

“Dead Hearts and New Beginnings”
John 3:1-17

The first heart transplant was performed in 1967 in Cape Town, South Africa by Dr. Christiaan Barnard. The recipient was Louis Washkansky, a 54 year old grocer with a debilitating heart condition. Mr. Washkansky survived only 18 days after the operation, never having left the hospital.

Barnard's second heart transplant patient was Philip Blaiberg. He survived for 19 months and was able to leave the hospital. After his surgery, Dr. Barnard carried Blaiberg's old heart in a plastic box and showed it to him. The two men sat on the hospital bed examining the scars and thickening of the dead useless heart. Dr. Barnard said, "Do you realize you're the first man in history to sit and look at his own dead heart?"

This morning my sermon title is "Dead Hearts and New Beginnings." We're thankful for physicians like Dr. Barnard, but we're even more thankful that our God can put an entirely new heart in place of our old, scarred heart. That's the only heart transplant that really matters. When God replaces a heart filled with malice, anger, hatred, envy, guilt and a host of other negative, destructive emotions with a heart filled with love, joy, peace and wholeness.

Do you know anyone who needs that kind of heart transplant? Do you?

Here's the good news for this Second Sunday in Lent. **The Christian faith, at its very heart, is about new beginnings.** You'll remember in Genesis that God tells Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation . . ." At the time Abram was an old man without children. And here God is telling him to leave the only homeland he's knows so that God could fulfill a promise to be the father of a great nation.

Paul tells us in Romans 4 that Abram "hoped against hope" that the promises of God were true. And they were. Because God is the God of new beginnings. The very word "faith" carries the connotation of hoping against hope, of believing and daring, of never giving up or caving in.

David A. Redding tells in one of his books about Orville Kelly--a man who was informed years ago that he was suffering from terminal cancer. He and his wife went home to cry and to die. Should they keep it a secret? They wondered and they prayed. The answer, they decided, was that they should not only pray but also play. They decided to put on a big party.

They invited all their friends. During the festivities, Orville held up his hand to make an announcement: "You may have wondered why I called you all together," he said. "This is a cancer party. I have been told that I have terminal cancer. Then my wife and I realized we are all terminal.

We decided to start a new organization. It is called M. T. C.--'Make Today Count.' You are all charter members." Since that time that organization has spread across the country. Orville's recognition of his mortality was a new beginning.

Such an attitude is not as rare as you might think. A Harvard sociologist noted years ago that some people meet tragedy and fall apart at the seams. Others meet the same tragedy and see their troubles as a challenge to their faith and courage. They make their troubles work for them, and the harder they fall, the higher they bounce.

The test of faith is not how people act, but how they react. Life is not easy. We constantly need to make new beginnings. Fortunately, God is the God of new beginnings--for marriages, for relationships, for failed lives, for hurting hearts.

Here's a second thing that needs to be said: **Christian faith not only makes new beginnings possible, it makes new beginnings necessary.** In our lesson from this morning Jesus encounters Nicodemus--a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews. He's no bum off the streets. Not only is Nicodemus a good man and a powerful man, but he's also a man open to the teachings of Jesus. "Rabbi," says Nicodemus, "we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

That's high flattery from a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews. And yet it doesn't impress Jesus at all. Jesus says to Nicodemus, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

The imagery is puzzling to Nicodemus. How can an old man reenter his mother's womb and be born again. He's puzzled, but he's also a bit angry. After all, he's a man of nobility. What kind of new beginning could he possibly need to make?

You've known people like that, haven't you? They are the center of their own universe. Big fish in little ponds. How dare anyone suggest they need to change.

Several hundred years ago, before Copernicus, most people believed that the sun and the stars revolved around the earth. When Copernicus issued his revolutionary teachings that the earth was not the center of the universe, he was greeted with a great outcry. It was many years before his teachings were accepted.

It is easy to see why persons might believe that the earth is the center of the universe. After all, it is our home. The truth of the matter is that for most persons, they themselves are the center of their universe. We come into the world kicking and screaming and insisting that the world meet our needs.

What Nicodemus needed, and what every person in this world needs at some time in life is a radical reorientation where we acknowledge that we're not the center of the universe. And it's not some particular sin here or there that's the problem. It's our entire frame of reference. Are we centered on ourselves, or are we centered on God and His will for our lives?

C.S. Lewis addresses this same issue in a memorable way in one of his science fiction books, *Out of the Silent Planet*. In this space fantasy Ransom, a scientist from earth, lands on another planet and makes friends with the inhabitants. Ransom decides to tell them the history of planet earth. As he does, he notes with some embarrassment that he is recounting the story of war after war.

One of the creatures to whom he is telling this story concludes that their constant fighting must mean that on earth there is no "Oyarsa." ("Oyarsa" is their name for God.) Another of the creatures offers another explanation. Earthlings behave like that, he concludes, not because there is no Oyarsa, but because each of them wants to be a little Oyarsa, himself or herself.

Lewis as usual hit the nail right on the head. When we are not centered on God, we will be centered on ourselves--our passions, our desires, our idols. The Christian faith is about new beginnings. New beginnings are possible. Even more important, new beginnings are necessary.

This brings me to one final thought. **When we meet Christ, new beginnings are inevitable.** If we truly meet Jesus, we are going to be a new creature.

That's what worship is all about. We come to hear the Word read and preached, to sing the great hymns of faith, to confess our sins, to make our petitions and to offer our praise. And in the process, we can be transformed from who we were to who we can become in Christ.

That's not true of all of us, of course. Some of us simply "come to church." It's a habit, a tradition, something good for the children. Many of us come without the least inclination that we might have an encounter with the living God in worship. I've heard it said that today's generation of adults worship at their play and play at their worship. That may be far more true than we'd like it to be.

Jacob encountered God at Bethel and cried out, "Surely the Lord is in this place and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is the house of God and this is the gate of heaven" (Genesis 28:17).

Perhaps this morning's service is your Bethel. Every time we come into this place we ought to be prepared to encounter God. If we are so prepared, a new beginning is inevitable. Every Lord's Day, every time we open the Word, every time we kneel in prayer is a time of new beginning. It is not only possible. It is not only necessary. It is inevitable.

John Ortberg in his book *Faith and Doubt* tells about Bill Moore who discovered what a new beginning is all about. Bill grew up in poverty. One night he got drunk and shot a man for five thousand dollars. He ended up on death row.

Two men visited the prison where Bill Moore was incarcerated and told him about Jesus and his love--a love that sent Jesus to death row for people just like Bill.

Nobody had ever told Bill about Jesus before. "He'd been sitting on death row for years. He turned his life over to Jesus, and it changed him so much--changed the darkness and bitterness

and hatred inside him so much that other people began to be drawn to him. People started meeting Jesus through this guy on death row. He became known as 'The Peacemaker.' His cell block was the safest place in the penitentiary because so many people were coming to Christ through Bill Moore.

"Churches found out about this, and when people needed counseling, no kidding, churches started sending people to the penitentiary to get counseling from Bill Moore. Can you imagine calling a church to ask for a referral and hearing, 'I want you to go over to death row. There's an inmate there...' Who does that? Jesus does that.

"Bill Moore was changed so much that he won the love of the family of the man he killed. Eventually, the authorities not only canceled his death sentence; they not only commuted his sentence, which was unprecedented; but they paroled him. Bill Moore now serves as head of congregation in a couple of housing projects in a desperately poor area."¹ That's the life-changing power of Jesus Christ in one person's life.

Now I know that you're not on death row, although some think coming to church is a death sentence. I get that you're a pretty good person. I mean, you're even in church this morning on daylight savings time.

But, could it be that deep in your heart there's a hunger for something more to life? Is it time for you to make a new beginning? It is possible for that to happen, thanks to the love which Christ poured out on the cross of Calvary. And some kind of new beginning is even necessary if you're going to become the person God created you to be. And if you have truly come to worship the living God this day, a new beginning is inevitable... If you are truly seeking.

Dr. Christiaan Barnard transplanted hearts and gave people a new shot at life. God can do much more than that. God can give you an entirely new heart that is guaranteed for a better life in this world and eternal life in the world to come. Will you accept that new heart today?

¹ John Ortberg attributes this story to Lee Strobel's book, *The Case for Faith*.