

Renewals

Acts 10:34-43

January 8, 2023

First Presbyterian, Luling

I think it was last week in the pre-worship visiting time that we were talking about renewals of magazines and newspapers and satellite TV and internet service and all kinds of things. We were collectively grumpy about the whole idea of renewal of those things. That got me to thinking about what other things we renew. There's renewal of driver's licenses, car registrations, prescriptions, apartment leases: also not enjoyable. Renewal of car insurance, house insurance, medical insurance. Yuck, yuck, and yuck. Renewal is such a nice word—making something new again—but our experience in our market-driven culture has left us with a yuck feeling about renewals. It's a task we have to do. It's going to cost us more money than it did last year, more than likely. There's nothing refreshing or new about renewal. The only thing I can think of that I enjoy renewing is my library book.

Every once in a while, though, WE need to be renewed, WE need to find renewal. I think we often think about renewing commitments or promises to ourselves at New Year's and call them resolutions. But I've never found that sort of artificial—or outwardly imposed—schedule is all that effective in my efforts at renewal. But sometimes I am able to renew a good habit. Maybe “refresh” is also a word for what I'm trying to grasp at here.

Me being the agent of renewal, us being the agents of our own renewal, human effort at self-renewal is not exactly what I want to talk about today, though, after looking at this Scripture. I want to talk about us being renewed. We are the objects of renewal, and God is the one doing the renewal.

In the case of the reading from Acts today, God is renewing Peter. In the case of the Matthew reading that Beth read, God is renewing Jesus in baptism, through the Holy Spirit. But let's stick with Peter for the moment.

Peter has just had the foundations of his faith shaken underneath him. He has received a vision that let him know that the Jewish kosher laws didn't have to apply to everyone who wanted to be a Christian. And he has had an encounter with a Roman centurion named Cornelius that has left him with an expanded understanding of who Jesus is for. The Pentecost experience had assured him that all Jewish people were included in the new covenant—all of them from all over, speaking and hearing in their own languages, all received the Holy Spirit. But

Peter had not really understood or had room in his faith to understand that God's grace in Jesus Christ went way way way beyond all Jewish people wherever they were. This vision and experience with Cornelius lead him to the opening sentence of his sermon: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." This is God working renewal in Peter. God's grace in Jesus Christ was for all people, all of them, even those he had thought impossible. God's renewal work in Peter results in a new and expanded understanding of his faith.

Peter testifies to that new and expanded understanding, to that renewal, with that first sentence. But then he turns to what scholars think is probably a developing Christian creed; that is, these words were already in circulation as a statement of belief among the early church.¹ It's a recitation, a concise summary, of who Jesus was and what his ministry was about. Listen to it again with that framework. "You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

It starts to sound a little like we do, reciting the Apostles' Creed each week. It's not as systematic, but it clearly tells who Jesus was, how he was anointed by the Spirit to do good and heal. He died and was raised on the third day and appeared to witnesses. All who believe receive forgiveness. And we, in turn, are commanded to be witnesses to all this.

God has worked a renewal of Peter's faith, not long after another renewal at Pentecost. Peter's faith has expanded to be more inclusive. And he marks that renewal by using words he already knew, with a new and expanded understanding now of what those words mean. A renewal, then, really is a refreshing, an updating, a reworking. It's not tossing out everything and starting over, no throwing out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. It's understanding

¹ Mark Tranvik, workingpreacher.org commentary, January 9, 2011

old beliefs in new ways. In renewed ways.

We have that same opportunity. We recite old words each week, ancient words, words that have provided meaning and comfort to our ancestors in the faith. Yet we surely understand them in new and renewed ways. We ourselves have grown and changed and been renewed in the ways we understand our faith. God has given us renewals, and God isn't finished doing that.

What happens after Peter's sermon and creed recitation is that the whole crowd of Gentiles receives the gift of the Holy Spirit, just as the crowd of Jews had received the Spirit at Pentecost. And Peter orders that they all be baptized in the name of Jesus.

Baptism is a sign of renewal, but renewal of our faith does not end with our baptisms, not hardly. God renews our faith, renews refreshes reworks rewords restores rebuilds renews. Let us respond to that renewal with gratitude and witness.