



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to everyone

13025 Bell Air Drive, Auburn, CA 95603 (530) 823-3916 apc@auburnpresbyterian.org

“Cleaning Up for a New Start” First Sunday in Lent Genesis 9:8-17; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

During Lent, I end up writing and delivering more Bible messages than usual. I have even filled in for one of my colleagues. But different churches have different customs when it comes to the sermon. In another town, a visiting preacher greeted people after the opening service of a revival series. The people seemed very gracious and appreciative of the sermon they had just heard. But then, one lady abruptly stated, "Too long!" as she filed past the minister. She then cycled back through the line and shouted, "Too loud!" The two negative comments unnerved him a bit but he tried to maintain his composure. When she came through a third time her comments were no more flattering. She declared, "And it was also boring!" At this point the chairman of the deacons intervened and assured the evangelist that this woman's remarks should not be taken seriously. He whispered, "Don't pay any attention to her. She's a little senile and doesn't know what she's saying. She just repeats what other people say."

Sometimes, you just wish you could have a do-over—you know? We give children do-overs, don't we, as they are learning some new skill. A young girl kicks a soccer ball in a practice, and it sails 'way over the goal net. Quickly, she runs and gets the ball, re-sets it, and yells, "Do-over!" and kicks the ball into the net. Or a boy is learning woodworking, and he has a shop project that has to meet certain standards. But his first attempt is a mess—nothing is square or plumb. He feels like a failure. But his shop teacher comes alongside him, gives him a couple of new boards and says, "Don't worry. Just do it over."

Do we give adults do-overs? In golf, if you hit a terrible shot (something I know a lot about), if you're among friends, they'll give you a "mulligan"—which is just a folksy name for a do-over. You drop another ball and give it a whack because you've learned something after the first bad result.

Of course, golf is one thing. It's just a game--at which Tiger Woods can make millions of dollars. Someone said that "Golf is a good walk, spoiled." But many activities of our lives are not games at all.

Sometimes people wake up one day and realize they have spent 40 years for what seems like nothing. Many of us have made a particular mistake for which we've had to pay and pay. I know a fellow who patented an invention—he had a really good idea, I thought—but he grossly underestimated how difficult it would be to wedge his way into the medical marketplace. Undercapitalized, he nearly lost his house in his effort, and he definitely insured he would be working for a long time to make up the deficit. Another man I know got into a habit of drinking alcohol, and especially when hard times came, or he had stress over a relationship in his life, the habit became self-medication. He lost his wife, his kids, and his career, and one night I had to help him carry out his decision to turn himself into the police at the jail because he'd committed

a crime. I know a young woman who was lonely and gave herself sexually to a man she loved. Unfortunately, the man lied about his own faithfulness. She contracted Clymidia, and lost her ability to have children—a huge loss for her.

Each of these people would love to have a “do-over”.

This morning, I want to listen to God with you for what God says about do-overs. We’ll start in Genesis, chapter 9, verses 8-17. Please open your Bibles to Genesis 9. This section contains some proclamations from God at the end of the flood he has sent to scrub the earth clean of sinful humanity. Only Noah and his family were preserved. Listen with me for God’s Voice, as I read these words aloud. *[text]*

The boat and its inhabitants were a giant “do-over”. God had become so disgusted at how his people were constantly ignoring Him, and causing all kinds of evil. So he sorted through them, found Noah—a man who would respond to him—and gave him the opportunity to save himself, his family, and all creation. Noah built the ark—the boat—just as God directed him. Since the weather was just fine, other people were very curious, I’m sure, about this big boat taking shape near Noah’s home. God had warned all of humankind, but no one listened except Noah. So God got out a BIG eraser, and wiped the earth clean. He cleansed the earth, so he could start again—this time with Noah, who had witnessed how important it was to stay connected with God.

Shift now to Mark’s gospel, chapter 1. Get to verse 9, and keep your Bible open so you can see the context. Turn up your attention; God may speak to you in these words. *[text: Mark 1:9-15]*

Jesus is launched into ministry. He has been preparing for this his whole life. And yet, he continues to grow. He is baptized—the mark of “starting over”. He is tested by The Accuser, and passes with flying colors.

[Matthew and Luke give more detailed accounts. If you read their versions, and then the rest of their gospels, you’ll see that the challenges the devil throws at Jesus are precisely the kind of thing he is going to face once he gets “in the field”. Having faced down these desirable-but-not-good offers the tempter makes, Jesus will recognize those or similar land mines when they appear, and respond rightly when it really counts.]

You’ll notice these events that Mark records so sparsely all occur in chapter one, which goes on to record the call of his first disciples, casting out demons, healings of various kinds, and an important choice—almost as if what he learned from the final exam Satan gave him was being put into practice—all this in chapter ONE! This is just the start of his ministry!

In Mark’s account, the message of John the Baptist announces the coming of an important God-appointed person. The other gospels—Matthew, Luke, and John—make the baptism of Jesus a major sign of God making a new start. John’s gospel begins, “In the beginning . . .”, and that’s a deliberate echo of the first words of Genesis in the story of creation: “In the beginning. . .” John is saying, “In Jesus, God is starting over. God is making a new creation.” Matthew and Luke start with genealogies—linking Jesus to the start of creation or the

start of history of God's people, the Israelites. They are likewise saying, "God is starting in Jesus with something that will bring His purposes to fulfillment, clearly." Jesus is another do-over for humanity.

The Apostle Peter comments on this—naming both these earlier incidents, when he writes in First Letter,

Christ suffered for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners to bring you safely home to God. He suffered physical death, but he was raised to life in the Spirit.

So he went and preached to the spirits in prison-- those who disobeyed God long ago when God waited patiently while Noah was building his boat. Only eight people were saved from drowning in that terrible flood. And that water is a picture of baptism, which now saves you, not by removing dirt from your body, but as a response to God from a clean conscience. It is effective because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Now Christ has gone to heaven. He is seated in the place of honor next to God, and all the angels and authorities and powers accept his authority.

(1 Peter 3:18-22, NIV)

What are you hearing from God today? One thing most all of us must get from this: this God is heavy into do-overs. Creation was the "do", the Flood was a do-over. God started yet again with Abraham, this time working with a sub-set of humanity—I call it a "pilot plant"—to create a demonstration group that would show the kind of living God wants. That history did not work out so well, either (which shows, human choices are real, with real consequences). So God spelled out his specifications for living in relationship with Him—He gave His Law to Moses and the Hebrew people, so that they could have notes, something solid to refer to. And that was not a huge improvement, either. By the time of Jeremiah, God was pleading with His people. Since the Law was not sufficient to get their love, God promised he would write his covenant upon the hearts of his people, and that they would KNOW Him, not just hear His rules.

"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the Lord.

"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God, and they will be my people.

No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord.

"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." (Jeremiah 31:33-34, NIV)

And in Jesus, God went still further. It was not laws, not promises, but a person God provided us—as if God was "drawing a picture" for His dull and self-centered people.

Absolutely—this is “the God of Do-Overs”. The God of the Universe is into do-overs—even making whole new creations to restore us to relationship with Him for the continuing adventure of salvation (“**Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.**” --Philippians 2:12-13, RSV)

These difficult economic times have had a silver lining for a number of people. Faced with layoffs and maybe even losing a house, some people have decided to take this as an opportunity to re-set their lives. It’s time to do what they love, they reason. There will never be a better time than now. They are truly “starting over”, getting a whole new start.

Kimberly Seals-Allers is a writer whose newest book is called, *The Mocha Manual for Turning Your Passion into Profit*. In her book she tells the story of several people who made huge shifts in their lives so they could do what they loved.

Seals-Allers herself was a legal analyst for a big insurance company, as I recall. But she had always wanted to be a writer, and this calling just would not let her go. But to give up her current six-figure job? She had many reasons to be scared of such a big change. She really liked the security of that employment; she said in an interview, “I think the two most beautiful words in the English language are ‘direct deposit.’” She had two children. Her marriage was crumbling. But after thinking about it, she realized NOT doing what she loved would cost her more than staying with that job. And in this economy, she points out, there are a number of people out of work who would be excited to join in a start-up operation. It takes persistence, for sure, to make such a big change, but losing a job can be just the push people need to get on with their lives in a new way.

God is into Do-Overs. Do you want a do-over? Ask. Seek. Knock, Jesus said. Get ready. Clean up for a new start. In a moment, I’ll offer you the chance to make a new start in your life.

But this time, take Jesus along with you. Listen to Him, who lived our life so we could live life with God. Get to know this One who is giving you a new lease on life, so you can follow Him into the kind of life you’ve always wanted.

If you want a new start for a life with God, I invite you to talk with God, along with me. I’ll say a phrase, and you can inwardly say those words to God. This is how you ask, seek, and knock. Then we will celebrate the Lord’s Supper, the meal Jesus himself gave us to join ourselves to him. This meal will mean a lot more to you today. And after worship, please stay in place for a brief official meeting to elect a Elder. Then, a few of our Prayer Ministry Team will move to the front to help you continue in these first steps of your new walk with God, or get prayer support for a particular need you are carrying today.

Now, I’d like everyone to bow our heads and close our eyes, for this is our time to talk with God. ***O God, I want Your new life. I want a new start. I am sorry for living my life without letting You lead. Please give me a new heart for this new start. Help me make holy***

*habits of listening to You first. Please live in me, as Jesus said. I pray all this in Jesus' Name.
[And God's people said. . . . Amen.]*

INTRO TO COMMUNION

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California
on March 1, 2009, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]