

The importance of a good beginning

Do you know what Faith Hill, Bill Murray, Stephen King, Ricki Lake and New Day Church all have in common? They all share September 21st as a birthday.

Today is a big milestone in the life of this church, although in some ways it's an artificial milestone. We've been meeting for a year already. But much of that year has been spent planning and preparing, and this morning we can officially say we've begun.

Today is the last of our four snapshots about New Day. In three preview services over the summer we tried to provide some idea of what New Day is all about. This morning is like a bridge between those snapshots and what we'll be doing this fall. We'll be looking at stories from Jesus' life as recorded in the book of John. Out of the four biographies we have of Jesus' life on earth – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – John is distinct. The flavor of the book is more stylized, more artistic almost in the way he approaches the life of Jesus. And he tells some great stories.

I'd like to look at the very first chapter with you. If you have a Bible and want to follow along, I'll be reading from John 1:1-18.

John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God -- children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'" From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through

Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

I've titled the message for this morning, "The Importance of a Good Beginning." Here we are – just starting out a new church, we're just reading the opening lines of a book of the Bible that talks about The Beginning – It seemed like a good time to talk about the value of starting right.

As I thought about what I wanted to say, it made me think of Snoopy. There were about three things that Snoopy would always do when he was sitting on top of his doghouse. He would fly his Sopwith Camel, chasing the Red Barron. He would complain about the food in his dog dish. And he would try to write a novel.

Each time he sat down at the typewriter, he would begin with the same words: "It was a dark and stormy night." And that was about as far as he got.

Actually, Snoopy didn't even come up with that line on his own. He plagiarized the opening line from a novel called Paul Clifford that was written in 1830 by Edward Bulwer-Lytton.

"It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents--except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind which swept up the streets (for it is in London that our scene lies), rattling along the housetops, and fiercely agitating the scanty flame of the lamps that struggled against the darkness."

--Edward George Bulwer-Lytton, Paul Clifford (1830)

That line has become the standard for cheesy writing. Since 1982, San Jose State University has had fun with their Bulwer-Lytton contest, asking people to submit bad opening lines to imaginary novels.

Here are a couple examples:

Colonel Cleatus Yorbyville had been one seriously bored astronaut for the first few months of his diplomatic mission on the third planet of the Frangelicus XIV system, but all that had changed on the day he'd discovered that his tiny, multipedal and infinitely hospitable alien hosts were not only edible but tasted remarkably like that stuff that's left on the pan after you've made cinnamon buns and burned them a little.

Mark Silcox

Auburn AL 36830

There was no question about it, my computer was locked up like a crazy aunt in a dark, secluded attic, or like the brakes on my '73 Chevy Impala on a rainy day when my wife is driving the kids to origami lessons and is running late because Isaiah, my son, made a fuss at the last minute and refused to be put into his car seat.

*Peter L. Belmonte
Altus AFB, OK*

The sun rose over the horizon like a great big radioactive baby's head with a bad sunburn but then again it might just have been that Lisa was always cranky this early in the morning.

*Debra Allen
Wichita Falls, TX*

Any author will tell you that how you start off a story makes a huge difference. Even in non-fiction it matters a great deal. It was very important to John. He chose a different way to start than any of the other gospel writers. And he did it for reasons we'll look at in a minute.

We've carefully chosen when and how we are starting New Day. We've put a full year of planning and preparation into getting ready for what happens from today forward. We could have done things differently along the way, but we made some specific choices as to how we have gone about starting a church. In fact, we considered several other possible ways to get this thing off the ground. Different times, different places, different approaches, different values.

So what makes a beginning so important? Why does it really matter?

In the text we read, we can see some reasons why it mattered to John.

First, where you begin determines where you'll end up.

In 1492, Columbus sailed the blue. He was headed west, thinking he would end up in the east. As you all know, he didn't count on the fact that he would bump into America. When he landed in San Salvador, he thought he was in India, and when he reached Cuba, he thought he was in Japan. Where he started out from Portugal and the direction he took on his 10 week journey drastically affected where he ended up.

How you begin is extremely important. John is well aware of this reality. He has in mind exactly what he wants to see happen in his book. He has an ending in mind. For him, it isn't good enough to start from Jesus' human birth. It isn't good enough to show how he is a descendant of Abraham, or even Adam. John pushes it all the way back, back to the very beginning. He starts with the fact that Jesus is God. And that will make all the difference in the conclusions he reaches in his account.

We have heard this concept for so long that even if we don't believe it, it doesn't have a dramatic impact on our ears. But imagine what it must have sounded like to people hearing it for the first time. They might have heard of Jesus, knew he was a popular teacher and a bit of a problem for the religious leaders. But it would have been news to them to hear somebody say he was God.

It's been about 40 years since Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. Suppose somebody like Jesse Jackson, who was a follower of Dr. King in the civil rights movement, came out with a book that claimed Dr. King was God. That's how radical the concept would have sounded to most people in John's day. Jesus had been gone for many years by the time John's book came out. It's the kind of explosive beginning to a book that would make people want to read it to see just where John was going.

We don't have to guess as to what his aim was. He puts it in writing later in the book:

John 20:30-31

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

In other words, John had a choice of what he started with, and he deliberately decided to begin with the fact of Jesus' deity. Because if that truth isn't established, there's no point to the rest of the story. He's not interested in just recording all the remarkable events that happened in the life of a remarkable person. He's not trying to write a comprehensive biography for the sake of history.

We could say the same thing about New Day. We are starting out with our foundation being the same place as John's book. Everything we do as a church is built on the fact of who Jesus is and what he has done. That makes a big difference in where we'll end up.

For example, nearly all churches talk about sin, but they don't all deal with it in the same way. If our emphasis was on dealing with the sin problem ourselves, then we'll load people down with guilt and shame and tell them they have to work harder if they want God to love them. But if – like we've said -- our foundation is who Jesus is and what he did by coming and dying for us to deal with the problem of sin, then our emphasis will be on accepting that incredible gift of love with a humble and grateful heart. Where you start determines where you'll end up.

But there's more to it than that. How you begin doesn't just determine where you're going – **it also determines how far you'll get.**

The way you start something has a big impact on just how far you can run with it. Pete Scazzero tells a story in his book, *The Emotionally Healthy Church* that perfectly exemplifies this point. Back in the 1800s, there was a group of British explorers who set off to find the North Pole. It was a two to three year trek, but their sailing ships only brought a 12 day supply of coal. They did make room on board for a 1200 volume library, a hand organ, sterling silver and china. They didn't pack any special clothing for the arctic except their military uniforms. When Eskimos came across their frozen bodies, they were pulling a life boat full of sterling silver and chocolate.

You can't start out on a journey taking the wrong gear or the wrong fuel.

John knew that if he only talked about a Jesus who was a nice guy, there would be no energy in it. That idea would run out of gas pretty quickly. That wouldn't be enough to get people to a place of hope. Remember – his goal is to help people realize that there is life in the name of Jesus. So he starts out with plenty of fuel – the idea that when Jesus came he revealed God. He put a human face on the invisible spirit. A few years ago, Joan Osborne had a popular song that asked the question, “What if God was one of us?” That's exactly what Jesus answers. As we look at his life, we see what God thinks and feels.

Hebrews 1:3

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

He sustains all things. His fuel tank for us will never run out.

Part of the reason John offers such staying power is because he grounds his message in the consistency of God's mercy. Several times, John talked about how when Jesus came, people didn't believe who he was.

John 1:10

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.

It's like the scene in *It's a Wonderful Life* when Jimmy Stewart is running around to everyone from his life and nobody knows who he is. They should have known him but they didn't. The world should have recognized Jesus. They should have seen what a great thing God was doing. But nobody even paid attention.

You would think that would make God mad. That he would say, “Forget these people.” But what does John tell us in the next verse?

John 1:11-12

He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

We talked about that verse last week. The point is that John is emphasizing the fact that God doesn't give up on us. He keeps extending his grace.

Lam 3:22-23

Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning.

New every morning. That is what will get us to the finish line – not the fact that we're strong people or good people or well behaved people but the fact that we've got a strong God who every day has new grace and forgiveness to offer us. The only start that will

get us all the way to eternity is one that is based entirely on the grace of God. Anything else will leave us stranded by the side of the road.

New Day is not going to be a perfect church. We're not going to be able to stand up and say "This is the right way to do church." If we're trying to run on that idea, we've probably already blown it several times over. We can't last if we think that we're any different than other people who have started all those churches that have gone before us. What sustains us has to be about Jesus himself, not us. We have to start from a point of grace, and we want to be the kind of church that says, "Look what God has done for us. He can do the same thing for you."

When Paul wrote to the Roman church, he told them not to become judgmental about people they thought were messing up. Then he said this:

Romans 14:4

Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

I want to be the kind of person who believes in a God who isn't just enough for me, but who is big enough to see other people through to the very end. He's the one who makes us stand.

Finally, where you begin determines who will go with you. Let's say you're a Metro bus driver. You go from the Park and Ride at 320th in Federal Way up to downtown Seattle. That's your route. The people who are going to climb on board are going to be the people who live near where you start. You're not going to get people driving down from Everett to catch the bus in Federal Way to take them to Seattle. You're not providing any service to people who don't live near where you are. The starting point dictates who goes along for the ride.

I frequently write press releases for clients at my day job, and we always put a lot of care and thought into the leading sentence. If I don't catch an editor's attention right at the start, I'm not going to keep them.

John's opening words, "In the beginning" instantly take people to Genesis 1:1. It's the exact same phrase as the first words in the Bible. He is intentionally making a link. He wants people to hear the echo, so they know that he is associating Jesus with the God of the universe. And for the Jewish people, if Jesus is at the beginning of Genesis, that means he's at the core of their Scriptures. John wanted his fellow Jews to embrace Jesus as the God they had worshipped since Abraham.

As revolutionary as the concept is, at the same time it is entirely consistent with it. To borrow an illustration from C.S. Lewis, if I'm a four year old trying to draw a circle, it won't be perfect. When I get to an age where I can create one on the computer, the end result will look dramatically different. But there's also a consistency there, because they are representing the same thing.

Jesus is God's perfect circle, unveiled to a world of hand-drawn scribbly circles. The Bible talks about him as a mystery revealed. John wants people who know some basic things about God to see how Jesus completes the picture. He's not a departure from past revelations about God, but the ultimate epitome of them all.

This bears directly on our goals in starting a New Church. Where we start has a lot to do with who's going to climb on board with us. And we have two main types of people that we hope are on our route.

First, we want to be a place where people with little or no church background feel comfortable and free to come learn about God. If that's you, we hope you'll feel like the way we do things is understandable and helpful. We'll try to show how Jesus answers many questions and fills in the gaps that may not have made sense about God.

Second, there are many people out there who have quite frankly had damaging experiences in church. We don't want to raise expectations too high by saying that we're better or perfect, but we want to be a place where people can try church again and find an environment of grace.

There will be some people who don't want to get on our bus. And that's fine. It isn't our mission to try to attract people who are already involved in other great churches. We really aren't looking to try to collect a bunch of people who don't need what we have to offer. The start that you see here is designed with the idea that it will affect who comes along with us.

Beginnings are important, and we're so glad that you're here to be part of ours today. As you go, think about how these beginnings might relate to your own life. Do you know where you want to be headed? Are you building on a good enough foundation to get you there, or are you struggling to get by from day to day on your own strength?

The great thing is that just because beginnings are important doesn't mean if we botched a beginning we can't start over. John points out over and over again that Jesus lets us start fresh. Every day can be a new day. And if you'd like to be surrounded with people who are committed to living out that truth, we hope you'll find a place here with us.

An international literary parody contest, the competition honors the memory if not the reputation of Victorian novelist Edward George Earl Bulwer-Lytton (1803-1873), who has just enjoyed his bicentennial. The goal of the contest is childishly simple: entrants are challenged to submit bad opening sentences to imaginary novels. Although best known for *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) and the phrase, "the pen is mightier than the sword," Bulwer-Lytton opened his novel *Paul Clifford* (1830) with the immortal words that the "Peanuts" beagle Snoopy plagiarized for years, "It was a dark and stormy night."

The contest began in 1982 as a quiet campus affair, attracting only three submissions. This response being a thunderous success by academic standards, the contest went public the following year and ever since has attracted thousands of annual entries from all over the world

The flock of geese flew overhead in a "V" formation - not in an old-fashioned-looking Times New Roman kind of a "V", branched out slightly at the two opposite arms at the top of the "V", nor in a more modern-looking, straight and crisp, linear Arial sort of "V" (although since they were flying, Arial might have been appropriate), but in a slightly asymmetric, tilting off-to-one-side sort of italicized Courier New-like "V" - and LaFonte knew that he was just the type of man to know the difference.

John Dotson (U.S. Naval Officer)
Arlington, VA

Detective Inspector Mike Norman slipped six fingers into his overcoat pocket, five of them clad in a latex glove and attached to his palm, while the sixth was wrapped in a plastic evidence bag and apparently belonged to the kidnapped pianist Ricardo Moore, or, as it now seemed likely, the kidnapped ex-pianist Ricardo Moore.

Alan Campbell
Edinburgh, Scotland

Colonel Cleatus Yorbyville had been one seriously bored astronaut for the first few months of his diplomatic mission on the third planet of the Frangelicus XIV system, but

all that had changed on the day he'd discovered that his tiny, multipedal and infinitely hospitable alien hosts were not only edible but tasted remarkably like that stuff that's left on the pan after you've made cinnamon buns and burned them a little.

Mark Silcox
Auburn AL 36830

When the time came for Timothy to fly the nest, he felt the best years of his life were ahead of him, if only because he had spent the childhood ones living in a nest.

Sian Arthur
London, England

Our story begins in the farthest reaches of the frozen tundra where, due to the axillary convergence of the solar angle of incidence and the latitudinal reflective attitude of the quiescent magnetospheric photoreceptors, it stays light for a really long time.

Marsha Engelbrecht
Lafayette, LA

Our story begins, as very few do, in the small but diabolically clever town of Torrington, Alberta, where the Gopher Hole Museum, displaying 71 adorable yet eerie stuffed gophers dressed up to resemble the townspeople, has attracted so many tourists that when a Torrington home goes on the market, it sells in less than six years.

Joanne Morcom
Calgary, Alberta

Penny was always there for me even when she was somewhere else because we -- Penny and me - were literally, though not really, two peas in a pod: round, green - the naïve kind - and overall, well, pea-like; and whilst our un-leguminous domicile was not pod-like, it was padlocked.

**Brian Nash
Derry, NH**

Since 1982 the English Department at San Jose State University has sponsored the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest, a whimsical literary competition that challenges entrants to compose the opening sentence to the worst of all possible novels. The contest (hereafter referred to as the BLFC) was the brainchild (or Rosemary's baby) of Professor Scott Rice, whose graduate school excavations unearthed the source of the line "It was a dark and stormy night." Sentenced to write a seminar paper on a minor Victorian novelist, he chose the man with the funny hyphenated name, Edward George [Bulwer-Lytton](#), who was best known for perpetrating *The Last Days of Pompeii*, *Eugene Aram*, *Rienzi*, *The Caxtons*, *The Coming Race*, and--not least--[Paul Clifford](#), whose famous opener has been plagiarized repeatedly by the cartoon beagle Snoopy.

"It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents--except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind which swept up the streets (for it is in London that our scene lies), rattling along the housetops, and fiercely agitating the scanty flame of the lamps that struggled against the darkness."

--Edward George Bulwer-Lytton, *Paul Clifford* (1830)

How you begin filters who will go with you.

How you begin determines where you'll end up.

How you begin determines how far you can take it.

Overture of an opera

Who Jesus was went unrecognized
John the Baptist was the witness pointing out who he was.

Augustine's observation.

Press release lead in