

SERMON: 2017/07/02 - BTR

[Pick three children; put costumes on - scarecrow, tin-man, lion; walk to back of the nave.]

In the novel, 'The Wizard of Oz' - and in the film of that same name - there is a (marvellous) "yellow brick road," which, if you follow it without deviation, will take you directly to a wonderful place called "The Emerald City," where everyone is happy and prosperous and healthy.

And you might say that that place is a symbol - a metaphor - of God's Kingdom - "Heaven" - which Christians also call "the new Jerusalem." [Skip up the aisle] But life isn't like that. It isn't a straight road [gesture to aisle] that leads us unfailingly to "the Good" - to abundance and peace. Often we encounter "junctions" where a decision must be made - choices, hard ones - and we go down the wrong route to despair, loneliness, depravity. So, what do we do? We've all these options before us. Alternatives. Well, God foresaw that we would choose the wrong path - the Bible calls it "sin" - so he ordained - planned - a special, "narrow" way for us - the way of Christ - and we can opt to take it whenever we want - to have a NEW BEGINNING with the Creator and His son. And this is what we're going to be talking about this morning: NEW BEGINNINGS. Ok? Right, off you go! [Kids depart.]

Abraham had had what seemed like a new beginning:

He was on a pretty amazing adventure that had taken him from his home in Ur to foreign, exotic lands, and he'd gotten into all kinds of scrapes and bother. What a roller-coaster it had been! A real "mixed bag" of good stuff and bad.

And whilst God had been with him on this peculiar journey, I suggest to you that this moment described here in *Genesis 22* is the true turning point in their relationship - the "re-set button."

And it is a crisis.

(Feminist) scholar Phyllis Trible calls this episode a "text of terror," and it seems like that at first, doesn't it?

We were - in this passage - on the very cusp of murdering a child! Staring into the abyss.

Just place yourself in that scenario. Picture yourself as Isaac's father: how dreadfully bleak! How dark and awful.

And it should remind us that to be human - both according to the Bible *and* history - is often to teeter at the edge of the bestial and the criminal and the deplorable.

And if this isn't your experience, well you belong to a fortunate minority - but thank God and not "Lady luck:" because, as it says in *Matthew 5:45*, which is a key text, mind, for understanding why He world is the way it is, and yet easily overlooked - divine grace is showered on all - and this is astonishing: that the love of our Heavenly Father manifests itself in all lives, both those of Christians and non-believers, stimulating virtues as well as art and manners in every culture and corner.

John Wesley call it 'preventing grace', and Calvin 'common grace'.
But there is a limit to God's patience, and a judgment coming.

And Saint Paul, in *Romans 6*, refers to our entrapment - our enslavement - to that regime - or "dominion," as he calls it - that I've already mentioned, which is our nature - our "condition."

But we *can* start again - be *re-made*, *re-freshed*, by Jesus' death on the cross. *He* is - for you and me - the (sacrificial) ram that Abraham found caught 'in a thicket by its thorns' [Gen. 22:12], and which was substituted for the boy. But we must embrace this truth, and not just pay it "lip-service" - and that's hard. It'll take deep humility - to admit our (fundamental) brokenness.

I found myself thrust into that position by a near-death experience when I was in the Army. And that's what it took - a serious bout of pneumonia - to strip me of my pride and my pretension; to open my eyes to 'the [wondrous] free gift' [Rom.6:23] that the violence on Calvary - seemingly tragic - represents.

This was the new beginning that, eventually, brought me here, with Rebekah and Poppy: the latest "milestone" in our following - or should that be "stumbling"? - after Christ, which involves taking risks - risking dignity, risking hospitality, risking treasure and time - so that we might one day find ourselves enjoying 'eternal life'.

And this also applies to the Church - to *this* church - to *you*. So my question is, are you ready? Are you willing? The forgiveness of Friday entails a new kind of life on Sunday - a *re-birth*(!) [Jn. 3:3], and there's nothing subtle or discrete about a birth. It is boisterous and painful and exciting and joyous, and that's got to be our vision - our vision for St. Matthews, McMinnville.