

“New Beginnings”

Sermon by Lisa Crismore

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Isaiah 65:17-25

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, an one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the lord – and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent – its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on my holy mountain, says the Lord.

The opening film for the Heartland Film Festival this year was “Gimme Shelter”. It was a true story about a teenager named Apple or her birth name - Agnes Bailey. Her story begins when she is trying to leave her abusive, prostitute, drug-dealing mother. She somehow makes her way onto a bus headed for New Jersey to find her father whom she has never met. Daddy has made it rich. He has the big, fancy house with the trophy wife and 2 kids. Needless to say, Apple fits into their life like a sore thumb. Then when they discover that she is pregnant, their solution is for her to abort the baby. Apple shows up at the clinic but can't go through with it and runs!

She finds herself out on the street and nowhere to go. A stranger approaches her and tries to force her into his car. She gets away but in the process almost gets killed.

It is in the hospital that her life begins to turn around because it is here where she meets Father McCarthy, the hospital chaplain. In the beginning, he tells her that he will pray for her and her response is, “Don't bother!” Apple has never experienced another person caring for her let alone God. But Father McCarthy doesn't give up. He keeps nudging her and caring for her. In the end he finds a way for her to keep her baby.

He introduces her to Kathy DiFiore's shelter for pregnant teens and new mothers. Kathy welcomes Apple and gives her love and protection. As she welcomes her new baby into the world, Apple is ready and able to start a new life with the help of Kathy and her many supporters.

The one thing I love about Heartland Film Festival is that you many times will get to meet and hear from the director and actors of the film. This night, they not only had the director and lead actor but also some of the women from the shelter and Kathy DiFiore there. It was interesting to hear the questions from the audience, especially to Kathy. When they asked Kathy about totally giving of herself to these young women she explained, “She had gone through a horrible divorce and at the end of that is when God called her to do this.”

It was also shared that Kathy received a lot of support from Mother Teresa when she was alive and honored at the White House by President Ronald Reagan. Kathy runs not just 1 shelter but 5 shelters in New Jersey.

Apple Bailey received a new life when she met Father McCarthy and Kathy DiFiore. She received a new beginning for both her and her baby's future.

The people in Isaiah were pretty beat up like Apple. The people in exile had been returned home only to find a corrupt social system. There was violence and bloodshed. They had lost all hope in rebuilding their beloved Jerusalem. Everything was gone and they had lost faith. Like Apple they questioned, "Why bother praying, does God really care?"

Then like Father McCarthy and Kathy DiFiore, the prophet Isaiah offers hope with a message from God. There is a promise for a new beginning. There is hope for the future.

I love the image of the tree - "for like the days of the tree shall the days of my people be." Have you ever noticed the rings of a tree, which mark each year of its life? My father-in-law loves to work with wood. He tells me that when you look at the rings it can tell if there was a drought or if there was plenty of rain for the year, if the tree had been struck by lightning or if there had been a disease. The rings of the tree tell a lot about its life. Trees grow strong and tall as they persevere through what life offers them.

Isaiah is telling the people that they will be around to tell their stories. They will have a future to tell about the ups and downs of life. They will be blessed with children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The ultimate is there will be peace. "People will not be destroyed or hurt on all my holy mountain," says the Lord.

In this imagery of new beginnings, I am reminded of my retreat at Rockville Women's Prison a couple of weeks ago. Many of you have asked how it went. I want to thank you for all your support. It was clear that God's Spirit was present and transforming. Because as the women of Rockville prison received Christ's love and grace, they receive a new beginning on life just like the people in Jerusalem. This was an opportunity for them to release their burdens, to get rid of the "yuck and muck" that have weighed them down. This offers them freedom to live with a clean slate and a new life of hope, even for the women who have a long sentence. They will have internal peace.

One of the women shared that she was unchurched. This retreat for her was like being transported to a foreign country and no one was speaking her language. She didn't know the familiar songs or stories which were being referenced. When asked why she decided to apply to attend, she said it was her daughter. You see her daughter has been living with her school teacher where she has been going to church and learning about God. This has changed her daughter and made her a new person. Her child is excited about Jesus and she wants this woman to go to church with her someday! This woman is excited about the change in her daughter. She wanted to see what this was all about! She fears for her son who is heading down the same road she has travelled. She prays that he will find someone like her daughter found who will lead him to Christ.

By the end of the retreat, this woman was ready to receive this new life in Christ. She was afraid of the newness which is understandable. How would her family receive this news?

Will this change her life? Is this really true? She, like the people in Jerusalem, was tired of the old life and they were ready to receive God's new life of hope and peace.

As the church, the Body of Christ, we are called to live a new life in Christ. We, at John Knox, are living out our calling by the new beginning stories that we tell. We welcome new members in our second service and we will welcome Nya Baker through the waters of baptism, today. We will promise to teach and support Nya and Felicia through their faith journey. It is a new beginning for them as well as for us.

Our church has stories after stories of how we have been part of the poetic message of the prophet Isaiah. Bob Hunter led our session through a six hour retreat, yesterday. We are beginning to talk about what comes next in the life of John Knox. But do move forward, it is also important to reflect on the past. It reminded me of the rings in the tree. We were able to tell the stories of when we have experienced droughts and when we have had good times of plentiful rain! We spent a good amount of time talking about the risks and rewards of being an open, caring, community.

Our ministry has changed over the years. Years ago, mission was what we supported in missionaries who served over seas. Now, mission is right out our front porch. Ministry may not only happen inside the walls of the church. We may have to go out and do ministry elsewhere. What will that look like?

It is clear as we share our stories and many of you may recall the sermon our secretary, Kim Grant gave back in June. With all the people that use our space Monday-Saturday, there is as much ministry that goes on during the week as is done on Sunday mornings – maybe even more! How do we connect those ministries together or do we? Church is changing. Ministry is changing. How do we as the church change to minister to God's people?

It is time for new goals which will take us into the future. What kind of ministry or new beginnings is God calling us to pursue in the next 3-5 years? Bob posed the question, "What might be some next steps for John Knox Presbyterian Church to more fully embody your commitment to being an open, caring, community?" I have a feeling that members on session may not be the only ones asked this question. We as a congregation will be invited to be a part of this visioning for the future because we are a part of tomorrow. May we seek to offer future hope and peace that Isaiah speaks of for our congregation and community. Amen.