



**Beginning in the Middle** – John 1:1-14

*The Rev. Geoff Parker to First Parish Church, Brunswick – Jan. 2, 2011*

Well, as promised, I wanted to continue my Christmas season gift to us all: a little reflection on the beginning of my time here. Last week, we talked about letting our expectations be revised in the new story that God is telling in our midst. This week, the gospel of John invites us to reflect a little more on the beginning of things by the light of our Christ candle and the Christmas season.

I have heard theologians say it in much more serious tones, but I will say: show me a Christian and I will show you a person whose soul runs on a broken wristwatch. By this I mean, time doesn't work quite the same as our everyday existence in the story of our faith. I remember being in grade school and being told that the very definition of a story was that it had a beginning, a middle, and an end. (I later found out that the assumption was that those three pieces would happen in that order... which I think is pretty limiting, don't you?) Our scripture today confounds that sort of thinking. If you stick a bookmark in your bible at the place where John says: "In the beginning..." and then close the book, you're looking at a page  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way through our scriptures. A funny place for a beginning.

It's here that we are reminded that our bibles are not ONE story, but rather a collection of stories through which our ancestors in faith tell us of their wrestling and dancing and loving relationship with God. It's here that we find that the Gospel of John wants to tell the whole story over again by the light of this Word which has come... shining in the darkness.

I have been thinking about beginnings a lot as I started my ministry here. Most of you know that my early work was as a road manager for a touring rock band. Now, I'm sure this may come as a shock to all of you, but during those years, your pastor here was not immersed in the contemplative life! Though at some level life on the road with a band is a lot more mundane than you would think (especially when you're the guy who has to wake people up in the morning), there is a lot of truth to

the stuff you see in movies and tv shows about being in a band. I have known a lot of folks who were living *hard lives*, doing *hard things* out there.

As I've moved into becoming a pastor, I've maintained a lot of close relationships with folks from those times, and I get sought out a lot by people from the road who have changed their lives a lot since then, through sometimes intense epiphanies of faith, or you might say, conversions. We don't often say conversion anymore in polite society, as it has too often been at the point of a sword in the history of the world, but there are conversions which come from within. I can tell you, these people are lit up from their experiences, and they are changed in a real way.

There are two ways in which these folks start out these new faith lives that they have discovered, as I see it. There are those for whom their dawning of faith is an event that occurs on a line and alters the track forever, like a marble rolling along, and then suddenly bumped in a new direction. For them, there is a clear distinction in their lives: there was everything before, and everything that will come after their experiences of God. The problem that I see is that too often, who they were before becomes this shadow-figure version of themselves. They are stalked by their past, and the story of their present faithful selves is told in the language of defeating that past. These are good and loving people, but they often suffer from this militant opposition to themselves, and they often struggle to forgive... others, certainly, but particularly themselves. As a Christian pastor, it doesn't ring true to my notion of the God that Jesus preached.

Others take a different tack. For them, the dawning of faith is more like a stone that is dropped into a pool. The ripples spread in all directions, both back and forward, through their past and future. By this way of thinking, the past—with all of its pain and mistakes—isn't cut off and denied by the new faith at all. It's there, but it is *part* of the story which led to their faith. This happy conversion didn't end one life (bad) and begin another (good), it retold the whole story through the eyes of God. This isn't to avoid the reconciliation or forgiveness that they must seek—either from

God, or from others. It is a portrayal of the pattern of honest repentance and forgiveness that is the ebb and flow of the Kingdom of God Jesus proclaimed. If we are so lucky, we should all hope to retell our stories—to begin the myriad beginnings of our lives—this way.

Many people have asked me if I feel different having been ordained and called to this church. Some people from the days in the tour bus ask me how I can reconcile the road manager I was then and the pastor I am now. The answer I give them is that my call to the church was not something like that ricochet marble, but like the stone dropped in the water. My call to the church—and then to ministry in the middle of my life—changed the events that would come after, surely, but also changed the events at the start. So it is for this church. Each new pastor (or associate pastor) is not an entirely new direction that strives to ignore the past (for that would be a naive pastor indeed!) Rather, each change in the congregation—in leadership or otherwise—is a way of retelling the story of this community of faith: who we have been, who we are, and who we hope to be.

Like the story John tells us today: when Jesus happens in the middle, the beginning is forever altered. That challenge rings in our ears as we hear our gospel text, friends. This new day, this new year, this day when we celebrate a last supper that was actually a kind of “first supper”... we are surrounded with the invitation to begin. This new beginning in the middle of our scriptural story invites us in to read how a faithful people were changed in all of their times—not just in the moment of finding this savior Jesus. Instead the entire story of their faith was retold again. Behold, even our stories are made new!