

WGUMC January 8, 2011 “Baptism and Brain Science”
Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17

On Friday, when I was supposed to be working on a sermon, I went to pick up a new rug for the living room. I rolled it out and put it under the new couch and a few hours later, a new floor lamp arrived, a gift from my folks. Finally, I got out the new lamp shades I found at Target just before Christmas.

For over twenty years in ministry, my furniture has mostly been cast-offs from parishioners. I still have a piece that Nancy Danson left for me in Santa Cruz. But the excitement of coming to a new church and a newly-renovated parsonage in Willow Glen got me primed for something new.

Now you could take me aside and tell me that getting a new couch, even a new church, will not give me a new life. And you'd be right, but the fact remains that we'll never have a new life if we never experience anything new. For me, the New Year starts with a new living room. But it doesn't stop there.

Besides, the brain science is on my side. Neurologists know that our brains have evolved to ignore the old and seek out the new. My dog is good about this. When she sees a new trail marker along our old running route, something in that pea brain of hers gets all excited and she barks at it.

Human brains work pretty much the same way. When we encounter something new, it stimulates a part of the brain called the substantia nigra ventral tegmental area, also known as the “novelty center.” That, in turn, revs up the production of dopamine, the “feel-good” neurotransmitter, or what one neuroscientist calls the “gimme more” neurotransmitter. Dopamine increases our motivation, stimulates learning and improves our memory, and this is the way our brains change. The neurons that make up the network of the brain literally, physically change when we see something, do something, learn something new.

So you see, new is what humans are wired to do. Biologically speaking, we are always seeking new life. That's what makes our species so successful. That's what filled our history and will fill our future with great achievements and awesome discoveries. Newton, Galileo, Darwin, Edison, Einstein—all must have been dopamine addicts because they were always after the new thought, the revolutionary theory, the turn-the-world-upside-down idea.

We don't have to be Einstein to need the new. Keep your brain active, your doctor tells you. No matter your age, learn a language, take up a musical instrument, read a book, enroll in a class, buy a computer, travel to a foreign country, make a new friend. Experience something new and the dopamine will do wonders for you.

Don't believe me? Think back to when you drove your first car or took your first plane ride, when you met your first love or had your first child or bought your first house. Do you

remember what a rush that was? Do you remember how that new thing in your life changed your life?

Always on the lookout for the newest thing, the people go out to see John the Baptist because they've heard about a new prophet. They come for his baptism of repentance. They want his promise of new life. They don't know it, but their brains are already wired for it, and they're lining up for it.

Then John the Baptist becomes John the Barker: "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me...I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." [Mark 1:7-8] This new guy I'm telling you about will define *new*, because he's a turn-the-world-upside-down kind of guy.

Lo and behold, Jesus appears on the scene. And after he is baptized by John, the heavens open, the Spirit descends, the voice speaks: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." [Mark 1:11]

So, the people who have come up out of the water of *John's* baptism begin to experience *Jesus's* new reality. And following this Spirit-anointed Savior, they discover that every word he says, every thing he does is new. As they are taking it all in, he is literally changing their brain chemistry. He makes their neurons do things they've never done before. If they had functional MRI's back then, I bet you could see it on the screen. This is your brain on rebirth. This is what new life looks like.

Could an MRI tell us what's new about you? Is your brain ready? Is your heart ready to take your relationship with God to the next level? Because if God is exactly the same for us today as on the day we were baptized, then the new life left us long ago. If our relationship with God isn't going somewhere, then we aren't headed anywhere.

A year ago this last December, I knew that my tenure in Novato was coming to an end. I wasn't yet out of my post-doc depression (can I use it? was it worth it? how much did I pay

for it?) I had regrets about what I hadn't accomplished, qualms about what I had. I was stuck wandering in a wilderness of vocational anxiety, through a desert of self-doubt.

Needing direction, I headed for the labyrinth walk at a Lutheran Church in Terra Linda the first Tuesday in Advent. When your life feels like a maze with lots of twists and turns and dead-ends, the labyrinth is a soul map. When you walk it, you can't get lost in it. The way out is the way in.

"I am the way," Jesus once said, and I met him on the way, on the labyrinth. That night I was praying the lectionary for that Sunday: "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom...For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water...A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way...the redeemed shall walk there...and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." [Isaiah 35]

And while I was walking and praying, pouring my heart out to God, suddenly I could see in my mind's eye, Jesus walking along with me. It was like a daydream or like I was watching myself in a movie. Jesus was walking with me as if there wasn't anything in the world he'd rather be doing and smiling at me as if I were a best friend. I remember that it seemed to me that the sun was shining (though the room was dark and candlelit), and he was tossing his head back laughing, delighting in my company.

Boy, that got to me. Because I figured no one, including me, had delighted in my company for a long time, so I began to cry. But at the same time, I was experiencing a joy that I've never experienced before. All my self-doubt was being swallowed up by a love I've never felt quite like that before. And I've been at this a long time, my friends. So it is true: God really is making all things new." [Rev 21:5] And God's mercies

never do come to an end. "They are new every morning." [Lam 3:22-3a]

Whatever happened that night, I can tell you that it changed my life. Healing waters broke forth in my wilderness. Flowers blossomed in my desert. My baptism was renewed. And not only was my heart reset, but my brain was rewired. Literally. The memory of that moment has been seared into my brain and it lives in me a year later. I relive it when I need to. It has given me new courage and guided me down new paths, and heaven only knows what new life is still ahead of me.

So, I tell you this story because I don't want you ever to doubt that God is waiting to do a new thing in you. Jesus has come up out of the waters of baptism and he's ready to wander in your wilderness with you as long as he needs to, until your rivers flow, until your flowers bloom. Let us pray:

Lord, it's been a dry winter and for some of us,
our spirits are dry, our souls are thirsty.
"Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters..."

Lord, we keep coming, but the well is deep and we have
no bucket. Where do we get the living water?
"The water I give will become in you a spring of water
gushing up to eternal life."

Lord, let that water work its wonders in our life:
douse our fire for anything that is not you;
intensify our thirst for everything that is you
until we are drinking deeply of your life
until we are drenched in your truth
until we are letting your living waters shift and shape us
until we are ready for this new reality
until we are fit for your eternity.

Let us sing: "Water, River, Spirit, Grace"