

Fred Hedt
Ascension Lutheran Church
Landover Hills, Maryland

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“A Fresh Start”
Philippians 3.12-14

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

This morning St. Paul says to us in our Epistle reading,

“¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”
That is our text.

In the last several weeks we’ve seen an overwhelming number of natural disasters. Hurricanes across the Gulf states and in the Caribbean ... heaving rainfall causing extensive flooding ... earthquakes in Mexico ... and widespread fires out West.

Again and again on the televised news we’ve seen the heartbreaking reports of people surveying the total destruction of homes, businesses, and entire neighborhoods. Everything these people own, everything they’ve worked for has been swept away. As they survey the wreckage a reporter will often ask, “What will you do now?” Many people are just too numb to respond. But often what you hear is “we’ll just have to make **a fresh start.**”

In our text St. Paul is describing the “**fresh start**” he had to make. A fresh start he had to make as he surveyed the wreckage *not* of a home or a business or a village. A fresh start because what had collapsed around him was his belief system. What he had always believed to be true and trustworthy would no longer work. He had to make a fresh start.

St. Paul believed in God. And St. Paul – Saul back then – had been raised to believe that you had to make yourself right with God. That you had to pile up enough good deeds to curry God’s favor. That you had to be good enough to earn God’s approval.

That’s probably still the most popular religion in the world today. No matter what god or gods a person believes in – the Holy Trinity or Allah or Jehovah or Vishnu – a lot of people believe we have to **earn** that god’s favor. When asked what they believe, a lot of people say it like this: “Good people go to heaven ... bad people go to hell.”

That’s the religion St. Paul – Saul – grew up with: “Good people go to heaven ... bad people go to hell.” And St. Paul – Saul – resolved that if he had to *earn* God’s favor, if it’s *good* people who go to heaven, then no one – **NO ONE** – was going to be “gooder” than he. Saul became a Pharisee – a group that had all kinds of rules, do’s & don’ts – and he resolved to keep *all* of their rules. He

was going to work so hard at being a Pharisee that he would go after anyone or anything that was contrary. So when this new fangled religion popped up – “Christianity” – Saul set out to eradicate it. Saul was there when Steven, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death. Saul was given the authority to hunt down and arrest Christians – and that probably did not end well for them.

And then – in what I think is enormous bit of providential irony in persecuting Christians Paul encountered Christ. In that encounter Paul saw what perfect love looked like. In that encounter Paul saw what *perfect* righteousness looked like. When Paul held all of his own efforts and striving to make himself righteous next to the perfect righteousness of Christ, he realized that all of his attempts to earn God’s favor were futile. And when he put the righteousness he believed he had assembled next to the perfect righteousness of Christ, it looked like – in St. Paul’s words – a “pile of crap”. A *small* “pile of crap” at that.

Paul also realized in that moment that Christ was offering him a **fresh start**. Christ was offering Paul his own perfect righteousness as a free gift of love: Christ would take all of Paul’s failures and sin and even his history of persecution and give Paul his own perfect righteousness.

Paul writes that in that moment he came to realize the “surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” Paul wanted to leave behind his old way of life and be “found in Christ, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but a righteousness that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.”

St. Paul found a fresh start in Christ. His story continues in today’s text: “I don’t already have in hand everything that Christ has in store for me. So here’s my strategy: I forget what lies behind me, and I strain forward to what lies ahead – the heavenly call of God in Jesus.”

“Forgetting what lies behind.” He’s not talking about completely wiping out the memory of his past. He will recall with joy his family and friends and all the good times. However, he will no longer dwell on the notion he had to win God’s favor. He will let go of all the effort he put into trying to make himself good enough for God. His striving to build his own righteousness before God is now ancient history. In terms of his relationship with God, he’s made a fresh start in Christ.

The *really* Good News is that *fresh starts* are possible for *all* of us. Our baptism is a fresh start. We are born “flesh” – broken, fallen, mortal. We come into this world so separated from our Creator that it is so easy for us to presume that a Creator doesn’t even exist. It’s a deadly notion – born “flesh” it is our destiny to die. Baptized into Christ we are reborn. The Creator reaches through water to name us and to claim us and to cover us with the righteousness of Christ. We are reborn as “spirit” and are the forever children of God. And have a brand new destiny: to rise with Christ and live!

We can claim and celebrate that fresh start everyday by recalling our baptism. When you were baptized the sign of the cross was drawn on you. Every time you retrace that sign with the words “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” you are saying “I am a person who has made a fresh start in Christ.”

Every morning that I am in the shower, that water flowing over me helps me recall my baptism. I retrace that baptismal cross that was drawn on me and repeat the first promise I ever made: “Today I renounce the devil and all his works and all his ways.” No matter what I said or did or *failed* to do yesterday, I make a fresh start today. I am covered in the righteousness of Christ – freed and forgiven. This is a brand new day and I am making a fresh start!

In Christ, no matter what has happened, a fresh start is *always* possible. Those poor unfortunates who stand there surveying the wreckage of a home, a business, or a neighborhood wiped out by flood or flame – St. Paul would remind them that in everything God is at work for their good. (Rom. 8.28) Wherever you may find yourself at this moment, for whatever reason you got here, God can take where you are and make it a “fresh start”. “Tragedy” does not have to be the final word in your story. “Difficulty” does not have to give way to despair. It may take a lot of hard work, it may require a lot of help, but in Christ there is always the possibility of a “fresh start.”

There can be a fresh start for the people of Puerto Rico – we can be the answer to their prayers and provide the help they so desperately need. There can be a fresh start for homeowners in California, a future even if their past has been consumed in flames. There can be a fresh start for those of us grieving the passing of loved ones: in time God’s love can fill the empty spaces in our hearts and lives. There can be a fresh start for those of us dealing with health or financial issues.

But all of those things – as important as they are – all of them are *penultimate*. In our text, as St. Paul contemplates his fresh start in Christ he realizes as blessed as he is he has not yet received *everything* that he will have in Christ. With St. Paul, you and I are anticipating *THE* fresh start. The **ULTIMATE** fresh start.

We look forward to Jesus returning to make *all things new* – a fresh start for *everything!* Creation will be set free from its bondage to decay. Death will be swallowed up in Christ’s victory. Everything that was hurtful, harmful, will be done away with. Everything that caused us pain and heartache will be done away with. We will rise in Christ to live in God’s presence forever.

When that day arrives

all of God’s people,

all of God’s creation will experience – **A FRESH START.**