus—and over time, in epiphany, lent, and Easter, we'll grow with Jesus—the Jesus who matures, and heals, who challenges authority, and who eventually surrenders his life. But not today. Today, let us hang on to the God who comes to us in new beginnings, in this tiny infant. During Christmas we celebrate this infant God, this God of endless possibility and vulnerability, this God who delights in offering us the chance, over and over, to begin again.

Who are we, here at St. Stephen's today? Perhaps some of us are those who love church and the Christian story so much that we can't stay away, even on New Year's Eve. Perhaps some of us are traveling and are temporarily away from our families, and so we have space and time and church seems like a worthy thing to do over the holiday break. Perhaps some of us grew up in church but we found it didn't speak to us in every day life, and so now we do attend, around Christmas and Easter, because somehow we're still connected—in some distant, uncomfortable way—with the Great Story of Christian tradition, the birth of Jesus, or at least with the songs and the tree and the candles and the sense of hope that is here at this darkest time of the year. And perhaps some of us are here because we have nowhere else to be, because there is no family or tree or eggnog or presents waiting for us somewhere.

To every one of us I want to affirm this: we can know deep in our bones that the baby-God of Christmas makes it possible for us to begin again. Always. There is no time of life, no series of events, no habits of behavior or mind that are so entrenched that God cannot make a new beginning for us. In our family dynamics, in grief, in addiction, in politics, in any and every situation, we can have a new beginning. And not a beginning that we have to manufacture from energy we don't have, but from the creative power of the universe, the endlessly new Word of God, Jesus the Christ.

You might be tempted to start thinking about New Year's resolutions at all this talk about new beginnings, especially on New Year's Eve. I've never had any luck with those, but if you want to try them tomorrow, be my guest. But not today. Instead of trying to make a fresh start happen ourselves, let us open ourselves to beginning again by seeking to encounter the living God. We know that new beginnings always entail the risk of loss, and vulnerability, and that one can't know the outcome in advance. Like Jeff staring at baby Carly in the hospital room, or any one of us facing situations that seem entrenched and hopeless, we don't know what the future will hold. But we can know that instead of trying to control the outcome, we can experience something far more wild and priceless and holy: we can encounter the God who is with us. We can

become like children again, open to the wonder and possibility of this moment, and of the God who is with us in it.

The point of letting ourselves become childlike again in our faith is not to enter the land of make believe. It is to suspend the part of us that needs so desperately to control things, so that we can join Jesus in his creative journey of restoring the world. It is about engaging in practices, like prayer and silence and play, that allow God to make a new beginning of us. Though we can't re-create ourselves, we as individuals and as a church can cooperate with God's creative power working in us through the Spirit of Christ, who alone makes all things new.