



Seeking: How Do We Begin Again?

Gathering

Create a space for worship - perhaps with a small table with a bible, cross and candle.

This week, it would be appropriate to find a **purple cloth** or scarf to signify that we are in a time of preparation. Take some deep breaths as you gather your thoughts towards God.

Listen - I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For (U2)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3-5YC_oHjE



Gathering

Today is the second week in our preparations for Easter, and the question we are asking is: How do we begin again?

There is no doubt that as we get more settled with something - a place, a routine, a certain group of people - and as we get older, the idea of a new start or a new beginning becomes more and more uncomfortable.

But deeply embedded in our understanding of the love of God revealed to us in Jesus is the idea, the assurance, the opportunity, that it is always possible, indeed sometimes it is necessary, for us to begin again.

So when we find ourselves entrenched in, or dug in, to what is: how do we begin again?

Light Candle

We light the candle - focussing our attention, allowing ourselves to be drawn to its flame. We look to Jesus, the light of the world, a light that shines even in the darkest of times offering hope and healing.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Ancient of Days, breathed life into this Land and her Peoples.

From time beyond our reckoning the Wodi Wodi people of the Dharawal nation have blessed this place through their care and concern.

We pay our respects to their Elders and Leaders, past and present and emerging, and we pray for the future of their communities.

May we walk gently and respectfully on this Land.

(c) 2017, A.Koh-Butler, This land is God's land and God's Spirit dwells here

Call to Worship

What is it like to begin again?

It is like flowers in the spring that push through frozen ground.

It is like babies learning to walk, one clumsy step at a time.

It is like Nicodemus in the night, asking Jesus for guidance.

It is like a Sunday morning, starting our week anew.

May we find God in our seeking.

May we learn as we go.

May we be brave enough to begin again.

Let us worship the God of new beginnings.

Prayer

God of night and day,

we dare to venture out into the unknown -

into the darkness,

to the edge of the wilderness,

to a new country,

where you will guide us.

We come to be led and encouraged.

we come to seek answers to questions we didn't even know we had.

We come to find you - steadfast and true. Amen.

Sing - God of Dawn (tune: Ode To Joy (TIS 698))

As the new day begins, this song reminds us of the opportunities we have for new beginnings.

God of dawn, each day's renewal
brings the world into your light.

As your sun defeats the shadows,
drives away the darkest night:

we would greet this new beginning
as your call to start again,

lead us on with hope and courage,
make your will and purpose plain.

Holy Spirit, inspiration,

light and truth and root of prayer,

as your challenge moves us forward
taking us we know not where:

we will follow your direction,

though the way may not be clear.

Shape us, change us, recreate us,
so the future holds no fear.

Christ, you walked the world as we do,
knew its human pain and loss.

As your love broke through the barriers
by your death upon the cross;

we still speak your gospel message,
though two thousand years have gone.

Help us now translate its meaning
in this present world of wrong.

Praise to God, who spoke creation,
giving life to time and space.

Praise to Christ, whose living presence
showed the world your human face.

Praise the Spirit, daily witness
to your ever-loving way.

Take us now and re-awake us,
challenge us to use this day.

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Prayer of Confession - intro

Each week we include a time of confession - in some form.

Sometimes we name who we believe God to be - we confess our faith.

Sometimes we name who we are - we confess the reality of our humanness in the light of who we know God to be.

Either way, in our confession God offers us a new beginning.

As we open our hearts, as we speak honestly with God about who we are and who we long to be, God responds.

God wraps us in grace and invites us to begin again.

So together, with God's grace, let us open our hearts.

Together, with God's grace, let us pray the prayer of confession:

Prayer

Let us pray:

God of new life, you call us into unknown places,
and we bury our heads in the sand.

You promise all the stars in the sky,
and we doubt it can be true.

You speak of new life in the Spirit,
and we tell ourselves we've missed our chance.

Looking out into the wild possibility of this moment, O God, it feels like an impassable mountain or a vast, deepening sea hindering our way forward.

We feel discouraged and overwhelmed.

We don't move from where we are.

You know our hearts, O God, and the disbelief that has come to live there.

You know when we have become immobilised.

When we become timid and fear failure.

And we know we often fear dying, fear letting go,
even if it is for the sake of truly living.

God of grace, over and over and over again, you invite us closer to you.

Show us the way.

Forgive our mistakes.

Give us the courage to begin again with you. Amen.

Listen - I Look To The Hills

Words of Assurance

Psalm 121

- ¹ I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
- ² My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.
- ³ He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
- ⁴ He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
- ⁵ The Lord is your keeper;
the Lord is your shade at your right hand.
- ⁶ The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.
- ⁷ The Lord will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
- ⁸ The Lord will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and for evermore.

Family of faith, hear and believe this good news:

There is a grace to God's love that is bigger than we can imagine.

No matter what we did or didn't do yesterday, we have been forgiven.

Today, the slate is wiped clean.
Today, we are made new.
We belong to God.
We are held in God's love.
We are made new.
And we are deeply thankful to God!

Sanctified Art, Words for Worship

Listen - Land of The Seeking (Sanctified Art)

This song accompanies us as we look towards the cross - it invites us to inhabit the Land of the Seeking... <https://vimeo.com/800216630>

Listening for God's Voice

Reading: Genesis 12:1-4

Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

⁴ So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

Reading: John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' ³Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' ⁴Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' ⁵Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' ⁹Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' ¹⁰Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹ 'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

For the Word of God in Scripture,
for the Word of God among us,
for the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God!

Reflection

Holy God,

We come to you today with our biggest questions:

Who are we called to be?

What do you need from us?

Where are you in our midst?

How can we follow you more clearly?

How do we begin again?

As we open the Scriptures today, speak to us through these ancient stories that we might find what we are seeking in you. With gratitude and open hearts we pray, Amen.

Have you ever been offered a great opportunity and found yourself saying, "I'd like to come or I would like to try that but I'm too old"?

"Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran." (Genesis 12:4)

The thing about the story of God's call to Abram is that it reminds us that there is no retirement from discipleship - there is no retirement from the call to respond to God's Spirit no matter how old we get. Our bodies may not do what they used to and we may even find our minds struggling to keep up with the speed of contemporary life, but God continues to call us and sometimes that means breaking out of the spaces we have come to find comfort in and to forge a new path into a new way.

Alongside this story is Jesus' encounter with one of the Jewish leaders, Nicodemus.

Often when we read this account, we gravitate towards the famous bit - John 3:16 -

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

And we skip over some really important stuff and stop before we get to another fundamental part.

Let's start first with John 3:16 itself.

"God so loved the *world*" - the Greek word is *cosmos* (*κόσμον*).

God loved all of creation so much that he sent his Son,

"so that everyone who believes in him may not perish" - the Greek word translated as "perish" (*ἀπόληται*) also carries the sense of to die or to be destroyed -

"but may have eternal life". Later in John's gospel, the writer will be a bit more explicit, in John 17:3, where Jesus says this: "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

God sent Jesus into the world so that we might know God more deeply, and in that knowing, we can live an abundant life (see also John 10:10).

And then a much overlooked statement in verse 17:

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

My heart weeps when I see one Christian disciple condemning another let alone when we think we can condemn someone who is not part of the Christian community - and we do it all too often. We condemn those of different theological understandings or faith expressions, and we frequently condemn people who think differently from us or live lives that are different from ours.

But it seems to me that these verses, so loved by the Christian church, tell us clearly that God is not about condemnation but about loving people into a deeper understanding of Godself.

And all this comes at the end of a conversation that began as a leaders of the religious community comes to Jesus at night because he is afraid of what his colleagues might think, a conversation that begins with Jesus telling Nicodemus that he needs to start again, to be “born from above” (3:3). Again the Greek is not so clear with the original language holding a combined sense of born from above, born anew or born again.

And understanding what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus is about holding the ambiguity in the meaning.

Born “from above” echoes Jesus’ explanation about Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness (Numbers 21:1-9) alongside his own “lifting up” on the cross (3:14). It is not about connecting to some kind of higher reality but about looking up to the mystery of the cross.

So what Jesus means is (and I am drawing from an article by Andrew McGowan of the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale):¹

“your life must change in a way so radical that it can be spoken of as rebirth” and “the changed character of your life will reveal that your true identity belongs to a reality other than this world.” The two meanings support one another, showing that the change Jesus calls for and offers is not just incremental or partial (even though it may not be instantaneous), nor driven by our own initiative. We’re not in control of birth, after all. It is radical, and is his (and the Spirit’s [vv. 5-8]) work not our own. Recall the prologue to John’s gospel: “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a man, but of God” (1:13).

So what is this rebirth?

It may not be an intense religious experience or a single decision - although such things may play a part - it is not participation in a one-off sacramental act such as baptism, although that might point to it or be a sign of it, it is not even something you can point to and clearly say, “that’s it!” Like the wind, we don’t know where it comes from or where it goes, we can’t control it (3:8).

But it is a transformation, perhaps over some time, but a transformation that is clear, a life that is different.

And the clue is in Nicodemus’ own story.

Nicodemus appears three times in John’s account of Jesus’ life. Here in chapter 3, then a little later in chapter 7 when we find him arguing with his colleagues about Jesus and we hear him asking that Jesus be given a fair hearing (7:50-51). And then perhaps “more strikingly... at Jesus’ burial, bringing a massive load of spices” and assisting with his burial (19:39). Here he clearly aligns himself with the one who has been crucified. Where once he came at night, now he comes openly.

Nicodemus has been changed - we don’t know when, whether there was a moment of realisation or a gradual shift in his understanding, the story simply doesn’t tell us. What we see is a man who now holds tenderly the “pierced body of Jesus once lifted up, and to which [he] has been drawn. [Nicodemus] has been born again, and from above.”

So how do we begin again?

Isn’t this where the church finds itself today?

¹ https://abmcg.substack.com/p/born-again?utm_source=facebook&sd=pf&fbclid=IwAR0vbhAvo-dN2pLxo0Gaf_AF511Lfj3ckuZxMONos3PZCb67EVELGFz68l

We are growing older - there is no doubt that the demographic of the more traditional churches is largely older - our average age is well over 70 according to the most recent National Church Life Survey figures.

Often, it seems, we approach Jesus by night - afraid of what our contemporaries will say, afraid of what how our allegiance to Christ will be interpreted by our friends and families.

We are comfortable in our space but we have grown distant from the community that we are part of, and we are struggling to see how a new generation might respond to the call of God?

Maybe the transformation we so long for begins when we take the first step towards the way of Christ Jesus, when we lift our eyes to the cross, the way of love without bounds, and we take that first step, and then another, and then another, and then another...

And, in time, we find ourselves in a different space - a space where we know God more deeply and we are assured of who we are and whose we are.

The good news is that we are never too old to take that first step.

We are never buried too far in the mire, or too lost in the wilderness.

All it takes is the first step towards the one who loves us so much and wants us to know Godself deeply. It is never too late.

Let us pray...

God of the cosmos,

you sang us into being,

you breathe life into our weariness,

you long for us to know you deeply.

Help us to take just one step towards you, towards the life you have designed for us,

and as we do, meet us, we pray, and encourage us to take the next step,

and the next, and the next.

Help us then to know the transforming touch of your love

and the wonder of knowing that we belong to you,

so that our friends and neighbours will see the transformation in us and come to know, for themselves, your love for the world. Amen.

Responding

Sing - Begin Again (tune: TIS 314)

This is another song written specifically for the theme we are exploring today - a song that invites us, perhaps reminds us, that there is always the possibility of beginning again...

In the deep night of the soul

Rich in questions, yearning for

Life that matters far beyond

Picket fences and front lawns

When we tire of life mundane

We can still begin again

Every morning, every hour

Spirit gifts us with the power

To begin our life anew

What then will we choose to do?

Close a chapter, lift the pen

To once more begin again.

In the sunset of our life

After years of joy and strife

Wondering what we will leave

When the lights are growing dim

We can still begin again

Prayer for Others (Wendy Fenton)

Let us pray:

God, I wonder if prayer might be a way to begin again.
If in our lifting up of all that's going on,
in our church, in our world, in our neighbourhoods and families,
what we're really asking is for something new to be born.

Can you do that, God?
Can you take what is tarnished and tired and give it new life?
Can you pull us back to begin anew
when we've passed the point of no return?
Can you resurrect the dead?
We're trusting you can.

So, God, take our church, it's really yours after all.
Take the images of what this community used to be -
well-worn like a treasured photograph -
and show us your new vision.

Take this world
with its brinkmanship and power plays,
its fascination with wealth and
disregard for the needs of others,
and help us start again.

Take our beloved ones' struggles,
their grief and their pain,
their isolation and their fear,
take the burdens of
our dear friend Marie and others we know who are struggling with ill health,
the people of war-torn countries,
and those affected by the recent earthquakes and floods
and those we name aloud and in our hearts - *[silence]* ,
and renew the well-being of our beloved ones.

God, as we pray, also make us new,
through Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

Liz Foght Davis

Offering

As we have received, so we consider our response...

We make space now to think about what we have heard and seen today and consider our response.

As we make our offering - we remember again that this is not just about money - either here in the plate or through a bank transfer - this is also about how we are generous with our time and energy and gifts; and about how we resolve to live differently because we have encountered the living Christ.

Let us pray...

Generous God, we bring our gifts - of money and of ourselves -
grateful for all that we have,
and we bring our questions - yearning to know you more deeply.

We know that you meet us here and you invite us into something new.
Take us and reshape us, in the name of Jesus the Christ, we pray. Amen

Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Ash Wednesday, 2023, p.26

Sending

Sing - We Seek You With Our Questions God (tune: Ellacombe (TIS 361))

Our last song today names our seeking, our questions, our search for God, and we are reminded that in all of our seeking, God seeks us out.

We seek you with our questions, God, with
open heart and mind;
we long to live a fresher life
and leave our past behind,
for all that we have known before
has faded and grown worn.
We seek you with our questions, God, that
we might be reborn.

We search for you in garden green where
once you gave us birth;
We search for you in desert parched and
all throughout the earth.
With wonder, worry, doubt, and awe we
search through night and day.
We seek you with our questions, God, at
home and far away.

We wonder why things come to pass and
how to come alive.
Where do your living waters flow? How
can dry bones revive?
Who are you, God, who meet us here with
wisdom and with sign?
We seek you with our questions, God, we
yearn for truth divine.

You seek us with your questions, God,
inviting us to dare
to know you and to love you more,
to grow through act and prayer.
“Who will you trust and follow now? My
truth is all around.”
You seek us with your questions, God, you
seek and we are found.

Text: Hannah C. Brown, b.1980 © 2022 GIA Publications, Inc.

Sending Affirmation

Look to again to the hills!

From where does our help come?

***Our help comes from God,
who made heaven and Earth;***

who sustains the universe,

keeping the sun in place and the moon on track;

who provides sunshine and shade to nurture and protect life, day and night.

Look to the skies!

From where does our help come?

Our help comes from God,

who showed such immense love for us in the person of Jesus Christ;

who came not to judge or condemn anyone but to give eternal life.

Look around!

From where does our help come?

Our help comes from God,

whose Spirit is always at our side;

***whose presence is like the wind,
powerful, unpredictable, yet personal,
stirring us into new possibilities and bringing about new birth.***

Blessing

As you leave this place,
may God bless you with seeking.
Seek out the hungry.
Seek the weary.
Seek the good in every person you pass.
Seek out the hopeful.
Seek the faithful.
Seek God in each of us.
As you seek and as you wonder,
may you find what you are looking for.
In the name of our loving God,
who is always seeking us,
go now in peace. Amen.

Liturgy adapted from material from:
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A Sanctified Art: Seeking, www.sanctifiedart.org

Rev Kath Merrifield
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