

“Begin, Again.”

Isaiah 43:16-21

October 18, 2020

In the beginning, God spoke and the world was created. In the beginning, was the Word...and the Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth. And God said, “I am about to do something new! See, I have already begun!” And so it was that in the year 1838, fifteen members of the First Presbyterian Church in the frontier city of Indianapolis gathered on November 19th in the unfinished lecture hall of the Marion County Seminary to charter a new congregation in the New School Presbytery of Indiana. The next morning, Rev. James Johnston of that presbytery delivered the first sermon for that new congregation, taking as his text Proverbs 11:30, “the fruit of righteousness is a tree of life.” A year later, after three invitations were declined, this fledgling congregation called a twenty-six-year-old son of a well-known preacher, theologian, and seminary president to be its first full-time pastor. And so, in the fall of 1839, Henry Ward Beecher arrived and this hearty band of new school Presbyterians charted a new course in this new city. While none of us were there to witness it, all of us can imagine the excitement and the enthusiasm over this new beginning. From its start, the Second Presbyterian Church of Indianapolis sought to make an impact on the community in which God had placed it, to serve and to lead. And over the decades, this congregation did just that—establishing outreach centers and mission chapels to educate and care for the poor in our city, working with others to form scout troops, schools, medical clinics, and the city’s first public library system. From its founding, Second Presbyterian Church has worshipped the living God whose power and grace compel us to an active, on-the-move faith.

Sixty-one years ago, after more than a century of ministry downtown, this congregation was

offered an opportunity that looked like a loss—the requirement to vacate its location and move north. Second Presbyterian Church was called to begin, again. Through the gift of twenty acres and financial resources for the construction of a new church building, Charles and Dorothy Lynn enabled this new beginning, as did many other faithful members—some of whom are still with us today. Though, all of us can sense the promise and hope of watching this magnificent structure taking shape on the open space that was 7700 North Meridian Street.

1838. 1959. A beginning. A new beginning. Of course, the story of a church is not prone to homeostasis. Like all living organisms, churches are in constant motion and therefore steady, if subtly, change. Like that beautiful sailboat on the banner first designed by Mary Newill and handcrafted by Marian Beesley those decades ago, we make our way through the changing seas of life in God’s world, guided by the One who directs the winds and channels the currents. There are nearly constant changes in mission and ministry, transitions between pastors and church leaders, transformative events within and beyond the life of the congregation. And yet, as people of faith we do mark these pivotal moments that serve as turning points, clear markers of change, and newness.

The words of scripture we just heard are part of what Biblical scholars call the Book of Consolation, a section of Isaiah’s prophetic work that begins with an announcement in chapter forty—“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term.” A new day is coming. Exile will soon be over. It is time to prepare for the next chapter of life as God’s people. The language is both stirring and soaring.

But what is most striking to me this morning is that the prophet grounds this powerful proclamation of newness in memory. It's a bit ironic, actually, because the command *not* to remember the former things is surrounded by the images that call to mind God's saving power in the past—the dramatic exodus from Egypt and God's provision through forty years of wilderness wandering. In fact, the prophet goes back even further, to *the* beginning, as he recalls the forming of God's people so *that* they might declare God's praise.

What are we to make of this dramatic announcement of a new era that calls to heart and mind similar proclamations of new beginnings from ages past?

Since I am the one standing up here, I will attempt an answer. When God calls us to begin again, God equips us for that new start. It is in remembering God's past faithfulness and the courage of those who have come before us that we find our faith and the courage to embrace God's new thing. Mindful of and grateful for what *has* been, we boldly seek what *will be*. As a mentor of mine often proclaimed, "none of the promises of God can be proven true in advance. But, if you live them, you will find they are true every time."

A few years ago I was invited to offer a prayer at a grand reception celebrating the sixtieth wedding anniversary of longtime church members. Before I did, I asked the couple if they had anything they'd like to say. Ken took the microphone, "people keep asking me what it is like to be have been married for sixty years," he said, "but I don't really think of it that way. For me, it's been more like having six ten-year marriages. We make the decision to recommit and continue the journey every decade or so. We get to start over and try again." I love that way of thinking of our commitments. We do not say "yes" one time. We commit again, and again. We begin again, and again.

1838. 1959. 2020. This fall, we have been given the invitation to a new beginning at Second Presbyterian Church. As with beginnings of the past, the opportunity may look a lot like loss. And indeed,

much has been lost this year. But to fail to see and seize the *promise* of this moment would be, in my mind, to squander its potential. We have another choice. We can choose to trust the providence of God that has led this church for nearly two centuries. We can choose to channel the courage of our mothers and fathers in faith and commit ourselves afresh to this new beginning.

This week, I hope you'll spend some time considering your commitment to Second for the year ahead. I hope you'll have some conversations with other members, with friends, with staff members and church leaders, about the vision we're pursuing in the year ahead—a vision of growth in deep engagement with one another and God's word, of innovation in welcoming new ways of communicating and sharing our message, of sustainability and support for our staff team, of outward focus in our local mission and service. I also hope you'll pray about what commitment might mean in this unique time. When the commitment committee met this summer to finalize our campaign this year, we discussed what might be an appropriate ask for our congregation. We saw strong growth last year and wanted to honor that as we look forward. We were deeply aware of the complex realities we've all faced this year, and how diversely we have been impacted. We were also aware of the incredible and time-sensitive opportunities of this moment for our church. We talked about playing it safe, prudent, conservative, setting a goal we knew we could reach. But that's not what we decided to do. In setting the vision of a 5% increase in our total budget, the leaders on our committee and on the session challenged themselves to be set an example of courageous faith. They recognized the call and opportunity that is before us. They acknowledged the reality that such an increase will ask those who are able to extend beyond the goal as a way of caring for those who are facing more difficult times. As a sign of that commitment, the elders of our congregation were asked to pledge first, and all thirty of them have set their giving goals, with a total increase of 8.6%. In my own family, we have made that same

commitment, confident that God will provide and we will be blessed by giving.

Dr. Jean Milner served as Senior Pastor of Second Presbyterian Church for nearly forty years, arriving at age twenty-eight and remaining here until his retirement in 1960. Dr. Milner is remembered for “his polished and dramatic preaching style, his skill in relating universal problems to the personal needs of church members.”¹ And, with a background in both science and theology, Milner charted the course of Second Church in the direction of intellectual faith, preaching in ways that expressed love for God with both heart *and* mind. In 1935, Milner published this book, *The Sky is Red: A Book about Revolution and Religion*. It is a fascinating book, seeking to carve out a new path for Christian faith that honors the past and welcomes a new day. In his opening chapter, Milner writes, “Our ancient fundamentals of faith are as true today as they ever were, but these things need to be restated in the language and thought of our time.” This is precisely what he does throughout the book. But it is his conclusion which strikes me as most prescient and timely for us—his final sentences written 85 years ago: “The Christian Church has an opportunity now, which, if she let slip through her hands, she may never have again. She must prove herself worthy of the leadership demanded of her. She will serve the modern world with Christian greatness or be repudiated by it. The Spirit of Christ will not leave the earth, but His Spirit will live in institutions other than our own.”

My friends at Second Church, God is doing a new thing among us. It springs forth and begs our attention. The journey ahead of us is unknown, but the choice before us is clear. Will we, in tight-fisted fear and anxiety, cling to what we have, what we know, what we’ve been...or will we, with open hands and courageous hearts, trust the Spirit that beckons to us now? We are gifted by Providence with this pivotal moment. We have no right to let it pass. Let us begin, again.

¹ <https://indianahistory.org/wp-content/uploads/reverend-jean-shepard-milner-addition.pdf>