



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

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"Beginning Again"

A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church

On January 1st, 2023, New Years' Day, from Gen. 1 & John 1

For the last twenty-two years, the team at Google has put together an annual summary of what people all over the world have been searching for called the "Year in Search;" a video montage of the themes that characterized our collective experience, providing a unique look into what we cared about, what inspired us, what intrigued us, and what we searched for as human beings in the last year. The video for 2022 begins like this, "This year more than ever, the world searched, 'can I change?'" What follows are the events that defined our year like the war in Ukraine, women protesting in Iran, the death of Queen Elizabeth with her voice saying, "Change has become a constant. The way we embrace it defines our future." The video ends with these words over a backdrop of the Carina Nebula from the Webb telescope, "To everyone who sees not what the world is, but what it can be, search on."

Google Data Editor, Simon Rogers, said "2022 was defined by our collective search for change and new possibilities. After two years of uncertainty, we re-emerged stronger, empowered, and sought out ways to become better versions of ourselves. Global searches of "how to change myself" and "how to be better" reached an all-time high. Trending searches ranged from changing jobs to improving relationships." For the first time in Google history, the world searched for "happiest jobs" more than "happiest cities." More than ever, people searched "how to be more present" and "how to be a better friend." But amid this personal growth, we also faced conflict and natural disasters that tested our resolve. We came together as a global community and looked for ways to support each other searching for 'how to help Ukraine' or 'how to help Puerto Rico.' The strength and determination we needed in these moments inspired us to ask, 'how to be fearless' and 'Can I create change?'"

This is the gospel according to Google, and what a surprise it is to find our faith encapsulated by a multinational technology company! Google was able to convey the gospel this year because their search engine reflects the deepest desires and hopes of humanity, which this year happened to be the quest for change and the collective search for a new beginning. And that is exactly what we find at the beginning of the gospel of John. Unlike Luke and Matthew, John doesn't provide us with a nativity story filled with interesting characters like Mary and Joseph, Caesar and Quirinius, shepherds and angels, or Herod and the magi. There is no mention of an imperial census, an inn with no room, or frankincense, gold, and myrrh. Instead, we get poetry—perhaps a song about a new beginning.



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John's gospel begins with the same word as the book of Genesis, the first word in the Bible—*bereishit*, which is Hebrew for "in the beginning." But John did not mean God had created the world all over again, but the creative force of that brought the universe into existence was also at work in the birth of Jesus. It wouldn't have been as dramatic, but John could have started his prologue with the words, "In the new beginning...". Scholar Wes Howard Brook writes, "John's prologue is a wistful summary of the unsure dance between *being* and *becoming*, between What Is and What Has Come to Be. It offers a commentary on the poignant, ironic relationship between Creator and created, the Word and the world...consciously molding itself in dialogue with the opening words of the Hebrew scriptures, John starts with an ancient belief that becomes sparkingly new for his community and its successors. 'In the beginning' is a cosmic opening that challenges readers to consider primal origins, sources of power and creativity, and our relationship to all that is."ⁱ

Today is the eighth day of Christmas, the last day of Kwanzaa, and New Year's Day, which means it is the perfect time to talk about new beginnings. The beginning of a new year is not simply a time to read "Best of Lists," eat collard greens, black eyed peas, and stewed tomatoes. It's also a time to review the past year and reflect on the highs and lows, the ups and downs, where we've been, where we're going, what we lost, what was gained, what went well, and what we might do differently next year. It is the time when we make resolutions to eat differently, exercise more, lose weight, join a gym, practice self-care, meditate more often, hire a life coach, talk to a therapist, look for a new job, or take on a new project. We make goals for the coming year as individuals, families, and as a church. We take time to reflection on who we are, what want to change, and who we want to become in 2023.

Some of you may feel overwhelmed by all this reflection, planning, and the labor required to create resolutions, set goals, or reach new aspirations. You may feel a little cynical or jaded about the whole "New Years' Day New Beginning" thing. You may be saying to yourself, "I've done this many times before and it never works. The new gym membership is useless by Martin Luther King Day, our focus on our self-care vanishes by Valentines' Day, and the resolution to read a book a day becomes a book a month by Palm Sunday. What's the point of doing this every year?"

New year new beginnings can be like a marketing ploy invented by the health and fitness industry to sell us "the false gospel of wellness,"ⁱⁱⁱ or worse a set up for failure that leaves us judging and resenting ourselves. You may feel like the song by rock band Death Cab for Cutie, "So this is the new year, and I don't feel any different. So, this is the new year, and I have no resolutions, or self-assigned penance, for problems with easy solutions." Maybe you don't feel any different. Maybe you don't feel like making resolutions. Maybe you don't have problems with easy solutions.



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I understand that feeling, but I think you may resonate with the prologue to the gospel of John. It is one of the few places in the entire Bible where there are no commands, or directives, or instructions, or resolutions given, and there are most certainly easy solutions. Instead, we have a poetic description of the beginning of the world and the story of a new beginning that came in Jesus.

John's prologue may appear to be nothing but a beautiful picture of how God created the universe, took on flesh, and lived among us in Jesus. Yet, embedded within John's dramatic work of art are four key elements God wove together to actualize the new beginning. These four elements are crucial for us because they are not only the building blocks of the new creation God unfolded at Christmas. They are also the four ingredients of any new beginning; the key elements that are needed for any person or community who wants to start again.

You can call them elements, concepts, materials, components, or factors, but I'm calling them ingredients because I love to cook and while I was making brown butter bourbon chocolate chip cookies this Christmas I was reminded of the importance of ingredients. If you forget baking soda your cookies won't rise. If you forget butter your cookies will be hard. If you forget sugar your cookies will be bland. And if you forget the bourbon, you'll have a lot less fun cooking. If you want to make a recipe work, you need to have all the ingredients working together. That is what makes something new and wonderful, beautiful, and delicious.

There are four themes in the prologue of the gospel of John's that are ingredients for a new beginning—light and life; grace and truth. When these elements are mixed together they create the material we need to begin again. If we only have one or a few of these ingredients, we might make a new beginning, but without all of them it is difficult to develop the kind of new beginning that goes beyond our own individual lives and has the power to change the world. Many new beginnings are self-centered attempts to remake our own lives without any concern for the world around us. But when our new beginnings include the four ingredients we find in the gospel of John, they have the possibility not only to change your own lives for the better, but the lives of those around us as well.

In the beginning and the *new* beginning, in Genesis and John, God started the same way—by bringing light and life into the world. We tend to think of light quite literally, but ancient people spoke of light in highly metaphorical ways. Light was anything that radiates and illuminates, opens the eyes of the blind, wakes those who are sleeping, helps people to see more clearly. Light is about visions and epiphanies that reveal the way forward. Light can also be uncomfortable and painful when it exposes what going on in the dark and reveals the unholy secrets taking place in the shadows.



Light is the element that sets off a spark that ignites a new beginning. It is not a coincidence that the four primary festivals of this season all include lighting candles—Hanukah, Christmas, Kwanza, and New Years'. In their own unique way, each of these traditions is a ritual embodiment of Isaiah's words, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness could not overcome it."

Our covenant is the most sacred statement we have as a community, and I find it fascinating that first thing we vow to do in that covenant is to be open to all new light. We proclaim, "We will be open to all new light strengthened by God and each other in our faith." We don't say we will strive to be open to new light or we hope to be open to new light. We say, "WE WILL!" Even more startling, we do not pledge to be open to all light. That would be a nice statement, but we pledge to be open to all new light. There are many lights we've received as individuals and as a community over the last 80 years that have been illuminating and enlightening. However, we do not vow to be open all the light that created epiphanies for our forebearers in the past or visions that once enlightened us years ago. No, for eight decades we've said that we will be open to all new light. That is a radical statement! It means we've covenanted to be a people who constantly ask ourselves, "What is the new light that shining? And how do we find it and prepare ourselves to receive it?"

As human beings, we are creatures of habit and unfortunately sometimes our habits tend toward shadows instead of the light. We tune in to NPR again, we watch the same television news stations. We read books from the same authors, articles from familiar sites, and listen to the same podcasts. We subscribe to the Wall Street Journal, the NY Times, and Washington Post again. We receive the same light we got last year and the year before that. What if we changed things up completely this year and went on a search for new light? What if we stopped watching the same news or reading the same devotional, we have been for the last five years and found something different—some new light? New beginning are born from new light!

In John's prologue light is synonymous with life, the second ingredient in the recipe of a new creation. Life is not simply the opposite of death, but of apathy and indifference. Life is the beat of our hearts, the blood in our veins, and the breath in our lungs. It is not only our vitality and energy of our spirits, but it is our will, our passion, our faith, our hope, and new beginnings are born from the question—"What gives me life? What animates my soul? What sets my heart on fire? What causes me to spring out of bed in the morning ready for a new day? How can I away from what is life-taking, deal dealing, and soul sucking, so I can have more of what is life-giving and joy producing? What would it mean for my life to be a light for all people—including myself?"



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When we're open to new light and animated by the spirit of life we receive the gift of creativity, which is the very essence of God. When it is said we human beings are made in God's image, it means we're made to be creative. Creativity is our divine spark and innovation is nothing less than how we embody God's design. Sadly, it is easy to lose our creativity and surrender our divinity, because the darkness and death that dominate our world has the power to overwhelm us in fear. We're afraid something will go wrong, so we do the same thing over and over again and expect different results, knowing full well that's the definition of insanity. When are setting out on the course for a new beginning—our goal should not be to do the same thing that we've always done. Our goal should be to let the creativity flow, think outside the box, and open our minds to the possibilities of innovation. The more complex the world becomes, the more creativity we need as people and as a community. As Albert Einstein said, "The thinking that got us to where we are is not the thinking that will get us to where we want to be." Light and life give birth to creativity.

Once we have laid a foundation of light and life, the architecture of a new beginning is built on two indispensable pillars found toward the end of John's poetic prologue: grace and truth. Without grace our new beginning will be nothing more than a house of cards that will crumble at the first sign of disturbance or blow away in the wind. It will be a house with no wall walls. The absence of grace is why many new beginnings stop in their tracks. Grace is the ingredient we always seem to forget, because it's the hardest part of starting over again, yet there's no way forward without it. 2022 was a difficult year. We made mistakes. Other people did too. We disappointed people. People disappointed us. We failed. People failed us. It wasn't always pretty, and so we need a fresh start. A chance to begin again. But we're not going to get there without grace. We need to have the grace to forgive our family, our friends, our fellow church members, our neighbors, even our enemies, and the most difficult person to forgive—ourselves. We have to find a way to offer ourselves and each other a clean slate and a fresh start. So, if we didn't feel grace overwhelming us last night as we heard people singing "Auld Lang Syne," then we may need sing it again until we find the grace we need to really make a new beginning.

Whenever I hear that song, I think about that moment in the movie *Forrest Gump* when he and Lieutenant Dan are at a bar on New Year's Eve. As the ball drops, fireworks crack, bottles pop, people cheer, and "Auld Lang Syne" starts playing in the background. The lovable Gump wishes Lieutenant Dan a Happy New Year, but Lieutenant Dan doesn't respond at all. He's not celebrating. He's staring off into the distance, deep in thought and reflection, contemplating the meaning of life. Later we learn that moment was the catalyst that kick-started his recovery from rock bottom and became the birth of a whole new life for him. It was his new beginning.



While grace is the most important ingredient, it must be balanced by its partner truth or grace will become cheap and shallow. We can't live in denial about what happened in 2022. Denial is a surefire way to sabotage a new beginning. Many new beginnings get off the ground only to malfunction and crash because of our propensity for denial. T.S. Eliot once said, "Humanity can only bear so much reality," and that may be right, but we have to try to bear as much reality as possible if we want to begin again. James Baldwin's famous maxim is a New Year's motto, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." We must face the complicated and painful truth our lives and our world if we want to find a new beginning as individuals, families, and as a church. We do not face reality because we love rehashing the past or wallowing in our own guilt. We face it because we know if we don't, our history will repeat itself. We face the truth because we know that is the only way to truly begin again.

Life and light, grace, and truth, these are the ingredients of a new beginning, and they are available to us at the start of every new year. The question is where in your life do you need a new beginning? Perhaps today is the day. Perhaps today is start of your new beginning. Perhaps today is the day your family and friends will look back on not just as the start of chapter, but a whole new book!" Perhaps today is the day our ancestors will write, "In the new beginning they...". Perhaps today is the day people will sing, "And that's the day everything changed." People asked this year, "Can we change?" And the answer is "Yes, we can!" Christmas is all the proof we need, and John is our poetic witness. It is always possible to begin again, so long as we have life and light, grace, and truth. So, on this sacred occasion, I wish you a Merry Christmas, a Joyous Kwanzaa, and Happy New Year and I offer you this blessing, "To everyone who sees not only what the world is, but what it can be, may God be with you, and may you search on until you find your new beginning."

ⁱ Wes Howard Brook, *Becoming Children of God*, Orbis: Maryknoll, NY, 1994.

ⁱⁱ Rina Raphael, *The Gospel of Wellness, Gyms, Gurus, Goop and the False Gospel of Wellness*, Henry Holt: NY, 2022.