

# Sermon: New Beginnings

February 18, 2024

Genesis 9:8-17

Mark 1:9-15

In the Kilauea Iki crater, there is an ohī'a tree. Actually, there are several ohī'a trees, which is quite remarkable when you think about it. Sixty-five years ago Kilauea Iki was full of liquid lava. That's not good soil to grow a tree.

Even today, the crater's surface is mostly flat where the liquid rock cooled. There are plenty of cracks, since lava doesn't cool evenly, and it's in those cracks where the seeds found enough soil to make a start, and enough soil over the years to make a tree.

At least one of the trees has grown so that it's taller than I am, even though it's almost certainly younger than I am. I doubt it started growing within five years of the Kilauea Iki eruption. Sometime during the years afterward, it found its new beginning.

In 1807, and then again in 1809, Henry 'Opukaha'ia found a new beginning. He set out from his homeland for new experiences of the world. Two years later he settled in to learn as much as he could about the language and the culture and the religion of the place he'd found himself. He made good friends – everything I read about 'Opukaha'ia says that people treasured his friendship – and he set himself to yet another new beginning by committing not just to the Christian faith but to bring the good news to his native island.

He could not, but his good friends: they made it happen in part to honor his memory.

In Genesis 9, God declared a new beginning not just for the people but for all the living creatures of the Earth. "The waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh," said God.

And in the first chapter of Mark, we hear of Jesus' new beginning: Baptism, temptation, vocation. He washed in the Jordan. He was tempted in the wilderness. He began to teach in Galilee.

Cheryl Lindsay writes at UCC.org, "After going public, Jesus goes private and is confronted with the challenge of being fully human. If one questions whether Jesus needed to be baptized, the follow-up to that is pondering why Jesus needed to be tempted. The answer is likely the same. Temptation is part of the human condition, and Jesus participates fully in humanity. Baptism and temptation form the basis of his preparation for launching his public ministry."

Baptism and temptation formed the situation in which Jesus committed to his new beginning.

Unlike the later Gospel writers Matthew and Luke, who had a detailed account of Jesus' temptation, Mark did not. All he knew was that it happened, that it involved forty days in the wilderness, that Jesus resisted Satan's temptations, and that the angels waited upon Jesus in the same way that servants bring dishes to a table. He wrote one – one! – sentence to describe it.

But there's a lot going on in that sentence. The wilderness and the forty days recall the Hebrew people's forty years in the wilderness. The wild beasts evoke the Peaceable Kingdom imagery of the prophet Isaiah. The serving angels recall Elijah's meals during his journey to Mount Horeb. Mark expected his readers to know a lot about Scripture, wouldn't you say?

You and I are, I suspect, familiar with the internal process of making new beginnings. Like Jesus, we've sought out experiences that can, or may, or perhaps should, but at any rate did set us on a different route of our journey. That might have been the selection of a school or an educational concentration, or of an apprenticeship or an employer: something that would equip us to do something we hadn't been able to do before, something that would mark the place where we said, "I shall do this."

With Valentine's Day still close in the rear-view mirror, our committed relationships also function in this way. How many new relationships are also new beginnings? It's impossible to say, because it takes time to realize that care for a person will redirect one's life. But they do, don't they, and not just marriages. Deep friendships. Children, including those we choose as hanai. The people whom we mentor. The people who mentor us. People enter our lives, and we're on a new way.

Dare I say it? Our baptisms set us on a new beginning. Those who, like me, were baptized young don't remember it, but a lot of people made promises to guide us on a path, or at least not to guide us on a lot of other potential paths. Even with all the bumpiness of adolescence, I have to say that my parents' commitment to the promises they made at my baptism guided my life far more than I was willing to admit at the age of fourteen.

Sorry, fourteen-year-olds. You're likely to find that out later, too, and I hope that, like me, you conclude that that's a good thing.

Our baptisms make for more than one new beginning, because the promises aren't just made by people. God promises to be an ever-present guide and protector. The Holy Spirit does not rest in the lives of Christians, but is active, loving, and encouraging.

If not always... wealth-accumulating.

Wealth accumulating... that sounds more like a temptation.

Debie Thomas writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, “If those forty days in the wilderness was a time of self-creation, a time for Jesus to decide who he was and how he would live out his calling, then here is what the Son of God chose: deprivation over power. Vulnerability over rescue. Obscurity over honor. At every instance in which he could have reached for the certain, the extraordinary, and the miraculous, he reached instead for the precarious, the quiet, and the mundane.”

Odd as it may seem, a lot of new beginnings rise from temptation – both temptation rejected and temptation accepted, I’d say. Temptations usually offer us a chance to take a new turn in the road. Turn one way, and receive... well, what tempts you? Is it comfortable clothes, or fashionable ones? Is it an attractive smile or a flirtatious manner? Is it a big house or a big bank account?

Turn one way and you might – might – receive what tempts you. Turn another way and you will be on the path of someone who made choices for reasons other than temptation. Reasons of integrity – I choose to be who I choose to be. Reasons of economy – who needs a fancy car? Reasons of faith – God asked me to be attentive to things other than romance and sex.

Jesus emerged from that wilderness tempted by, but unpersuaded by the temptations. He emerged having chosen the challenging way of integrity, vulnerability, and faith.

There’s one other thing that happened before Jesus embarked on his new way of life, though. He didn’t begin his preaching ministry until John the Baptist had been arrested. I guess that left a gap, a puka, in the faith life of the people. If John couldn’t be there to fill it, Jesus would.

Sometimes outside events set us on new roads, or confirm us on the new paths. People train for new jobs, for example. When an employer hires them for that job, it’s an important confirmation of a career. In the United Church of Christ, ordination requires three things: a person convinced that God has called them into ministry; an Association who, in working with them, is also convinced of God’s call to them; and somebody willing to employ them as their minister. It doesn’t happen often, but it has happened that somebody has gone through the steps and nobody called them.

I would guess that’s happened to teachers, lawyers, counselors, cooks, and electricians, too. Not to mention lots of other people who’ve had to learn skills.

That will set you on a new path. Unhappily, for certain, but a new path.

Baptism, temptation, and entry into vocation were a major shift for Jesus. The Gospel writers used very little ink to describe Jesus’ life before his baptism. He doesn’t seem to have done things that made him stand out. Afterward, he quickly gained a reputation that grew in the telling, one that would trouble the highest religious and civil leadership of the land.

Our new beginnings may not all be that dramatic. We make new beginnings every morning, don't we? We make new beginnings every time we decide something that's just somewhat different from the last time. Small new beginnings in diet or exercise can have profound positive impacts on our health, for example. Small new beginnings in giving can make a huge difference for someone in need. Small new beginnings in compassion and forgiveness can set a rocky relationship in a new direction. Small new beginnings can shed the burdens of guilt or shame. Small new beginnings can release us from the unjust influence of dominating people.

New beginnings. For Jesus. For us.

Amen.

*by Eric Anderson*