

“Backpacks and Baptisms: You are Marvelously Made for ‘This New Year’”

[Jeremiah 18:1-11](#)

[Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17](#)

[Luke 14:25-33](#)

Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts; for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boast of your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

O God of New Beginnings

May we be curious and compassionate

Fill our hearts with the joy of new friends

and our minds with wonder of learning new things.

And the knowledge that you are in each of our moments: joyful and sorrowful.

Amen.ⁱ

It is the most wonderful time of the year.

Back to School.

We love it for so many reasons.

For the shopping of crayons, markers, the exact sort of paper, that crisp snap of the binders, ready to receive the new year's knowledge.

We return to a routine, sports, schedules, expectations.

Even, loud boiling test tubes, as our closing hymn sings.

The return of school zones and traffic.

It's exciting.

Pencils have been bought, school lists completed, first day of school photos taken on doorsteps with new and clean lunch boxes, smiles are big on children's faces and parents' too.

Backpacks have been filled with blank sheets of paper, permissions slips signed for the year, excited and anxious children delivered by excited and anxious parents.

A week of excitement, joy and let's be honest anxiety.

Regardless of if it is your first day of kindergarten or grad school, or teaching as a first-year teacher or veteran.

Everything is new.

Like the pencils that are too big because they have yet to be used and molded by our grip, the first day of school holds so many unknowns and we aren't quite sure of the space where we fit in.

We hold our breath, parents, teachers, students alike, as we plunge right in- taking that brave first step into the new year, new school, new community.

And we are all in, armed with who we are, a backpack of supplies and a lunch box, the new year begins.

Even if you do not have your own children, you remember those days yourself, don't you?

The joy of seeing friends after the summer.

The anxiety of where will I sit for lunch and with whom?

The curiosity of do I have the teacher I wanted?

The question of what have we gotten ourselves into?

I imagine Jeremiah today, while called by God as a prophet, might be wondering the same thing. God said to Jeremiah, "Go to the Potter's house, I am going to teach you something." 18 chapters into our time with Jeremiah, this is not the first day of school. Jeremiah has been listening to and sharing God's message to the people of Israel in exile for quite some time. By now, Jeremiah's backpack is full of notes, assignments, and projects. No, today in our reading we are into the first months of school, this is a first field trip of sorts.

And here, at the Potter's shed, God reminds Jeremiah of the very visual work of the potter shaping the clay. The potter uses clay that is already there. Taking the clay and re-forming it. Re-creating, molding it into something new. External pressure shaping what otherwise would sit there as a lump.

God is reminding Jeremiah that, in the midst of where they are, God is shaping the people of Israel. All that is given to them will mold them, educate them and form them. All that is given to them will transform them, like the potter on the wheel shaping the clay. This is a new day for that clay, a new beginning, a new shape. This message of transformation is what Jeremiah is to share with the people.

This time here will shape you. Like clay amidst the potter's hands, you will be transformed into something new. There is a plan, you will be shaped, there will be change.

Ya'll, shaping clay is not a gentle process, it messy, uncomfortable, not asked for by the clay, and forceful. God is reminding Jeremiah that this transformation will be much like a potter's work with clay- with great strong guidance and will create something so marvelous that you cannot even imagine the end product.

In our Gospel today, Jesus, too, is speaking to his disciples, his closest followers and they are being taught a new thing. Continuing as a disciple, a follower, a student of Jesus means that there will be messy times, there will be times where the community that the disciples will find themselves will be re-formed. There will be times where all else will push against you. Life will be hard. You will have to say NO to some things because of your yes to God.

Both Jeremiah and the disciples are being invited into taking that one marvelous brave step into being fully into the new community that is being formed by God. Leaving all else behind. Being shaped by our creator. Being wholly (holy?) loved for who they are and willing to risk everything else for the knowledge of this love.

You are marvelously and wonderfully made, our psalmist says to us.

(In a short while) We will re-affirm this understanding of our own personhood in our baptisms today. As a congregation, re-affirming our baptismal covenant with parents and godparents, we begin again with excitement and maybe a little bit of anxiety about starting fresh in the eyes of God's grace and love.

Each of our baptizand parents are acutely aware of that anxiety and excitement in each of moment of their child's journey right now. Armed with diaper bags and bottles, they lean into each new day of learning.

In baptism, we leave all else and re-commit our faithfulness to God.

With these promises, we are all in, with our heart and mind and soul. Today's baptismal moment is also our own new beginning and willingness to start fresh, pencils sharpened, for this new chapter in our own journey of faith.

We know that God knows all of our ins and outs and is on this journey with us and LOVES US.

With Jeremiah, God accompanies the prophet in each of the messages given, the call to transformation and the belief in each person's ability to be formed anew.

With the disciples, Jesus reminds them that while the journey is not going to be easy, their response to God's call in their lives and listening to this call (and our call) should guide all of our footsteps.

To all of these calls, we, as disciples, say "I will with God's help"- just like our baptizands and their parents and godparents starting for the first time on these promises together, we say them together with gladness and singleness of heart, knowing we too will be formed and reformed in this messy and wonderful life of the world to come.

The truth is, those backpacks and diaper bags, while essential tools for our journey, are security blankets like the character Linus carries in the Charles Schultz' cartoon Peanuts.

What we really need for this journey is right within us, the deep love and beloved-ness of being a child of God. This is what Jesus is asking of his disciples, that is what God is asking of Jeremiah and the Israelites. To let go of everything else and be shaped by this love.

Friends, you have what you need.

Have no fear, take heart and jump in with the deep gladness of this new day to start fresh.

Amen.

¹ Adapted from Kayla Craig's "A Prayer for the First Day of School" found in her book, *To Light Their Way: A Collection of Prayers and Liturgies for Parents*