***A NEW BEGINNING***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

January 3, 2016

Texts: Genesis 1:1-5 and John 1:1-14

Have you made your New Year’s resolutions yet? It is after all the 3rd day of the new year. Are your resolutions off to a good start or already broken or still pending? Are you still trying to decide whether to make your New Year’s resolution, “stop procrastinating”, or have you resolved not to make any more resolutions? In an article in *The Washington Post* on New Year’s Day, Petula Dvorak offers her suggestions for resolutions for 2016. “Here we are,” she writes, “another turn of the calendar, another chance at those resolutions.” A new year provides a fresh opportunity to reboot and begin anew. For some of us that means a resolution to lose some things – a few pounds or some clutter around the house or some bad habits that keep us from being the people we want to be; for others it means adding some things – new disciplines or new exercise routines or new commitments to be better persons. In her article, Dvorak suggests we consider unplugging from the television that consumes 35 hours a week for the average American and plug into the world by voting and trying to fix some of the problems that plague us as a nation. As she notes,

*[A]bout 30 million more people watched the Super Bowl last year than voted for our country’s leadership. More people have bought the ‘Twilight’ series books, Bon Jovi albums and Wii game boxes than voted in the last presidential election*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Perhaps her suggestion for greater civic involvement resonates with your own New Year’s resolutions or perhaps you have some other noble aspirations for 2016. But whatever resolutions you have penned or have pending, the new year offers an opportunity to begin anew to be a new and better you. Where then do you begin with this year’s new beginning?

The writer in Genesis opens the story of God’s relationship with all creation with these words: “In the beginning when God created…” The writer in Genesis begins in the beginning with God. “Dear God,” writes little Dennis, “my Grandpa says you were around when he was a little boy. Just how far back do you go?” How far back does God go? All the way to the beginning, says the writer in Genesis. In the beginning –

before Grandpa or any other Grandpas sat a grandchild on a knee,

before animals roamed the earth looking for a mate,

before poison ivy or any other plant set anyone to itching,

before mountains had thrust their jagged peaks to the sky,

before there was sky, or sun, or stars twinkling in the night,

before night first fell or day first dawned,

before anything and before nothing, there was God.

While the cosmos-to-be is aswim in watery dark chaos, God is present – there in the darkness, there amid the chaos, there in the beginning, the *ruach* of God – the breath or wind of God – blowing over the waters. Into that chaotic beginning God brings order. Into the darkness God brings light.

Current astronomers and physicists place that beginning for our universe at about 13 billion years, give or take a billion. They project some sort of a Big Bang that set in motion a chain of events over time that brought us here to this place on this day. The writer of Genesis knows nothing about that Big Bang, nothing about black holes or evolution or earth’s revolutions around the sun or the God particle. The writer is not a scientist, but a theologian. “The sciences have shown us how to understand creation as nature,” writes Jurgen Moltmann. “Now theology must show how nature is to be understood as God’s creation.”[[2]](#endnote-2) It is that purpose which is revealed in these verses in Genesis. The writer tells us not about the science of creation, but about the Creator: in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth; God created all that is, was, and will be!

The beginning point for our understanding of God is as creator of all things. Before we know of the God who redeems creation, before we know about the God who hears our prayers, meets our daily needs, and guides our steps, before we know of the God who saves us from our sins, we know about the God who created heaven and earth in the beginning. The Hebrew word for create is *bara*. It is a word unique to God. Humans *build*. They *make*, *construct*, *invent*, *compose*, *shape*, *conceive* or *engineer*, but God alone *bara*s. It is divine activity that brings into being a universe, a world, a people – it is divine activity that creates existence out of nothingness. Yet, as Old Testament scholar Bill Brown notes:

*There is…in Scripture no Grand Unified Theory of creation (or, better, no Grand Unified Theology). Instead there are diverse traditions reflecting differing theological perspectives.[[3]](#endnote-3)*

Brown identifies at least seven different traditions and perspectives on creation in Scripture. While they differ on the details and purposes for creation, they hold in common God’s presence there in the beginning as the sole creator.

Science is striving to explain how this miracle of God took place. With probes into deep space and into the fabric of genomes, and with attempts with the Large Hadron Collider at CERN to see the elusive Higgs boson – the God Particle that is supposed to be essential to the fabric of the universe – science seeks to explain what happened, to work its way back to the beginning. It seeks not to find God, but to describe God’s handiwork. In the words of one writer:

*Whatever or whomever we place our faith in, should be big enough that new understandings inspire greater awe and wonder even as we understand them better. Neither science nor God is great because they remain mysterious, but because they remain endlessly engaging and inspiring.[[4]](#endnote-4)*

As Christians we need not be threatened by scientific study and discoveries, for our faith is not based on the mystery of God, but in the real presence of God in our midst as our Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer. Most of science traces God’s fingerprints without ever seeing the divine hand. It is interested in the *how* of creation, not necessarily the *who*. For those interested in the *who* of creation, God is readily apparent. “Any one thing in creation is sufficient to demonstrate a Providence to a humble and grateful mind,”[[5]](#endnote-5) wrote a first century writer. Fifteen hundred years later, John Calvin said it a little more poetically:

*Let us not be ashamed to take pious delight in the works of God open and manifest in this most beautiful theater. For…although it is not the chief evidence for faith, yet it is the first evidence in the order of nature, to be mindful that wherever we cast our eyes, all things they meet are works of God...*[[6]](#endnote-6)

Years ago there was talk of God the Cosmic Watchmaker who created the universe, wound it up, then stood back and watched it run. Such a God is always distant, always removed from the work of creation. That is not the God of Genesis, nor the God who comes to us in the Word made flesh, nor the God who continues to sweep across our faces day to day. Our God is One who is in the midst of creation as it takes place, a God who is intimately involved with all that God has created, a God who forms our inward parts and knits us together in our mothers’ wombs, according to the psalmist. As Jurgen Moltmann notes:

*In the gift and through the powers of the Holy Spirit a new divine presence is experienced in creation. God the Creator takes up his dwelling in his creation and makes it his home.[[7]](#endnote-7)*

That same God comes home to us in Jesus Christ, the Word (the *Logos*) made flesh. It is that *Logos* who John describes as being in the beginning with God and being God, the One without whom not anything that was made was made. What came into being through him was life. Out of the formless, lifeless void the *Logos* brought life! Out of the dark depths the *Logos* brought light. Out of nothing God brought something. If God could do such a thing, could create order out of chaos, could spark life out of a void, could stir creation into being, then perhaps God can create or spark or stir something in you in 2016?

This new year offers a new beginning. Make your new beginning – like that of the writers in Scripture – begin with God. Before you make your resolutions about you, consider making a resolution about God. Perhaps it is a resolution to love as God calls you to love, or to live as God calls you to live, or to forgive as God calls you to forgive. Perhaps it is a resolution to blow the dust off your Bible and actually read what God has to say in those pages. Perhaps it is a resolution to pray each day rather than just on Sundays or in the midst of desperate times. Perhaps it is a resolution to read a book that engages your faith rather than just your fantasy. Perhaps it is a resolution to serve God by finding a new opportunity to serve your neighbor. Perhaps it is a resolution to meet God anew in this new year. But whatever it is, begin with God who is with you – in 2016 and beyond.

You are now three days into this new year and three days into your new resolutions. There is still time to make one more resolution about you and God. Make that your first resolution even if it is your last resolution. Begin with God who is there in all our beginnings, including this one! Amen

1. “In 2016, we could unplug, vote, be less selfish”, Petula Dvorak, *The Washington* Post, January 1, 2016, pp.B-1,3 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p.38 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation*, Oxford University Press: New York, 2010, p.14 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Brian Vastag & Joe Achenbach, “’God Particle’, Higg’s boson search area narrowing, CERN sceintists say”, *The* *Washington Post*, Decmeber 14, 2011 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Epictetus (A.D. c. 55-135), *Discourses*, Bk.1, ch.16 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk.1, Ch. XIV.20 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Moltmann at p.96 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)