

## **A New Year, A New Beginning**

Genesis 1:1-5

Mark 1:4-11

The Rev. Andrew W. Walter  
Grace Episcopal Church  
The 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany  
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*In the beginning...*

Genesis 1:1

*And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

Mark 1:11

This past Tuesday, most of us awoke focused on the snow, wondering if schools would be open or closed or delayed, discovering, with shock and disbelief, that Colesville Road and Georgia Avenue would not be plowed until late morning (how was that even possible?), and so we overlooked the fact that Tuesday was January 6, the Day of Epiphany.

The Day of Epiphany is one of the seven principal celebrations of the church year, right up there with Christmas, Easter, Pentecost and All Saints' Day, but because it rarely falls on a Sunday, it doesn't get the same attention as those other holidays. The word "epiphany" means "to manifest" or "make known," and during this Epiphany season, all of our readings will, in some way, reveal the true nature of Jesus as Lord and Messiah.

Today, we witness a profound example of this with his baptism at the river Jordan. Jesus' baptism signified a key turning point in his life. Emerging from that water, seeing the heavens open, the Spirit descending, and hearing that voice, "You are my Son, the Beloved," was a powerful awakening for Jesus. His entire life changed in that moment, as he came to understand who he was, what his calling would be, what was his to accomplish.

The baptism marked a new start for Jesus, a new beginning, and like all new beginnings, it was full of hope and possibility. The future was wide open. Life and ministry beckoned, inviting Jesus to step forward into the unknown and make of it what he could. Nothing was set. Anything was possible. He could pursue his own path, seek his own destiny, guided only by the still, small voice emanating from within.

That is the promise of every new beginning.

I think most of us feel that same sense of optimism at the start of a new year. As the previous year fades into memory, so too do our mistakes and missed opportunities. A new year pours over us like the water of baptism, washing away the past, and we are offered a fresh start and a clean slate, the opportunity to get life right. It is just as the poet wrote: "And now we welcome

the new year, full of things that have never been.”<sup>1</sup>

Hope and longing are the source of our excitement and anticipation as the calendar turns, and the reason why so many of us make New Year’s resolutions. If you look around the church this morning, almost half of us made resolutions at the start of the year. We vowed: to lose weight; or, get organized; to spend less and save more; to enjoy life to the fullest; to start exercising. I am sure you can guess the resolution which I tend to hear: we’re gonna go to church more.

Unfortunately, for many of us, our new year’s resolutions usually follow a familiar pattern. January 1 rolls around, and we are all energized and determined. We tell ourselves this year is going to be different than last year. We start watching what we eat. We pay attention to our checkbook. We hit the gym. But, right around now, ten days into the new year, our resolve begins to wane. As the temperature drops and we get stuck indoors, with nothing to do but watch the NFL playoffs, our motivation plummets. A third of us have probably already let our resolutions go by the wayside. Come February, the majority of us will have abandoned our goals altogether. Only 8% of all people who make new year’s resolutions actually achieve them.

I think the problem is we focus on what our resolution will be rather than why we are making one. We set a goal which we think we can achieve without really reflecting on what we hope to gain.

Instead, we need to ask ourselves, “Why? Why am I making a resolution? Why do I hope to achieve?” Those are very big “WHY’s?” though, and asking those kinds of questions can be intimidating. It means taking a good hard look at ourselves and our lives and considering what it is we want for the future.

Imagine sitting down and asking yourself:

What areas of my life give me energy and fulfillment, and what could I do to experience more of that?

What are the most important relationships in my life and how can I strengthen them?

Is there something about which I feel passionate, and yet, never tried? Is this the year to make that happen?

How can I contribute to others and make a difference in the world?

Answering those questions would enable us to articulate our highest hopes and aspirations. Our answers would help us rediscover our ideal self and the life we long to live. But, they are hard questions to ask.

So, I would like to offer a suggestion. One that I think will help all of us. This year, make a commitment to do one thing, just one thing, to deepen your connection to God. Do something to get to know Jesus better. Read a book. Read the Bible. Come to church, listen to the sermon and email the preacher a question. Take one of our classes. If you are not sure what you might

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<sup>1</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke

want to do, let one of us clergy know, and we will help you. That's why we are here. That is what we love to do – help you connect with God; get to know Jesus.

Connecting more closely with God in this way will slowly reveal answers to those big questions. It will lead to a powerful awakening, in which we come to understand who we are, what are calling is, and what is ours to accomplish, because we will come to know ourselves through the eyes of the One who created us, redeemed us and sustains us. It will mean a new start, a new beginning, in which anything is possible, and life will be what we make of it. All it take is one thing, just one thing. What a year it could be.

Amen.