

A Brand-new Life

A SERMON BY THE REV. RICHARD W. NEAL

BASED ON AN EARLY BAPTISMAL SERMON IN THE FIRST LETTER OF PETER

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Christian baptism is not a sign of having arrived at a healing relationship with God; it is the beginning of a life-long journey toward wholeness. As someone said, baptism represents the desire to see the world differently, to see each other differently, and even to see ourselves differently. It is a fresh start, not a destination. Being baptized is not like beginning a new year or turning over a new leaf in the life we've been living. It's about starting a new life entirely, a life we have in Christ, in which everything old has passed away and everything becomes new, an entirely new creation (2 Cor. 5:17)! Listen with me to a baptismal sermon from the early church, found in St. Peter's first letter. In it, Peter reminds us who we are, and he calls us anew to the life upon which we embarked in our own baptisms. [The text is adapted from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of scripture, The Message.]

HOW FORTUNATE WE ARE TO HAVE THE GOD WE HAVE! Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we have been given a brand-new life and have everything to live for, including a future in heaven – and the future starts now! God is keeping careful watch over us and the future. The day is coming when you will have it all – life healed and whole. So roll up your sleeves, put your mind in gear, and be totally ready to receive the gift that's yours. Let your life be pulled into a way of life shaped by God's life, a life energetic and blazing with holiness. Remember that God said, "I am holy; you be holy."

Now that you have cleaned up your lives by following the truth, love one another as if your lives depended on it. Your new life is not like your old life. Your old birth came from a union of flesh; your new birth comes from your union with God's living Word. Just think - a life conceived by God and born in you! You have had a taste of God. Now, drink deeply of God's pure kindness, then you will grow up mature and whole in God. Welcome into your lives the Source of life itself, and give it the place of honor in your lives. Then present yourselves as living stones for the construction of a spiritual sanctuary vibrant with life, in which you serve as holy priests offering up to God lives that are approved and blessed by Christ.

You have been chosen by God, chosen for the high calling of priestly work, chosen to be a holy people, God's instruments to do God's work and to speak God's message, to tell others the night-and-day difference God made for you and can make for others. For once, you were merely so many individuals; now you are the people of God. Once you lived life on your own; now you live in partnership with God.

Friends, the world you see around you is not your home, so don't make yourselves cozy in it. Don't indulge your ego at the expense of your soul. Live an exemplary life among your neighbors so that your actions will show them that there is another way to live, a life-giving way. As the scriptures say, "Whoever wants to embrace life and see the day fill up with good, here is what you do: say nothing evil or hurtful; snub evil and cultivate good; run after peace for all you are worth. God looks on all this with approval, listening and responding well to what you ask."

If with heart and soul you are doing good, do you think you can be stopped? Even if you suffer for it, you are still better off. Don't give the opposition a second thought. Through thick and thin, keep your hearts at attention, in adoration before Christ your Master. Be ready to speak up and tell anyone who asks why you are living the way you are, and always with the utmost courtesy. Keep a clear conscience before God so that when people throw mud at you, none of it will stick. They will end up realizing that *they are* the ones who need a bath. It is better to suffer for doing good, if that is what God wants, than to be punished for doing bad. That is what Christ did definitively: suffered because of others' sins. He went through it all – was put to death and then made alive – to bring us to God.

Since Jesus went through everything, you are going through and more, learn to think like Him. Think of your sufferings as a weaning from that old sinful habit of always expecting to get your own way. Then you will be able to live out your days free to pursue what God wants, instead of being tyrannized by what you want.

You have already put in your time in the old way of life, without God at the center. Now it is time to be done with it for good. Of course, your old friends will not understand why you don't join in with the old gang anymore. But you don't have to give an account to them. They are the ones who will be called on the carpet before God.

Listen to the Message. Take nothing for granted. Stay wide-awake in prayer. Most of all, love each other as if your life depended on it. Love makes up for practically anything. Be generous with the different things God gave you: if words, let it be God's words; if help, let it be God's hearty help. That way, God's bright presence will be evident in everything through Jesus, and *he will* get the credit as the One mighty in everything.

I have written as urgently and accurately as I know how. This is God's generous truth; embrace it with both arms!

PRAYER — Help us, O God, to hear deeply your affirmation that we are your beloved children, with whom you are well pleased. Give us grace to see ourselves and those around us as you see us, and to live as you would have us live.