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First preached 10am, 7th January 2024

Title of Sermon – “New Beginnings”

Genesis 1 and Mark 1:4-11

New beginnings can inspire hope, fuel excitement and be beautiful experiences, but new beginnings can also be scary, birthing uncertainty and dread.

We often see the arrival of a new year as the perfect time for a new beginning to make plans and promises – we feel energised and hopeful. But then maybe a little bit of uncertainty creeps in when things don't work out as planned or you stumble in some way, ruining the promise you made to yourself.

We also go through new beginnings when change school or change jobs or enter into retirement. These types of things can be exciting for some, yet dread filled for others.

A new beginning can also be forced on us.

The loud home is now empty as all the kids have grown up and moved on and you start the new chapter as empty nesters.

There are job cuts taking place in your workplace and suddenly you are unemployed. Your life is put into a spin, and you begin to look for work.

Even a death in the family forces us to a new beginning without that person in our life. We enter into a new season of life borne out of grief and sadness.

Some new beginnings happen over and over, day in and day out, the choice to show love rather than anger, or stay sober,

In church and society, we experience various types of changes that are an ending to one thing and the creation of a new way of doing things, a new way of thinking about

things and new methods that replace what once was – we have to re-learn, and we begin to adapt.

In the end, with every ending, there is a beginning, and with every beginning, there is an ending. Beginnings and endings go together.

It shouldn't surprise us because that is how God works in the world.

In the opening verses of the Bible, in Genesis, we are invited into the wonder and mystery of God, and we hear – in the beginning God created – or - when God began to create –

A beginning. And as we pay close attention to this song of creation, we see that the world begins as God works within the chaos and darkness that exists. With his powerful word, he shapes and forms the universe, a beginning of life, and the end of chaos. But we also discover that God is involved in the world, and he brings

life from that which was chaos and disorder. He creates humans in his image, as his own idol, to enjoy him and serve him in the world he created. He breathes life into them, and they live in peace as his people.

This is so different from the surrounding nations of Israel, who taught that creation was the result of violence and blood, of the gods fighting for power, of the humans created by the blood of defeated gods, and created as slaves to the gods so they can rest. The Lord God creates the universe for people, and to dwell with people and to live in harmony with them.

Life is not a burden; life is not living in fear of retribution from the gods for not serving them adequately enough... every beginning and end in life is a result of the gods playing games and humans impacted by their behaviour.

This is not a nice way to live. To put in a lighter way, when you stub your toe, it's god punishing you for something you haven't done or done wrongly... Remember that Jesus

tackles this thinking when he's with a blind man and he is asked, 'who sinned that this man has ended up blind?' In other words, why has God punished him?

Jesus answers: this isn't how our God works! The blind man is God's vessel to bring glory to God through me. This man has worth and is loved.

You may ask in desperation: What have I done that I keep having bad luck? Why is God punishing me? God can't forgive me for what I did in the past... I have heard these questions many times; they are the prayers of a heart seeking peace and a new beginning. They echo the words of a psalmist seeking rescue from evil.

Psalm 25: Guard my life and **rescue** me; do not let me be put to shame...

Do you know what is astounding about the one who cries out for rescue in the Psalms? Let me share the 2nd part of this verse...

Psalm 25: Guard my life and **rescue** me; do not let me be put to shame, **for I take refuge in you.**

Psalm 44: Rise up and help us; **rescue** us **because of your unfailing love.**

There is trust in the character of God they trust that he is good. This is echoed in Genesis 1 where the community confesses in the Lord God who:

Overcomes the chaos in the world and is continually restoring order...

In other words, God continues to create. God doesn't stop creating. He is always bringing about new beginnings... both on a cosmic level and in deeply personal ways among his people.

Those people from long ago wrote songs and poems that trusted in God who was different to the all other gods, more powerful than the all other gods that surrounded

them - and no matter what happened in life... they knew God was on their side – God had their back.

My friends, God is on your side too. Even when it feels he isn't, cling to the word, which exclaims – God is working for the good of those who love him.

Even when it seems like your world is falling apart, nothing can separate us from his love. Why? Because of what Jesus has done. Paul tells us that there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus – because Jesus is at the right hand of God (image of authority) and interceding for us.

This means Jesus is the mediator between God and humanity.

This means Jesus is the bridge separating the gaps between you and God.

Jesus has removed the hostility between God and humanity. Nothing can separate you from the love of God.

This is what I see unfolding in the baptism of Jesus. With Jesus the Son of God, fully God and fully human, on the scene, there is a new beginning for all of creation, for all people...

The kingdom of God has erupted into the world. Heaven tears open – a cosmic event. God is up to something

A new beginning...

He is in the world with all people, walking alongside like he did in Eden but differently, he is here to restore the broken relationship to bring his people back to him.

God is not in the far reaches of the universe, inattentive to human affairs. He is on the scene, working to restore his creation to his original plan.

Guess what, this plays out for each one of us today. The church, you and me, are his vessels of new beginnings, we are witnesses to a God of forgiveness. We have the privilege and calling to show people his forgiveness and

reveal a God who is present, who cares, and who desires to dwell with them.

See God loves all people no matter what, and he wants to be among his people and with his people, and this happens when the Holy Spirit, who is God, dwells in us – this is the guarantee of adoption into his family.

However, and this is why we are a church in mission, the love he has for all people doesn't equal adoption in his family.

God's forgiveness extends to all people, it is freely given for all, but until people know that forgiveness and accept it, it has no impact. They remain hostile to God and this has eternal ramifications.

We don't know our need for forgiveness without knowing the problem of sin and its power over us. It is not God's anger that leads to a change of heart or repentance. It is

his forgiveness that leads to a change. It is the gospel that changes hearts and lives.

The problem is sin blinds all people from the truth; sin results in hostility toward God; it says: I don't need a God in my life, I'm doing fine without him, or God is an angry judge and selfish...

The result is people trying to prove my worth based on my performance or trying to pry blessings from God through performance. However, we will never be satisfied.

Christians struggle with this every day too. It's very easy to slip into this mindset of performance, which leads to our thinking, God doesn't care about me, or God is against me, or I need to do more to get God on my side.

As followers of Jesus, your identity begins in God's character of forgiveness.

We practice daily repentance as a response to God's love.

We are the people of a new beginning as we share in the death and resurrection of Christ, and when this life ends, we know we will live in the fullness of what God has begun us in at our baptisms.

Living entrenched in the gospel means, like the psalmist, we can exclaim that every beginning or end I experience in my life - My God is with me all the way. Amen.