

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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Baptism of the Lord
1 Samuel 16:1-13; Mark 1:4-12

Start Close In

Start close in. Don't take the second step, or the third, start with the first thing close in, the step you don't want to take. (David Whyte, 2012, in *River Flows: New and Selected Poems*)

Not bad advice for a new year, is it? I came across this poem, which is on the cover of today's bulletin, earlier this week, and it resonated with me as a new year's poem, a word of wisdom about beginning, or beginning again.

Later in the week, someone shared with me a song with a related theme. The chorus of the song is this:

You are more than the choices that you make.
You are more than the sum of your past mistakes.
You are more than the problems you create.
You've been remade.

("You Are More," Tenth Avenue North)

Starting fresh in the love and grace of God is a year-round Christian theme. In fact, I'd call it our daily theme. Every day is a new day, an opportunity for a new start. Aren't we blessed to have stories like the story of David's anointing, and the story of Jesus' baptism, to remind us that our stories are also stories of fresh beginnings blessed by God!

A new start—isn't that what a child needs when he or she has blundered? And a fresh beginning is exactly what an adolescent often needs. Then there are the regrets of adulthood, the desire for a chance to do things over, the shame we all feel which needs healing and a second, third, fourth, or hundredth chance to do it right this time. And with that fresh start comes the call to the first courageous step in a new direction. David Whyte's poem also includes this verse:

Start right now
take a small step
you can call your own
don't follow someone else's
heroics, be humbled
and focused,
start close in,
don't mistake
that other
for your own.

(In Laura Kelly Fanucci, 2017, *To Bless Our Callings*, Wipf & Stock, Eugene, OR p. 29)

As we explore our callings from God, words like these remind us of the uniqueness of each one of us, that in our time and place and circumstance, God calls us as individuals and gives us the gifts we need to fulfill those calls. You know the old saying, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life." It's true. Today is the day you can take that step you've been holding back on taking, and start down a new path.

Like David. Or Jesus.

It's probably easier to relate to David, whose many flaws are documented in the biblical story. He became a great leader, and also a man who abused his power. The stories of his sins are told by his partisans, the same biblical writers who lauded his military success and proclaimed that he was chosen by God for an everlasting covenant. David is remembered as a great king, but far from a perfect man.

But in today's story, he is just a boy. Not only that, but he is the youngest boy in a family of eight sons. He is small, though handsome. He is the definition of "potential." But he is out in the field, tending the sheep.

David's beautiful eyes are the window into a beautiful soul, but that is not yet perceived by conventional human ways of judging. "The Lord looks on the heart," the scripture tells us. In ancient Hebrew thought, the heart was not the seat of emotions, as we speak of it today. Rather, "heart" was more akin to what we call "soul," where emotion, intelligence, discernment, wisdom, commitment, and character come together. (Donald P. Olsen, 2010, *Feasting on the Word* year A vol. 2, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, p. 100) This story testifies to the presence of the right combination of all those dimensions of being human in young David. His later sins, grievous as they were, did not obviate God's vision, and choice, for a crucial role in history.

So David was anointed, marked as the successor to the throne, out of view of the current and still reigning king. Echoes of this story are found in the gospel of Matthew, when the wise men come from the East to worship the new king, and jealous King Herod plots to kill the one who would usurp his throne. David, like Jesus, stays under the radar of a vengeful ruler. God's chosen one lives.

"And the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward," says the scripture. (1 Sam 16:13b) As Trinitarian Christians, we hear the Holy Spirit named in this text written long before Christ. The Spirit's presence in David is consistent with our understanding of the Spirit's presence in us as baptized Christians. The Spirit is the giver of *charisms*, the spiritual gifts named and described in the New Testament. Called to be King, anointed by God's prophet, David receives the spiritual gifts he needs to carry out his call.

Often we assume that our callings are dictated by our gifts. The person who demonstrates a gift for visionary and managing leadership is the one we should choose to be an elder in the church. The one who is full of mercy is a natural to be a deacon. And certainly, we assume, we know who is a teacher and who is not cut out for that. This story of David, however, causes us to re-think those assumptions. For in David's story, the sequence was 1) potential 2) being called out and anointed and 3) the coming of the Spirit and the Spirit's gifts. The gifts came after the call. I have seen that sequence occur, maybe you have, too, where someone looked beyond the surface, perhaps with the eyes of God, to see potential in an unlikely person. And when others in community recognized God's choice, the gifts appeared. This is a story of spiritual gifting, which is not the same as inherent talents and abilities. God looks on the heart, not as humans do. We need to ask for God's eyes to see what's on the inside.

And not only when we are serving on a nominating committee, or helping a young person figure out what vocation is a good fit. We need God's eyes to see the potential which lies in our own souls, the potential which can respond to a call heard at any time in our lives.

And then, take that first step. Close in. The step you don't want to take.

I imagine that Jesus didn't want to take that first step. He waited until he was 30 years old, after all, a fairly mature age in those days. And then something in John's call rang true for Jesus, just as it did for the crowds of others who went out into the wilderness to be baptized, to start over, to turn their

lives in a different direction. Something in that call to repentance called to Jesus, who knew no sin, but who had not yet answered his vocation. His first step, his close step, was down into the river, down under the water, down as to death. He couldn't take the second step, **up** out of the water, until he first took the first step, **down** into it. The potential was inside him. His anointing by John was with water, recognizing that he was the anointed One—in Hebrew, the Messiah, and in Greek, the Christ. God looked on at Jesus' heart and recognized his Son, the Beloved.

And then the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness (Mk 1:12), to prepare him for the fulfillment of his calling.

Now, I am not suggesting that anyone in this room is called to be the Messiah. Nor a king like David. But we are all called. God looks at all our hearts, all our souls, and sees the potential that lies within us. Yes, there is potential for meanness, and for foolishness. But there is also goodness in us, God knows, because God made us. God recognizes our potential to be part of God's healing of the world, and healing of hearts. When we step into our lives trusting that God will indeed use us in service of love and justice, peace and hopefulness, we are living in Christian faith. One of the roles of the community we call church is to anoint those who are called, perhaps not literally but symbolically, publicly recognizing what God sees in us. And then, we trust, whatever gifts are needed for the call to which we have been called will be given to us, will grow in us, and will blossom as they are used for God's purposes.

It doesn't matter how young, or how old we are. It doesn't matter how short or tall, how ruddy or pale, how handsome or homely. Our gender, our social status, our past successes and our past failures are all irrelevant, for God looks on the heart, and sees what can happen if we put our trust in him.

Each time we come to the communion table, we renew the baptismal covenant. In the sharing of bread and wine, Christ's body given for us, we receive again the message of baptism, You are my Beloved. And each time, we have a chance to respond, giving our lives back to the One who gave our lives to us. Step down, step up. Step one, step two. And we're on the way, the path, the road set before us, nourished for the journey.

There is a prayer I've often used as part of mission trips which picks up this same theme of stepping out in faith, making a new start in obedience to God's call. Will you pray it with me now?

O God, you have called your servants
to ventures of which we cannot see the ending,
by paths as yet untrodden,
through perils unknown.

Give us faith to go out with good courage,
not knowing where we go,
but only that your hand is leading us
and your love supporting us;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(Topping, Frank, ed., *Daily Prayer*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 85, in Fanucci, p. 68)