

LET'S START AT THE VERY BEGINNING.....JOHN 3:16

As the new year begins, this congregation starts a new era of its life and ministry. What an exciting time for many of you, yet what an unsettling necessity for, I suppose, just about as many.

For some of you it represents starting over all over again...when you just about had everything settled... in the way you most enjoyed it. **But for those** who have the energy and still are full of plenty of fresh ideas and possibilities, this is just another blip on the screen. This may offer opportunities to surge ahead of the pack, to try out those dreams yet untried or a few without room yet for expression.

Whatever emotion or set of feelings you find yourself in this morning, you have come to a place where **newness** is the operative word. What I mean is that here our God has announced that **something new is ALWAYS brewing**, and that God is the author of those new things. In new possibilities we may find expressed the new elements of the character of God, and even new ways of our very existence, the whole of creation.

We can hear God saying to the people of old, "*Behold I do a new thing! See even now will I not tell you of it?*"

Surely **something new is brewing** here, or at least it should be! You have moved into the information age, an era of unprecedented openness- with global communication setting the agenda for the nations and for every household. When my children each turned 16 and were about to earn freedom AND the keys to my car, their grandparents wanted to buy them their first CELL PHONES! "Over my dead body," I thought! "Don't want my children glued to the phone in endless teenage chatter every day. No way! I would never be able to get their attention again!" So I thought!

Oh, I just hate it when my in-laws are right! And they were. I now have 2 responsible kids in their 20's who have always casually and dutifully used their phones, checked in with us at the bewitching hours, called from dates, dances, and other remote spaces just to say, *"I'm safe, and I'll be home around dark thirty!"* It's a revolution! A communication revolution that tends to leave any of us behind if we aren't up to speed, or at least digitally re-mastered!

So now you have stepped into this new era with a stable, healthy and continuous pastoral leadership! What a rare blessing you have had here! You have kept up to date, you have kept the faith, and you have kept on a loving and winsome path! So I think you are bringing a pretty healthy perspective into this day of **newness**. Now you just need to know where to start- again. Travel back into The Sound of Music and hear Julie Andrews singing to her frightened new pupils, *"Let's start at the very beginning. A very good place to start!"* And with that she began the rudimentary lessons of the music scales.

I suggest something like that might happen here, something like re-stating the very roots of your gathering, the basis of your faith life, your mission, your greatest, most captivating conviction and belief. This is what I hear deep inside.....

"God so loved the world....." It all starts there for each of us. Our God is there at the very beginning.

As Isaiah proclaimed, *"The Alpha and the Omega...who always is, always has been and ever shall be!"*

And the Psalmist declared, *"O God, You know me, you know my thoughts. You were there when I was conceived....Where can I go from you. If I take the wings of the morning and ascend to the*

skies, you are there. If I should descend to the depths of Hell, O God, you are there to hold me. Where can I go that you are not there with me?!"

And John, *"Before anything was, There was God as the Word of Life. He created all things, and without Him nothing was created that was. And all things are created by Him, through Him and for Him."*

The Apostle Paul exclaimed, *"We are made right through faith by Grace..."* God's grace is around us, surrounding our every move, like the air that we breathe- always around us, in us and with us. *"And His grace is sufficient, or enough, for every need that we have!"*

As Augustine said in characteristic understatement, *"In Him we live and move and have our being."*

I love to sit with the children in our classrooms of learning. If you ever want some of those slumbering chords to be stirred again, just ask for the privilege to sit in and help those classes sometime.

One precocious child that I knew was named Will Aylsworth, a child who, when his parents had divorced, had spent most of his time with his granddad. Will's Papa Frank had died of cancer after a sudden but very attentive time with the family. So little 10 year old Will asked me very gravely one day, ***"Pastor, What does God do up there all day?"*** *My Grandmama told me God was up there taking care of granddaddy, but I know she was mixed up. Granddaddy told me he would be well up there, with a whole new everything! I didn't want to embarrass my MiMi.....*

I guess I just put her on the spot!

So what does God really do?"

Wow! Theology lesson number 21! And what a question for us all! What does God do "up there" all day? What would you have said?

This scripture fills in those blanks, telling us in simple terms that God is busily about a passion, as we would call it, a loving pursuit of the people loves so dearly. I know He has more than enough to do with those of us in Western North Carolina alone, not to mention those caught up in world affairs!

God so loved... so passionately yearned for, loved so intimately, so tenderly, that He gave... the dearest thing in all the loves that he had, He gave his best, His own Son.....

The word passion is not used in the Biblical language. We have created the word out of the Latin word for 'dramatic intensity of self investment'.....**Passion**.....*God So loved.*

Now when I give the scripture their due regard and study, or contemplate their meaning, that is once when I see and experience the work of God's promised Spirit within me. *"The Spirit testifies or bears witness within us,"* it says. John says in the 14th chapter, *"He brings to mind all that I have said."* He interprets the scripture and applies it to our particular need.

As I read this, *"that God so loved"...* that this inexpressible act of reaching toward me... to redeem the waste and loss in me...to put me at a right relationship with Him again....this became God's greatest passion... to set me free, then I begin to understand what God does, as little Will said to me, *"all day long up there!"*

God patiently but passionately, gently but gingerly broods over us like he did over creation, trying to shape us, and make of us

something that is alive and free, disentangled from harm and distraction, and fulfilling His plans for us so carefully laid out from day one.

God SO loved....but not just me, but you and all the peoples He has created, **all the world!** Just imagine! What a passionate God we serve. He knows our every move. Our thoughts are His concern, our progress, our efforts at significance, our every step, and our hearts. He knows us....and knowing, He loves us..... purposefully.

Now with that said, **we can begin something NEW, confidently, expectantly,** something that will be bright for the future, something that will be right and something desperately needed right now from us. We can be sure of that, because He knows us. Because He is here. Because He loves us.

There is, of course the danger in any passionate reading of scripture as always, to read just half, or to take the parts that we like and stop reading any further. In this context, the rest of the story says there is a caveat, an essential part for us to play in this saga of passion and purpose.

“.....that whosoever will believe in God’s gift of His Son.....”
Whoever would take Him at His word and place their trust in His integrity to do as He has said, whoever would simply believe....these would find the wonder of God’s empowering love to fill and fulfill their lives. Sounds almost too simple doesn’t it? And that is its biggest downfall, that it is incredibly simple to live this truth. Thus the sometimes even harder to believe euphoria,

so often seen in the lives of some truly devoted people. It is either just plain euphoria, or it is all and more that it purports to be, and thus, fills the lives of believers full to overflowing with strength and spiritual liveliness and possibilities.

When I think of this freedom in God's love, I cannot resist an image of a terrific children's movie which I have seen recently. It is called **Free Willie!** Have you seen it? About a young boy who learns to love a misguided whale who became captive to a harbor village off his expected ocean route. When the child came to realize the real life for the whale was not in his backyard but in the outlying ocean, he helped him find his way back, and at the great cost of his own close feelings, lets him go on to his wide ocean home!

What a picture of God's love and grace to us,...."to all who believe".....really meaning all who live in the truth of God's great love and the empowering gift of His Son, Jesus Christ, life is limitless! As it was meant to be through His passionate (and reconciling) love!

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