



Pastor Gwen's Message
A Clean Slate
Sunday January 3, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. **AMEN**

Today is the 2nd Sunday of Christmas, but it is also our first service in the new calendar year of 2021. I would guess that many of us have longed for this day, to start a new year that hopefully will be less stressful, less scary and lots safer. It just has to be a better year than 2020. Between the pandemic that encompassed most last year, and the political and racial climate in the US, I think many of us have looked forward to 2021 expecting a new lighter side of life or a sense of “normal” to return.

This made me start to think about new beginnings. Although there is something bittersweet about endings, I think that beginnings are exciting.

And that reminds me that the Brewers pitchers and catchers report in less than 45 days, with 87 days until opening day. I can't wait for my team to get started this year. Anticipation is such a wonderful thing. I am anxious for Major league baseball to start but have to admit that last year I was quite unhappy at many of the endings of those Brewer games.

I also like the endings of a good movie. I like the smell of a meal ready to eat. But, I do love a new calendar that is a blank slate to write on. The year holds so much possibility when looking forward. Maybe that is because I can start new and forget all the messes, I made in 2020 or forget the horrible year it was for so many people around the world. And of course, you all know that I love to plan. Planning and trying to organize my time is a specialty of this pastor.

Mark Donner still cannot believe that I have hymns picked and order of worship planned months in advance since he has been so accustomed to getting what is happening on a Sunday only a few days in advance.

How about you? Did 2020 end with a huff for you trying to look forward to a better year in 2021? How many of you have your Christmas trees down and decorations put away already. Are you still singing Christmas carols since we are still in the 12 days of Christmas. Well, that is all OK. We are still in the Christmas season and that is why you are still looking at our beautiful Christmas tree. The church season of Epiphany does not begin until Wednesday. And today we still are reflecting on what it means that Jesus came into our lives on that Holy night so long ago.

Luke tells the story of that first Christmas as he provides us with all the details that are so near and dear to our hearts. Virgin Mary giving birth in a stable, shepherds coming to see her baby and then the wise men come following a star. This is a story we never get tired of hearing. But today's gospel reading is from the prolong to the book of St John. It is a very different approach to Christmas, quite unlike the synoptic Gospels.

John begins his Gospel with three important words, "In the beginning". For this gospel writer, Jesus does not start with his birth at Christmas. Jesus has always been. This means that Jesus was present in the beginning, before anything else existed.

When we study the birth narrative in Sunday school, I always make a point to tell the kids that we are not waiting for Jesus to be born as we go through Advent, but rather we are preparing to celebrate the birth of baby Jesus. After all he was born some 2000 years ago. But from John's perspective, Jesus was around long before He came to earth as a baby in the manger.

John tells us that Jesus was God. He was in the beginning, before anything existed. This is sometimes a hard concept to wrap our heads around. Jesus was in heaven, with the Father and the Holy Spirit when they together formed or created all that is. And yes, John agrees that Jesus came down and became a human, yet He was still God. Boy if that isn't another hard concept for our

human brains to wrap around. Jesus, that baby born of a virgin is truly human and truly God at the same time.

John said, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us." Jesus walked among the people. He experienced hunger, thirst and exhaustion. He was God yet He still allowed himself to be subjected to insult, torment and rejection. For some 33 years Jesus walked the face of the earth and most people he encountered never came to realize that He was God. How can that be? Well Jesus was human.

I will never forget the day I was in an elevator in downtown Milwaukee and Mohammed Ali got on the elevator. I had a feeling he was someone important because his two bodyguards, asked us to step back to allow him to enter the elevator. I had the feeling he was someone important but had no idea who he was. I was just 14 or 15 on my way to play in a quartet at a fashion show. What did I know about boxing. When we got off the elevator, I asked my girlfriend's mom who had arranged our playing at the show, who that was and even after she told me, I still had no idea why I should be impressed even if Ali was one of the most renowned boxers in the world.

That is kind of like Jesus walking around in the Middle East first century. God was in the world, yet the world did not know him. John goes on to tell us that even his own people did not know him. In fact, most people did not have a clue. Yes, he might have been wiser than most and certainly he was a good teacher. People were even astonished by his miracles, but they did not know who he was.

Some folks, like the Pharisees thought he was just a troublemaker. They were threatened by his ability to gather large crowds to teach. All the while on earth Jesus was here to love the people he encountered into the family of God. To those who followed him, they became the children of God. They knew in person, human person, God's grace.

Well, in a new year it is time for new beginnings. Some of us will try to start new diets, tomorrow. And as Rodney always says, tomorrow is tomorrow and never will be today. Maybe you have plans to start cleaning out the basement or doing more exercise to get healthier. Maybe it is that you are starting the New Year unemployed or newly retired or as a single person who just lost a lifelong spouse. Whatever the case may be the New Year is upon us and we have the opportunity to start over. Sometimes on a positive note and sometimes not. But one thing we do know is that if we believe in Jesus Christ,

he will be with us each and every day. It does not matter what is coming up for us in the New Year, Jesus will be with us. Even in a dark world, when our hope is not enough, it is Jesus who brings us light to see abundant life anew.

Jesus has taken our sins upon himself on the cross and destroyed death. He forgives our past and promises us a new life filled with His blessings and grace. So yes, folks new beginning are ours not just at the beginning of a new year, but each and every day. God erases our past and gives us promise of a new and exciting future. A future where a clean slate lies before us. All sin and failure is behind you, erased are your broken promises and shattered dreams.

Life ahead is a second chance, a blank canvas, a new beginning for each one of us. As John tells us, all we have to do is receive it as a gift and it is ours. A new beginning from a loving God. We all have the opportunity to be the children of God as we accept Jesus as the Word made flesh, sent from the Father, who with the Spirit is to be worshipped and glorified.

So Happy New Year everyone. Happy New You. Look forward to every day by the grace of God! Thanks be to God. **AMEN.**