

Hespeler, 5 January 2020 © Scott McAndless

Jeremiah 31:7-14, Psalm 147:12-20, Ephesians 1:3-14, John 1:1-18

You've had five days. You all know what it is like at the turn of the year. Everybody else is doing it, so you tend to look back and look forward and at least pause to think about what happened in 2019 and what you'd like to happen in 2020. Many of us even make resolutions – setting out our intentions to be different in the new year. And of course, the people who run gyms and personal training companies and dieting plans all know it. Every year they sign thousands of people up for the services that they provide.

But, even though people always seem make the best of plans on the first of January, it seems just as common for people to struggle a bit on the follow-through. So, five days on, it doesn't seem too out of place to ask how you are doing. How are you following through on that exercise regime, that diet plan, that other resolution that was going to revolutionize your life in 2020?

If you are doing well, that is great. But it's only been five days; I think we all know that the real test is likely yet to come. And I don't mean to mock anyone's best intentions, but I don't think it is any secret that, if you do follow through 100% on your New Year's resolutions, you are definitely beating the odds. Most resolutions collapse into so much dust before the first month of the year is over.

It is almost as if making a decision on an arbitrary date on a calendar created by a man named Gregory doesn't have the magical power to bring about all of the changes we really crave in our lives. Well, as much as I applaud everyone's best efforts, I think that is exactly the case. But that doesn't mean that the change you may want is out of reach for you. And actually, the instinct is good; the idea of making the change at the beginning of something is good. It is just that we may be reaching for the wrong beginning.

There is something very special about the way that John decides to begin his gospel story of Jesus. You see, the Gospel of Mark decided that Jesus' story began when he was baptised – that you really didn't need to know anything about him before that happened. Then Matthew and Luke came along and said, "Wait a minute, you have to go back earlier than that to understand Jesus. You have to know about what happened when he was conceived and born."

Then it was like Matthew and Luke turned to John and said, "There's no way you can



start your story any earlier than that.” And John said, “just watch me!” He decided that you really can’t understand who Jesus is and what he did if you don’t go back way before Jesus was born – back to the very beginning of the world, in fact. **“In the beginning,”** he begins. And it is, of course, a very intentional echo of the opening of the Book of Genesis. But, instead of saying, **“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...”** he says, **“In the beginning was the Word.”**

Now, entire books – whole libraries – have been written about what John meant by that phrase, “the Word.” It refers, of course, to the fact that, in the Genesis story, God creates by *speaking* things into existence – by saying, **“Let there be...”** But it also means more than that. It refers to the biblical notion that the ideal of Wisdom (who is, interestingly enough, personified as a woman in the Proverbs) was actively present with God in the work of creation. (Proverbs 8:22-31)

Even more surprising, it is a reference to a central concept of ancient Greek philosophy. You see, John wrote his Gospel in Greek, and the Greek word he uses there, the word that is translated in English as *word*, is the word *λογος*. But *λογος* is not just the common, everyday ancient Greek word for a word. It was a special word for *word* that was mostly used by philosophers to talk about deeper ideas of meaning and understanding. That’s why we find it as a root in scholarly English words like *biology*, *technology* and *logic*.

So, in just the opening few words of his gospel, John introduces us to all sorts of interesting ideas and concepts about this world and how it came into being. But actually, the most amazing thing that he has to say about the beginning of all things is yet to come. He reveals – almost in passing, almost as if were a minor point – that this Word, this way that God spoke all things into being, this notion of divine wisdom, this organizing principle of Greek philosophy – was not something apart from God, but was, in fact, indistinguishable from God: **“and the Word was God.”**

But John is not quite finished blowing our minds, because there is one more key step in this story of the work of the *λογος* in creation. A few lines later he reveals that the Word became flesh and it is clear, as you continue, that he is talking about the main character of this Gospel – that this pre-existing Word of God is one and the same as Jesus of Nazareth. And that statement left a puzzle that Christians have spent the ages arguing over and trying to understand – how could Jesus possibly be the totally human man who was known and loved by his friends in Galilee and yet also at the same time the pre-existing Word of God who was from the beginning and was also, somehow, God?

But I am not going to try and unravel all of the mysteries of the Holy Trinity today. In fact, I don’t really think that it is a mystery that can be completely understood by human thought and reason. I just want us to note,

for the moment, that John believed that to truly understand Jesus and why he came and what he accomplished, you need to go back not just to his baptism, not just to his birth, but to the very beginning of all things.

And that brings us back to us and the struggles that we sometimes have to be and become the people that we want to be. As I said, we seem to feel this pull to want to make resolutions or to improve ourselves at the beginnings of things, like on the first of January. It is a correct impulse; the problem is just that we are looking towards the wrong beginning.

Here is what the Letter to the Ephesians says about you becoming your best person – the person that God always intended you to be. He says that God **“chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.”** He is saying that the story of your transformation didn’t start at the beginning of the New Year but rather at the beginning of time itself. And you may say, “How can that be? I wasn’t even around way back then. I think I would remember something like that.” And no you weren’t. The apostle is not suggesting that you were a pre-existent being who was there at the beginning of all things and you just don’t remember it.

But he clearly agrees with the author of the Gospel of John that Jesus is that kind of pre-existent being and, because Jesus was there and you are in Christ today, there is a sense in which you were there too. But Ephesians adds new depth of understanding to what it was that Jesus was doing there at the beginning of all things. The idea seems to be that Jesus began his great work all the way back then. Jesus’ work of bringing the human and the divine together, of wiping away everything that could ever separate you from God and of recreating you as the best person that you can be, is not tied to just one moment in time – not even the moment of Jesus’ death on the cross or of the resurrection. It is a project that has always been intended to take all of eternity to be fully realized.

And I think that this is one idea that has always been lacking in our plans to improve ourselves. Our thinking about making ourselves better is too future oriented. We try to become better people by suppressing who we have been – by seeking only to forget or overcome the mistakes or regrets of the past. This causes a problem because we end up trying to become brand new people who are completely disconnected from everything we have ever known or been. I believe that this is actually a formula for failure. You cannot embrace change without knowing who you are or where you have come from.

And that is why Jesus is able to engender the kind of change you truly need in your life. Jesus doesn’t just know who you may become, Jesus is also intimately connected with whom you have been. But I am saying more than just that Jesus is understanding of the mistakes and the errors that you’ve made in the past or the ways in which you failed to measure up to

your best intentions. The Letter to the Ephesians is saying that Jesus was there when you – everything that you were ever meant to do or be – were just a gleam in God’s eye. Jesus was in on the planning phase of your life. And Jesus has been pulling for you to become the person you were intended to be ever since. In fact, Jesus likely has a better sense of who you are supposed to be than you yourself have.

Now, I do believe that this is a notion that has often been misunderstood and even abused down through Christian history. This notion that God has a plan for people’s lives, for example, has been used to make people stay in situations where they are abused or mistreated. Slaves, for example, were often told that it was God’s good will for them that they remain slaves. Women in abusive relationships often receive the same message to this very day: this relationship is God’s will for you and therefore you have to put up with the abuse. That is a lie!

The whole point of this teaching is not that you have to accept the situation into which you were born or in which you have been placed. That would be to say that the world or that society or that the economy is what has predetermined what person you are supposed to be. No, the point of this is that Jesus knows you better than the world knows you, better than your society know you and better than the expectations that other people have put on you. Indeed, Jesus also knows you better than you know yourself and that is how you can discover, even later in life, new depths or new understandings of what God is calling you to be. This is about you learning to be true to your true self no matter what the world might think or what the world might say.

Now, what does all of this have to do with the efforts that we make to change or improve ourselves especially at the beginning of a new year? The tradition of simply making New Year’s resolutions is, I believe, ultimately a self-defeating thing. If you set out into the new year armed only with your willpower to create a better you, you will inevitably fail sooner or later and the discouragement that follows will only set you back.

I would suggest that more is needed than just decision and willpower. You need to go back, not just to the beginning of the year, but to the very beginning. Jesus was with you there and I would suggest that you begin by meditating with Jesus on how God sees you and what God is calling you to be. Do not let the fear of what other people might think get in the way. Do not waste your energy trying to conform yourself to what other people think you should be, but be transformed into that vision that God has for you. That is how true change, the change that you may crave, will come into your life.