

Starting over is a common theme with us. School reports, work projects, and many such things we often feel the need to scrap and begin fresh. When the month of January arrives, it is hailed as the time to officially start over. Fitness and dietary goals, relationships, and so forth. The consensus is that now is the time to begin anew. And who of us doesn't have something, perhaps many things, we wish we could start over?

God did. He started over. The world He created had become so wicked, it says in Genesis, that "*the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and it grieved Him to His heart.*" And so, He started over. He sent a flood to destroy every human being off the face of the earth except for Noah and his family. Eight persons in all. That is starting over. God did it; why can't we?

Now some things are rather easy to throw away and start again. There have been sermons that I have preached which I had scrapped and started over six, seven, and eight times. And there are sermons which I should have scrapped and started over.

It's one thing to take something we are working on in a new and different direction. But it's an entirely different thing to take ourselves and start over.

Yet, there are many who wish they could. I've spoken of him before, but he bears repeating here. Bruce was forty-two years old when he came into my office one day. He was not raised in the church. He might never have been in a church before this. He certainly had never spoken to a pastor before. He wanted to start over. His life had been a complete disaster. Drugs, alcohol, affairs with countless women. He had done every sin in the book many times over. He did not want his life anymore. He wanted a new one. Could I help him?

We talked about Jesus. For a few weeks we met regularly and he heard more and more of Jesus. And then the day came, and he was baptized. Within a week or two, I heard that he was in the hospital. He was dying. On his deathbed, he expressed to me his deep gratitude that Jesus had taken his old life and given him a new one; a life that he would have forever.

When most people start over, they are of the opinion that it takes resolve and effort on their part. Bruce had tried many times, and with great resolve. But his sinful flesh always got in the way. It's when Jesus came into his life through the power of Holy Baptism that Bruce could finally scrap his sinful past and start over with Jesus.

I think that few of us would, like Bruce, admit that we need to start fresh. We hate to admit that we are going in the wrong direction. Yet we need to. Don't we gather here each Sunday and confess: "I am wrong!" But not just that. We admit that we do not have within us what it takes to change the direction of our life.

But God does. And it's why He sent "*the Beloved,*" the only Son from heaven to be baptized. Starting over, for us, begins with Jesus' baptism. In being baptized, He placed Himself with us; under the Law to redeem us who were under the Law.

Jesus' life is the life that Bruce wanted; the life that we want and need. A life without the stains of ugly sins. A life without regrets, and guilt, and shame. Jesus' life is a holy life. It's why the heavens were opened in His baptism. Sin closes heaven. But Jesus, in His innocence, opened it.

And here is the wonder of it. Jesus opened heaven, not for Himself, but for us. He placed Himself with us in baptism. And in those waters, Jesus exchanged what was His for what is ours. He took your sinful and wretched life, and mine, that life which seems to always be going in the wrong direction, and He gave you His innocent and holy life. It's all there in the water. The water that joins His baptism to yours.

And echoing off that water came the voice from heaven: "*You are My Son, the beloved, with You I am well pleased.*" In these words we see the story of Abraham and his son Isaac. Isaac, the beloved son of Abraham; the son who was to be sacrificed on a mountain. But God stepped in. And it's because His own Beloved Son would place Himself with us in His baptism. Jesus is the One who would be sacrificed on the mountain. And already here when Jesus was baptized, we see the cross in the water, for Jesus is the One who was numbered with sinners to be the Savior of sinners by His sacrifice on the cross.

That is the Gospel that Bruce heard. The good news that pointed him away from his own resolve and effort to what Jesus had done for him and for all of you. Jesus took every sinful life, every wretched wrong to Himself. He died the Sinner in our place. And in our baptism, we are given His life; the new life of innocence and holiness.

Can I be any more clear about this? God forgives you. Every sin, every regret, every wrong. It's all forgiven. Jesus took your sins. He exchanged His holy life for yours. You are innocent. And heaven, therefore, is open to you.

That dove, which Noah sent out after the Great Flood, we see here in Jesus' baptism. For Jesus' baptism was the flood that washed away all the wickedness in your life and in mine. After the dove was sent out, Noah and his family were able to start over. So are you, my friend, so are you.

The flood of Jesus' baptism is also in your baptism. Every day, confessing your sins, you return to that blessed flood in which you hear God's voice speaking to you: "You are My beloved son and daughter." Every day you start over with Jesus in your baptismal flood. Every day you scrap your old sinful past and begin anew; fresh, clean, forgiven in Christ. Each and every day you can, and you should, say with the Apostle Paul: "*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.*"

All of this was good news for Bruce. And friend, it is good news also for you. Amen.