

**NEW BEGINNINGS:
PURPOSE DRIVEN PRAYER
Psalm 124/Acts 1:1-14
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, September 27, 2015**

Hopefully by now you know this congregation is preparing for a new beginning. God is asking us to let go of the traditional understanding model of being church members, belonging to an insular institution, to becoming disciples belonging to a Spirit-led movement going beyond our four walls into our neighborhood. You see the difference?

The old perception of church membership is static and safe. The new way is fluid and unpredictable. If we forge ahead it will sometimes seem messy and painful. If we do nothing we will slowly meander into a slow decline.

But God gives us a choice. Chose wisely and God will show us the way and give us the tools to be rebooted. That means we will be spiritually tested and emotionally challenged. Like kids sitting in the back seat of a car we will be asking each other, "Are we there yet?" But being on this endless journey sooner than later our growing pains will bear fruit. We will see results we never expected and have the satisfaction of knowing we are being chosen and empowered to expand the borders of Christ's Kingdom from this very place. How? Let's look at the early history of Christianity for guidance.

I majored in history. My professors pounded into our heads history repeats itself. That's why it's important to know history so we don't repeat the mistakes of the past and instead learn how to build on the successes of the past. The Bible is the history of God's people. We wouldn't know this story existed unless God revealed it to us. Without that knowledge the story of the Exodus would be just about a man named Moses leading the Jews from Egypt to back where they started from instead of the story of God empowering Moses and God saving the Israelites so they could resume their sacred purpose to be a light to all the nations of the earth. You see biblical history isn't the story of great men and women doing great things. It's really about God doing great things through ordinary men and women like us.

Some call the Book of Acts of the Apostles a history of the early church. But it's not a history book in the modern sense just as the four gospels are not biographies of Jesus in the modern sense. Instead the Book of Acts is a faith narrative. Some say it really should be called The Acts of the Holy Spirit because it's about God the Holy Spirit bringing people and events together for a new beginning in the unfolding drama of salvation history.

Through the Holy Spirit, God reveals a new reality: the eternal kingdom supersedes the world system. Caesar rules but God rules over Caesar. The world has one way of doing things but the Kingdom of God operates in ways that stands the world system on its head and defies the status quo way of thinking that the first shall be first to the curious notion that last shall be first. The world system may be the root of injustice and persecution in the world, but in the end God's love conquers all and God wins.

Christ's crucifixion and resurrection is the turning point in the history of God's people. Peter, James and John and later the Apostle Paul all experienced Christ's resurrection and it changed them for good, empowering them to be prepared for what would happen next, the Holy Spirit transforming them into fearless, joyful, troublemakers, men and women with a divine purpose, to live, love and serve in the world by bringing hope and Good News to lost and confused people.

That was then, this is now two thousand years later. You and I have the same mandate. We too are disciples called to make disciples but not necessarily attracting new dues paying church members. We have to let go of the idea that our job is to fill the empty spaces in our pews. Instead our purpose is to fill the empty spaces in our neighbor's lives with Christ's love. Whether or not they feel called to join us as church member shouldn't be our primary concern. Instead all God wants from us is to be faithful to our primary purpose to love God, our neighbor and ourselves.

So New Beginnings isn't about fixing Babcock Church tinkering with the status quo or as Jesus would put it putting new patches on old wine skins.

Instead it's about a new beginning, a total transformation of everything we are and everything we do as a faith community. And before you get too anxious about how we build this new way of being the church, be assured New Beginnings isn't all about us reinventing the wheel. That's not our responsibility. The good news is that's God's responsibility. God already reinvented the wheel and when the time is right God will show us what that new wheel looks like for us. Remember, Moses didn't make the Exodus happen. God made the Exodus happen. All Moses did was accept God's empowerment, trust and obey and go with the flow. Peter and Paul didn't start the Church. All they did was accept God's empowerment, trust and obey and go with the flow. And now it's our turn to accept God's empowerment, trust and obey and go with the flow. As far as we're concerned God, not us, will make new beginnings possible here at Babcock. The Spirit will lead, we will follow. If we don't, nothing will happen and lives will be lost.

So get it out of your heads you and I have to fix things or reinvent the wheel. We can't get ahead of ourselves and worry about what it will look like if and when we get there. God wants us to relax and take one step at a time. What is that first step?

Let's turn to the Book of Acts and learn from the ones who had their own new beginnings. We read in Acts 1:6-9 that after giving his final instructions to his disciples Jesus was taken up into heaven. Dumbstruck, the disciples watched Jesus being taken up through the clouds. Apparently they stood there too long watching because a couple of angels appeared and basically said to them, "Just don't stand there, go back to Jerusalem, hurry up and wait!"

Hurry up and wait. Being post-modern proactive people we don't like waiting around. We want to get busy, do something, make things happen. But in the Book of Acts we see an entirely different approach. When Peter and the others returned to Jerusalem they didn't sit down to strategy meetings and then run off to accomplish their mission. They didn't form a

committee and come up with a plan, probably because they didn't know what to do. Remember they were fishermen not experts in church growth. This was new to them, and what's more they didn't have Jesus to fall back on. But Jesus did promise the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, would come in power to show them what to do.

So, remembering and trusting Jesus' promise they waited. But they didn't just sit around twiddling their thumbs. They waited proactively. They prayed, constantly. What did they pray for? They probably didn't know exactly what to pray for so they probably prayed they would be ready when the Holy Spirit came. They didn't get ahead of themselves, they didn't try to fix things they didn't pray for any action plan or even a vision statement. They just prayed they'd be ready when the time came to receive power when the Holy Spirit arrived.

For the next eight months that's precisely what I hope all of us will be doing. You have a schedule of gatherings in the bulletin when you can gather in a small group, larger gatherings and suggestions about meeting with one or two prayer partners.

So what should you be praying for? 1) Start with this that you will be given the desire to seek God out and rest in his presence at least once a day, every day. 2) You can also pray God will give you the right prayer partner and if you're not in a group, that God will lead you to the right group. 3) You can also pray for others, praying they will also start praying. 4) You can pray for wisdom and understanding as you read one chapter each day of *The Purpose Driven Life*. 5) Finally you can pray that you'll be ready, that all of us will be ready to receive the Holy Spirit so we can be transformed, renewed, invigorated and committed to whatever outreach ministry God calls us to do in our neighborhood in keeping with our collective talents and resources. One more thing. Pray we will be united so we can be together and serve together the people God puts under our care. But also pray that will send us helpers who will want to partner with us in whatever life-changing affirming ministry God calls us to carry out.

In the weeks ahead I will be preaching from the Book of Acts so we can learn how that first generation of Christians became a dynamic movement of apostles and disciples who partnered with God to change the world. These will be teaching sermons, reminding us how to pray so our prayers can grow beyond laundry lists of requests to having intimate conversations and intimate times of quiet and rest in God's presence.

Prayer is good for the soul because prayer connects you to our life source, our friend and helper, our Lord and Savior. God is giving us a gift, the opportunity of a lifetime, to know God better so you can love God better but also better know and love ourselves. When you know yourself and love yourself as God knows and loves you, you will experience a new beginning of commitment and service to the least of these and through them, Christ himself.

Let the prayers begin.

Amen.