

A Brand-New Purpose *John 21:1-19*

INTRODUCTION

Last summer during my sabbatical Karen and I took a cruise up the Rhine River. That was something we wanted to do back in 2020 as a way of celebrating our 40th wedding anniversary. But COVID came along, and the 2020 cruise was canceled. So last year we cruised to celebrate our 44th anniversary instead.

There are many highlights on a trip like that, of course, but one of the ones I enjoyed the most was at our very first stop in Basel, Switzerland. There in the center of town our tour guide led us to the famous Tinguely Fountain.

On this site where this fountain now operated there once stood a grand old European theater, but unfortunately in the early 1970s it caught fire and was severely damaged. Much to the dismay of the local citizens, the city leaders – in the name of progress, of course – decided to tear the grand old theater down and replace it with a new modern one.

- One of the dissenters of this decision was a kinetic sculptor named Jean Tinguely. He and a financial backer bought much of the old iron works that were a part of the old theater, and also the actual site where the old theater sat.
- There they created this unique work of kinetic art. Art in motion.
- The sculptures in this fountain are meant to look like dancers in a theater show.
- Here's the fascinating part: Each sculpture in this fountain is created completely out of repurposed scrap iron – iron taken from the original theater.

What was once destined for the scrap heap is now repurposed into something brand-new.

We are in the liturgical season of Easter – the period time when we celebrate and commemorate the days Jesus spent on earth between His resurrection on Easter Sunday and His ascension. We will celebrate Ascension Sunday on June 1. This season – essentially this month of May – is a time when we talk about all things becoming new.

- A time when old things destined for the scrap heap are redeemed and repurposed for something new and beautiful, for something brand-new.

The prophet Isaiah foretold of this moment when he wrote:

Be alert, be present. I'm about to do something brand-new. It's bursting out!
Don't you see it? (Isaiah 43:19, The Message)

The Apostle Paul may have been talking about his own life when he wrote:

What we see is that anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life emerges! (2 Chronicles 5:17, The Message)

Old things become new.



That truth is beautifully illustrated in the lives of two men in today's Scripture readings.

FIRST we meet a man named Saul. A Jew. In fact, he was the perfect Jew.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. (Philippians 3:4b-6)

Born the right family. Educated by the right people. Passionate about his Jewish faith. So passionate was he that he chased down Christians all over the region just so he could torture them and imprison them for being followers of Jesus. What a perfect Jew he was!

In a couple of chapters, we will come to know this man Saul by his Roman name Paul – the same man who wrote these words offered to you earlier:

What we see is that anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life emerges! (2 Chronicles 5:17, The Message)

As we saw in today's first reading (Acts 9), in Saul God took a man headed in a completely wrong direction, and gave him a brand new purpose:

This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings ... (Acts 9:15)

God moved him from being Saul the persecutor to Paul the proclaimer. Like the iron in that old European theater, Saul was reshaped into something brand-new.

AND THEN IN THE GOSPEL LESSON we heard about Peter, the boisterous disciple who denied even knowing Jesus three times... despite boasting that he would never do anything like that.

Peter replied, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will." "Truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." (Matthew 26:33-34)

And yet he did. Standing in the courtyard while Jesus was on trial, Peter denied. Not once. Not twice. But three times. In Luke's version of this story, he describes how Jesus and Peter made eye contact right after that third denial.

Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!" Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him ... (Luke 22:60-61)

That had to hurt! Clearly it did, because Luke adds:

Then Peter went outside and wept bitterly. (Luke 22:62)

Because of his denial, Peter was certain he was destined for the scrap heap of history. He had been part of the inner circle. It was he would first acknowledge that Jesus was Messiah. And yet he denied Jesus at the very time Jesus needed him the most.

- So certain was he that he was doomed to the scrap heap, he decided to return to his former occupation.

Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathaniel, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them..." (John 21:2-3)

But Jesus had other plans. Peter was not destined to be bulldozed over with the rest of the rubble. NO! Jesus took this broken disciple and gave him a brand-new purpose:

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. (John 21:17)

God reshaped him from being Peter the fisherman to Peter the sheep feeder. Like the iron in that old European theater, Peter became something brand-new.

Two nice stories. Two stories with happy endings. Don't you love happy endings?! But so what? What difference do these two stories make for you and me? Let me offer two INSIGHTS.

#1: NO MATTER WHAT SOMEONE HAS DONE, JESUS CHRIST OFFERS A BRAND NEW START

Recently when we were studying the story of Saul, one of the participants in our Bible study said:

I don't understand why God would forgive someone like Saul.

After all, Saul was one bad dude. Think of all the people whose lives he disrupted, the people he tortured, maybe even killed. And he was wrong. He was wrong about what he believed and wrong about the way he went about trying to preserve what he believed. Very passionate but very wrong.

Peter was wrong, too. No one questions that. But Saul was VERY WRONG. Surely it would be easier for Peter to be forgiven than for Saul. On the one hand you have "wrong." On the other hand you have "VERY WRONG."

Even Saul knew he was a bad sinner. He wrote as much. He called himself the worst ever.

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. (1 Timothy 1:12)

Yet God forgave him. Paul continued ...

But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. (1 Timothy 1:13)

In other words, if God could forgive me, He will surely forgive you. No matter what we have done, Jesus offers us a brand-new start.

- If the sinner scale is Peter on one end and Saul on the other, no matter where you fit yourself, the good news is the same: Jesus offers a brand-new start.

#2: THAT BRAND NEW START IS ONLY POSSIBLE BECAUSE OF JESUS CHRIST

Recently my doctor took a look at my blood sugar levels and said, "I've done all I am going to do. The rest is up to you."

- And he is right. My blood sugar is my problem, and I need to fix it.
- I'm the only one who can say "no" to chocolate chip cookies and Reese's cups.

Sometimes we approach our relationship with Christ. And that never works.

I am going to do better, we say.

- This time I will stick with my morning devotions.
- This time I will watch my mouth and say only helpful things.
- This time I will think only happy thoughts.

But it comes to our forgiveness, it is different. It is not about what we do or don't do. It is about what Jesus does in us and through us and for us.

Martin Luther struggled with that issue for a time. Listen to what he wrote in one of his sermons:

When we hear that we have been promised forgiveness of sins, we really cannot grasp that, and we take this position: I have committed this and that sin; to pay for them I will do thus and so, fast "x" number of days, say "x" number of prayers, fund "x" number of poorhouses, and pay for all my sins.

It's because human nature is proud and always wants to be in control, pulling its own water bucket from the well, wants to have the honor of laying the first stone, of being Number One. That's why this is a majestic message of divine wisdom:

We must believe that our righteousness, salvation, and comfort lie outside of ourselves, namely, that we are righteous before God, acceptable to him, holy and wise, even though there is nothing within us but sin, injustice, and stupidity. (Martin Luther, Sermon on [Matthew 18:23-35](#))

I can do something about my blood sugar levels, but I can do nothing about my sin levels. Only Jesus can fix that.

And on Easter, He did. And because of Easter, Jesus offers everyone who believes in Him a brand-new start.

APPLICATION

Be alert, be present. I'm about to do something brand-new. It's bursting out! Don't you see it? (Isaiah 43:19, The Message)

God wants to do something new, and He wants to do it in you.

- Whether you feel worthy or not
- Whether you feel your best days are behind you or ahead of you
- Even if you think you can do it all on your own

The promise of Easter is that God makes all things brand-new.

Amen.