SERMON
for
SUNDAY JANUARY 4 2026

ON NEW BEGINNINGS AND AUDACIOUS PROMISES

I love John's daringness. John is an audacious author and theologian. Take, for instance, how he begins his Gospel: "In the beginning…." Sound familiar? Of course it does. These are the opening words of Genesis: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth…." (1:1).

So, think about that for a moment. John is writing his story of Jesus and decides to start by quoting the beginning of Genesis or, really, the whole Bible. It would be kind of like if I wanted to write a novel and decided to begin, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." In general, not a particularly good idea, as if I thought I was another Charles Dickens. Same thing with John. Except John *does in fact* think he's writing a new Genesis. *Now that's boldness!*

Why is John so audacious? Because he believes that he is, indeed, writing a new beginning. Actually, *the* new beginning. Of history. Of humanity. Of God's involvement in the creation.

John's story about Jesus is designed from beginning to end not just to tell us, but to evoke for us, the living, breathing promise of a new beginning to all of human history in and through the incarnate Word, Jesus the Christ. That's why he patterns his opening after Genesis. That's why he records seven signs (what we often call miracles) in his Gospel and then culminates with the eighth sign of resurrection as the eighth day, the start of a new week, chapter, and epoch. That's why the resurrection happens – only in John's Gospel, note – in a garden, to remind us of the Garden of Eden so that we might see the resurrection as the new creation.

What an appropriate theme for a sermon offered on January 4th! After the difficulty and darkness of war, the recent attack in Venezuela, the plight of refugees, unparalleled gun violence in North America, racial injustice, and more of 2025, we are so ready for a new beginning. Moreover, on only the fourth day of the new year, most of our resolutions are probably still intact, creating for us a hope that the new year will indeed be different from the old one.

But therein also lies the challenge. For while on January 4th our resolutions, expectations, and hopes are still intact, how will they be faring a week later on January 11th, or a month later on February 4th. Probably most of our resolutions will be in tatters and depending on the headlines our hopes may be as well.

Which raises the obvious question: can we trust new beginnings, whether the new year of the calendar or the new creation John describes? It's a fair question and deserves a serious answer. So, I'll return again to John. To two things, actually, that set John's Gospel apart and give us, if not proof, at least a promise worth believing that the new beginning John describes is worth our attention.

First, John describes Jesus as God's Word (1:1). As if Jesus captures the very mind, design, and purpose of God. Fair enough. But I also want to take that word, "Word," a bit more literally. Think, for a moment, what words actually do: they enable us to communicate, to share our thoughts and feelings with both precision and clarity. They allow us to express ourselves to each other, to be understandable and approachable. This is what Jesus does. Jesus is God's word and promise to us, God speaking as clearly as possible. God in Jesus, John makes clear, is doing something new. In earlier days, God gave the law and the prophets as expressions of God's will, but now God is going a step further, actually speaking to us directly and personally in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The Reformers used to speak of the "*Deus loquens*" – the "speaking God." *Loquens* is the Latin root of our word "eloquent," and I think it captures things nicely: Jesus is God at God's most eloquent, speaking as clearly as possible of God's profound love for us. This, as John reminds us, is new.

Second, and connected, this new, tangible, enfleshed Word opens up the possibility of a new relationship with God. "No one," John testifies, "has ever seen God" (1:18a). That's something most of us don't have to be reminded of. When tragedy strikes, when disappointment crushes us down, when hope and happiness flee, we often wonder where God is and sense the palpable absence of God far more profoundly than we've perhaps ever experienced God's presence. There's a reason, after all, that the old insurance policies promised to protect homes from "fire, flood, storm, tornado, and *other acts of God*"! An unknown God is capricious, untrustworthy, and ultimately fearsome.

Which is why Jesus – the One nestled in the very bosom of God – comes as God's Word made flesh. To reveal to us God's parental love. And not just to reveal, but to speak through word and deed as eloquently as possible that there is nothing God wouldn't do, nowhere God won't go, nothing God won't endure – even the loss of God's beloved Son – that we might know we are God's beloved children, worthy of dignity, honor, and love.

This is the heart of John's audacious Gospel – that in Jesus we receive a love letter written in human flesh and blood from the God who created the vast cosmos in the beginning, continues to sustain the universe even now, and values each and every one of us more than we can possibly imagine. And that Word… well, it creates all things new, taking our resolutions and hopes as well as our fears and disappointments and binding them together in the promises of God.

It's an important word, for only the One who created in the beginning can also create again. And, indeed, God will be about God's act of creating people and the world anew as we proclaim this audacious promise. For it, indeed, makes all things new and creates hope and strength to live into 2026 as another year of abundant grace.

Amen.