

NEW BEGINNINGS



AS FATHER OF FOUR DAUGHTERS and husband of a wife who has spent a lot of time in Young Women, I have attended many “New Beginnings.” I have always liked the name but sometimes half jokingly say to Susan, “Why do Young Women call it ‘New Beginnings’? Why not just ‘Beginnings’? What is the difference between a ‘beginning’ and a ‘new beginning’? Isn’t ‘new’ redundant?” Lately, however, I have felt new appreciation for the “new” in “New Beginnings.”

During the past few weeks, the phrase “new beginning” has been much in the media. Every inauguration constitutes a beginning, but this one has felt to many like a new beginning. In part, this is a partisan sentiment, but the phrase has purchase on us beyond partisan politics. Calling the inauguration a “new beginning” recognizes that inaugurating an African-American president is unprecedented and that it *renews* an ideal of equality which America has long espoused but struggled to realize.

In some ways, “new beginning” signals that the beginning is *not* entirely new. Thus, for example, when Lincoln called for “a new birth of freedom” in Gettysburg,² he invited the country to embrace freedom not as a new ideal but as an old one we had fought for before. So too a “new beginning” implies beginning not for the first time but beginning again afresh. It places one not “in the beginning” at Genesis I, so to speak, but after the Flood or the Exodus, at the start of a

new epoch with a chance to begin covenant history anew. A new beginning connotes a fresh start rather than a first start. It is to begin again, with renewed purpose and hope.

The phrase “new beginnings” implies hope, whether for Young Women, for a nation, or for us individually at a New Year. Sometimes America is accused of lacking a sense of history because we presume that we can reinvent ourselves without sufficiently recognizing how the heavy hand of history constrains our possibilities. The truth is not that America lacks a sense of history but that our sense of history encourages us to regard it as full of possibility, for us as it was for our forebears. Our sense of the past persuades us to believe in the possibility of new beginnings.

I confess that new beginnings are on my mind tonight for reasons other than Young Women, the inauguration, and the new year. As I write this, my middle daughter is in labor delivering her fifth child. It has been a long labor. We are anxious but hopeful that we’ll soon have a new granddaughter. Her birth will be a new beginning both for her family and for her.

For her parents and grandparents, this birth will provide a chance to renew our attempt to get parenting right. For her siblings, the birth of a new sister will forever change the family dynamics. Her twin sisters have no idea they are about to be displaced.

For my new granddaughter herself, this day, which she will celebrate as her birthday, in fact constitutes a new beginning rather than a beginning. She does not come into existence tonight *ex nihilo* but enters mortality “trailing clouds of glory from God ... who is our home.”³

Jesus taught that we all must be born again. This familiar doctrine of new beginnings seems particularly shocking to me tonight as I contemplate an actual birth. I understand Nicodemus’s bafflement: “How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?” (John 3:4). But I also feel afresh the profound promise embedded in Jesus’ paradoxical teaching

that “ye must be born again” (John 3:7). In it lies the joyful hope that the clammy hand of the past need not choke the future with its cold grip. We enjoy, through Christ, what Kierkegaard called “the possibility of possibility.”⁴ We have hope in new beginnings.

The core good news of the gospel is that we can begin again. The future has been opened by the Atonement. This makes possible new beginnings for all who embrace it. This is good news, good news indeed.