"A New Beginning … for Life!" **Jn 3.1-15**
Circumcision*Name-Lord /Jn - Risen Savior - 2012 (B–'87/G–'96)

Sometimes, when things are not right or not going well, we begin again. You are keyboarding an important document, make a mistake in the first paragraph … you delete and begin again. You start a musical recital piece, make mistakes in the early measures … and begin again. Someone begins a reading or speech and gets words twisted … and begins again. A person starts a test, does not read the directions carefully, proceeds incorrectly – but catches the mistake … and begins again.

In other cases, to restart does not make sense or is simply impossible. You took a wrong turn miles back, but instead of starting again, you will detour and take a different road. Your game plan is not working, and it is the third quarter of the game; you cannot restart, but you can adjust. We are into the new year, and maybe we do not like some decisions we made last year, but we cannot go back. We will seek to live with them and learn from them as we face similar circumstances this year.

What about one's spirituality? How does one start; where is one now; can one begin again? In the sight of God, we began life as lost and condemned creatures, spiritually dead and blind. You and I were enemies of God, totally opposed to Him, His Word and His will. Must this be the way? Yes, unless a dramatic change takes place --- one that God initiates and works in us. By the grace of God, we begin again, but first the "old self" must be put away. In the words of our Lord, one must be "born again." By the work of God's Holy Spirit, we give thanks to have

A NEW BEGINNING … FOR LIFE!

Nicodemus the Pharisee was a "seeker." Nicodemus, we read, came to Jesus at night, not wishing to be seen visiting this self-professed Messiah. As a Pharisee, he was a lay leader of the Jewish people, and he was a member of the Jewish high court, the Sanhedrin. Nicodemus was most concerned about the Law of Moses, doing things correctly, and keeping every "letter" of the Law perfectly. If one were not strictly obedient, he should start again.

Why was he coming to Jesus? Maybe he sensed the rules and regulations were like a prison, and there were many ways to "beat the system." Maybe he had doubts about his relationship to God and thought Jesus would have answers. Maybe he was impressed by something he had heard or seen and wanted to "check it out."

Whatever his reason for coming and no matter how poorly prepared, Nicodemus listened and responded. Later, we hear his lone voice object to the mistreatment of our Lord, and after Jesus' death, Nicodemus assisted in the proper care and treatment of the dead body. He was a Pharisee, legalist, and unsure of himself… but the Holy Spirit brought him to be a disciple of Jesus, the Messiah!

Nicodemus leads us to a great mystery. With questions and further probing, Nicodemus helps us to understand the meaning and effect of spiritual rebirth. Three times this is mentioned during the visit, and each time, Jesus speaks clearly that one must be born of water and the Spirit to be in His kingdom. While this cannot be fully understood, it is an important matter of faith – then and now!

Do you get the picture? Sin is like dirt, mud or grime on our bodies. Sin attaches itself to us, becomes part of us, and continues to influence who we are and what we do. Only a spiritual "bath," a cleansing, will make a difference, because we are "dead" in our sins. Those sins must be drowned, and we must be born again. As we were reminded today in the Holy Baptism, you and I, Joseph and all people, need a spiritual restart! Life was once lived under and for Satan, but after one's rebirth, one lives for Christ and has true Life forever.

The disciple of Jesus Christ who has experienced this rebirth, this new beginning of life, lives in contrast to the world around him. The world is easily satisfied with feeble efforts and mundane performances --- whatever it takes to get one through. The world thinks that a few sins here or there – like cheating on a test or a spouse; a little "white" lie; a bit of abuse; "normal" cursing or swearing; lack of worship or service or caring – is simply the way we live. "So, what's the big deal?" they ask. At the same time, the world claims that talk of a new beginning, being born again, and living for Jesus is only for religious fanatics!

Not so! God says if one is to have a right relationship with Him, Spirit-filled and everlasting, that one must be born again: restart, begin again! This is God's plan and design for one's new life in Christ, and this is best for us. We are called to reject worldly ways of this life, drown out sinful impurities, and be rid of ungodly priorities. God is holy, He wants people to follow Him in holiness of living, die to sin each day, and be born again with a true and living faith in the Savior, Jesus Christ.

Throughout this year, we will mark new days and events. In fact, we have an extra day, since it is "leap year." No matter the number of days in a year or a life, we have new life only in Jesus Christ. John Calvin wrote, "Christ, who is in heaven, put on our flesh that, by stretching out a brotherly hand to us, He might raise us to heaven along with Himself." During His life, Jesus reached out His "brotherly hand" to people great and small, and then, on a hill outside Jerusalem, He stretched out His hands to bear our sins on the cross. He died our death that we might live!

The Israelites of old looked to that brass serpent in the wilderness, in faith, and were saved. Today, all who look to Jesus Christ, believing, will be saved, enjoy rebirth, and have everlasting life! The true "glory" of our Lord, when His "hour" had come, was His crucifixion and death. In spite of humiliation, Jesus showed the glory of God in His obedience, even to death on the cross. Our sins killed Jesus, but His resurrection leads to our resurrection to life. St. Paul wrote to the Colossians (3.3) that a Christian's life is "hidden with Christ in God."

It is not always easy to begin again. We may feel embarrassed or simply not wish to take the time or effort. To restart indicates something was not right or went wrong with the initial start. In our spiritual lives, this is "most certainly true." Our sins are killing us, and there is no Hope apart from God's help. We must die to sin, devilish temptation and slavery --- die to everything that separates us from God. Then, God, by His grace and mercy, will rebirth us by water and the Word, forgive our sins, fill us with His Spirit, and unite us with Him forever through Jesus Christ. Along with baby Joseph, remember and celebrate your baptism today!

We needed and have received **A New Beginning … For Life!** In the Person of Jesus Christ – born, circumcised, baptized, crucified, resurrected, ascended, and ruling over all – resolve to live anew. Trust Him alone throughout this year, know He has won your salvation, and be confident He will never leave you or forsake you. Celebrate your baptism, rejoice in new life, and be assured that each new day is a new beginning in Christian living! Amen.