

Starting Over

A Sermon by Rev. Joe Hoffman

February 4, 2007

Text: Isaiah 6:1-8

I've been thinking a lot about my dad lately. He died three years ago this month. Yesterday afternoon I was home, taking a day off, trying to figure out how to relax, and it struck me that there was a ballgame coming on at 3:30. My beloved North Carolina Tar Heels, and my dad's favorite team, North Carolina State.

My dad and I used to watch ballgames all through the season, and back then – as a youth - I was a North Carolina State fan too because it was what he taught me to be. But I loved watching those games with my dad. They were some of my most favorite times. He and I would map out the day around whenever the game was. We would come into the den, light a fire – it was almost always cold outside – we'd get something to eat, and for 2 hours we would sit there and watch North Carolina State basketball.

And it was particularly thrilling when State would beat Duke or North Carolina because it didn't happen very often.

And so, yesterday, I said – I'm going to watch the game because I've got some time – and North Carolina is #3 in the country, and North Carolina State is not ranked – so, it might not be a very good game, but I'm going to watch it in memory of my dad. So I did. And I was aware that North Carolina State had this new coach named Sidney Lowe, who was actually on the NC State team in the 80's that won a national championship game unexpectedly. All these teams that they weren't suppose to beat they did beat. It was a wonderful year, and I knew that he was going to bring some passion to this North Carolina State team.

I just didn't think it was going to be yesterday.

But after NC State outplayed North Carolina yesterday, and showed so much spirit and passion, all I could do was smile. Because I could just see my dad – if he were still alive he would be dancing a little jig, and he would be at church this morning wearing his bright red sports coat and telling everybody about the game. He would be telling everyone – NC State, aren't they great! The underdog won!

My dad was a big fan. He taught me a lot about the little things. The simple joys in life. The little things you do with each other. It was one of our rituals – and I haven't been watching those games very much lately – and I realize, that's something that I need to do. Just to remember. To remember my dad. To remember what it's like to just do something fun. Something you enjoy doing.

My dad – I wouldn't have said this ten years ago – but my dad has become one of my spiritual mentors. He never took a text like this one Jerene read today from Isaiah and really talked about it. He was a pretty literalist sort of guy. Not closed minded, but not one to appreciate religious art very much. He would not have understood the imagery of this vision. But he could understand the part about: “Woe is me!” and “Send me!”. Here I am God. I've messed up a lot. I'm trying to do my best. Find a way God to use me.

That was the story of my dad's life. So, the further I get away from his life and not having time to spend with him, the more I realize that what he did teach me were just the basic rituals and practices. Every Sunday we went to church. And every Sunday we sat where Peggy Hester is sitting this morning – on the 2nd row on the right side, and I knew that was where my dad would be when I walked in. There was no reason not to go to church. If something else happened on the weekends, that was secondary. Church came first. Now, I know it's harder today for many of us. I understand that. But what he taught me was that every week, we have to start over again. Every week we need to come back and remember the story. We need to remember who we are. And we need to try to go out and do it better once again.

This text from Isaiah begins with a phrase that we often overlook to get to the rest of the text. It begins with the words: In the year that King Uzziah died. For me, it was in the year that my dad died, that I was able to look back and see the things that I couldn't see while he was alive. In the year that King Uzziah died there was a shift in the political leadership, and therefore, things that had not been possible before suddenly became possible. We know about that. The Democrats recently have taken over Congress, and some of us are really excited. We know that when there is a shift, a shift that has nothing to do with anything we have done, sometimes it is just something that happens. But when there is a shift, something changes, something is different, and it means that something can start over in a new way.

In the year that King Uzziah died ... something changed. And Isaiah was able to have a vision. And his prophetic voice was suddenly able to be heard in a way that it might not have ever made a difference before. And the God that is still alive and speaking among us has a way of working in the midst of those changing times. For me it was in the year that my dad died – and since then. Think about it in your life. Every day we are starting over again. It's not that we have forgotten what was yesterday. But we are picking it up again, we're starting over again, trying again.

It might be for you:

In the year that my first child was born ... something changed and was different.

In the year that my spouse died ... I had to start over in a different way.

In the year that I graduated from high school ... something changed.

In the year that I lost my job ... something was different.

Starting over. In the year that King Uzziah died something changed and the whole world had a different possibility, because God was working in the midst of the changes. It's the same with me and you. When things change in our lives or around us, we can start over.

Do you understand what I am saying? Think about your life, think about how it is when a certain event has caused you to start over. You may not have wanted to start over. You were happy with the way things were. But even so, when we start over, there's a new beginning, a new opportunity, and God is with us.

Sept. 11, 2001, planes flew into the twin towers – and we've had to start over. We've had to learn how to be a country with this being part of our history. And some of what we have decided to do, I wish we could go back and start over again. Because we did it out of revenge, we did it out of fear. But we have a chance. We can start over now. Whatever it is, we can start over again.

My dad taught me – if we just practice the rituals, if we just come and remember our story, we will remember who we are. And that's part of this text today too. When Isaiah has this vision, he's in a moment of awe, and is in a mystery, and from that he goes to confession – God, this is who I am, this is all I am, broken some times. making mistakes some times, making poor choices, so little compared to the Mystery of You, but here I am God. Send me. Make a difference with the gifts that I have.

Jesus was known for going around and being with ordinary, regular people ... people like my dad. When he was ready to call the disciples, he didn't go to the center for higher education and say: "I want everybody who has the highest grade point average. He didn't subscribe to the list of those most likely to succeed. He went out to regular people ... like fishermen, saying – cast your nets over there, see what happens. And would you like to start over and come with me? You don't have to know what is going to happen down the road. Let's just do this together and see where it takes us.

Starting over. In the year that we left our church building on Merrimon Avenue, things have been different. We're starting over. In the years that we were in interim space, that felt different too. We're starting over. In the year that we've been in this space, it's felt different and it is different. We're starting over. And God is with us in this moment, and we are together. And here we go.

In a few minutes we're going to come to this table. When we come to this table we take ordinary, simple elements of bread and wine, we break the bread, we pour the wine, we're starting over. Here we are God, once again, bringing ourselves to you, in the midst of all of Your Mystery – because it helps us remember. Here we are God, can you please use me? Will you send us?

Think about the difference ... in the year of... in the moment of in this particular time God is here. Use us God. Help us to start over again. Amen.