“To Begin Again”
Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1:1-18

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From the Pulpit
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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, The Second Sunday after Christmas, January 4, 2015, dedicated to Tom Stewart who I count as friend and mentor, to Chris Farquhar and all the Deacons who serve so faithfully at First Church, to all our children being born in this New Year and for all of us seeking God’s transformational presence in our lives and always to the glory of God!

“To Begin Again”
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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

A few nights ago I awoke from a memorable, colorful, vivid dream. The dream came just an hour after midnight in the wee hours of the New Year. Perhaps you could help me understand this dream…

I dreamt that I saw 100 of our finest young men dressed in scarlet and gray travelling to play that “team
down south.” I followed them there. As I arrived with others who called themselves “The Buckeye Nation,” I found we were surrounded by a terrible sea of red – red everywhere – like a crimson tide.

In my dream, no one in the sea of red believed that my little team could beat the huge, beastly, bloody avengers bathed in crimson. But, I saw one of our young men, named Sir Cardale, lift an oblong ball as he fearlessly said for all to hear, “We have not come to be vanished on the field of battle. Your team may be a crimson tide, but my team is nuts. We are buck-nuts. We are planted in the earth and we rise against all odds – even under a dome where true light cannot reach us. We are sweet like Sugar and we have come to win on your field of dreams, you who call yourselves SEC Kings.”

In my dream, hours went by. The game played on. Then it ended. I awoke in a sweat. In absolute disbelief, I looked to the heavens and saw four numbers and a dash – 42-35. A voice said unto me, “You have vanquished the Crimson Tide. Go home to the land of Bucknuts, plant your seeds in friendly soil, watch them grow and begin a new year in joy.” That was some dream! I am not sure exactly what it means. I will talk to Joseph – the great interpreter of dreams!
It is not every day that our dreams match our reality. In fact, it is rare, indeed. But, when it happens, we experience a joy beyond belief! We find ourselves flying around three feet off the ground. We want to share our good news with everyone – even though our good news is not everyone’s business or interest.

As we enter 2015, we begin again – fresh with new dreams and new visions; new hopes and new desires for fresh starts and new beginnings. Each of us wants this year to be even better than the last one. In some cases, we struggled so mightily in 2014, it seems like that should be easy to foretell and have happen. We are ready for a better year! For others, last year was great! We hope for even more greatness. (I heard one man on TV say the other night, “I had the best year of my life in 2014! I pray to God that this year is the NEW best year of my life!).

All three texts – Jeremiah, Ephesians and John - speak of new beginnings. They introduce us to “the best times of life.”

In Jeremiah, the prophetic poet conjures for us what new life will be like when people return home and the power of fear and death is broken. Creation will flourish, social life will resume with young people holding their boisterous parties and older people joining in (and not complaining!). This beautiful scene will change mourning
into joy; exile into homecoming, death into life, and sorrow into gladness. The party is on in Jeremiah (and I might point out that Jeremiah is not known as the partying type)!

The opening to letter to the Ephesians, Paul models his blessing after the Jewish *Berakah* (*brä-khä‘*). The BRAKHA are distinctive prayers in Judaism as they place God at the center of attention— the one who was and is and shall be forever. This prayer opens the letter (and our new year!) with praise for all that God is doing through Christ Jesus.

In Christ, the foundation of the world is established “in holy and blameless love.” In Him, God has taken us in as God’s own. In Him, we have redemption through his sacrifice, forgiveness for our trespasses, grace freely and abundantly given and delight in all of these things God has done. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translate this way: “God laid it out all before us in Christ, a long range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in Him, everything in deepest heaven and everything on planet earth. It’s in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for....” (Ephesians 1:10, 11). In Christ our future is signed, sealed and delivered by the Holy Spirit.

Here in this Christmas season, we are grounded in the amazing love and grace of the incarnate Christ. He is not
an afterthought of God for this world. He is God’s
to the Universe - not
an afterthought of God’s refocusing in a new day and age -
continues boldly in John, chapter 1. This passage was last
heard in our service of Lessons and Carols. It was the ninth
reading of the glorious telling of God’s creation and Christ’s
presence in our lives. We will hear it again on Maundy
Thursday in our Tenebrae service. I share it just before
blowing out the Christ candle. In both services, John 1
serves as the last word heard from Holy Scripture. In both
cases, we save the best for last… the best being the first
words of John!

Known as the Prologue to John’s Gospel, this passage
continues the miracle of the Christmas Incarnation – God
dwelling with us! - After we have packed up, recycled, gone
home and forgotten the “reason for the season.” With
Christ in the beginning of all things, we have to make a
decision for him and with him through this passage. Will
we pitch our tent with Christ? This Light, this Glory of
God, this Spirit of God, this Light of the World, this life
and light of ALL people – will we see him, stand with him,
come to know faith through him and in him? John calls us
deep beneath the questions of faith in Christ as we open this
New Year.
I have always loved *A River Runs through It* by Norman MacLean – the book and the film. MacLean writes, “Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of those rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs. ... I am haunted by waters.”

Each Sunday in worship, we respond, “Thanks be to God” when our worship leaders say, “The Word of God for the people of God.” In John 1, we come to know that the WORD OF GOD is not just letters on the page or chapters in a book we call the Bible. The Word of God is in all actuality, Christ Himself. He is the essence of God – love, forgiveness, grace, sensitivity, dignity, kindness, hope, joy, salvation and much, much more – all bound up in One WORD – JESUS.

As Christ is “The Word of God” in our lives, I see him in Norman MacLean’s words as “THE Rock from the basement of time.” All things flow over him and through him. He will not abandon us. He will be our hope and our salvation. He will be our New Year’s blessing. He will be our Light in the darkest times of our lives. He, the Word of God, is for the people of God...
As we make our way into this New Year, may we live into the blessing we receive as followers of Christ. May we begin this year in the joy of the Gospel!

Finally, would someone help translate a new dream I had last night? I saw a flock of ducks quacking on the branches of a huge Buckeye trees deep in the heart of Texas. All the ducks had Nike symbols on their wings and colors on the feather that made them not look like real ducks. Anyway, the Buck nuts swallowed the ducks in one gulp. Was this just a dream – or is this an Urban Legend? Where is Joseph when I need a dream interpreted?

Happy New Year! Alleluia! Amen.

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