Sunday, January 12, 1992
HOW TO MAKE A NEW BEGINNING
Philippians 3:12-16; Luke 9:57-62

January, the first month of the new year, is a natural time for thinking about new beginnings. Another year has passed, and it's time to look forward with hope. One way to put your dreams about the new year into words is to imagine the headlines you would like to see in print in 1992. Last year, a local advertising agency sent me a notepad for my desk, and the printing on the top of each page said, "Hoped for Headlines." Then each sheet had an imaginary headline.

Here are a few examples:

CONGRESS TO FOREGO PAY IMPROVE GOLF SCORES.
ACCORDION MUSIC FOUND TO BE CAUSE OF COMMON COLD.
STALLONE SAYS ABSOLUTELY NO MORE ROCKY MOVIES.
ADVERTISING HONORED FOR CONTRIBUTION TO MANKIND.
AIRLINE PRICES SLASHED, MIDDLE SEATS OUTLAWED.
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO TO DISCONTINUE FOOTBALL PROGRAM.
VAST QUANTITIES OF U.S. OIL DISCOVERED; WILL BEGIN SELLING TO MIDDLE EAST.
NEBRASKA PASSING HAILED IN ORANGE BOWL VICTORY.
DOCTOR FINED FOR WAITING ROOM DELAYS.

It's a fun game to play for dreaming about the future. Try it at home. Write out the headlines you'd most like to read in 1992. And then put down some personal headlines about your own life for this new year and beyond.

The first step in making a new beginning is to look forward with hope and then combine that with expectant waiting. Hope and expectant waiting go together.
The other day, I heard a television news correspondent conclude his story by saying, "We'll just have to wait and see what happens." I suddenly realized that I had been hearing that cliché in a wide variety of situations lately. As a concluding comment to a report or conversation, that phrase implies passivity. We're letting unknown forces assume command and deliver a final result. The matter is no longer in our hands. We'll just sit and wait.

Terry Anderson, a hostage who was released last month, is a living example of hope and that waiting need not mean passivity. For six years, he was forced to wait in a dark cell, sometimes alone, often chained. His captors were brutal. They tortured him physically and mentally. How did he respond? "You do what you have to do," he said to reporters when he arrived in Damascus. "You wake up every day, summon up the energy from somewhere, and you get through the day, day after day after day." There were periods when he said he felt like giving up, overwhelmed with despair at the suffering and hopelessness of his condition. But he was not passive. His was a waiting of active expectancy, even though there was no clear vision of how or when the story would end. He filled his horribly truncated experience in Thomas Sutherland — he learned to speak French. From his captors, he learned more Arabic. When guards took away slips of paper he had fashioned into playing cards, he created a makeshift chess set. An avid weightlifter before his capture, Anderson used two plastic water bottles to simulate dumbbells.

The first book he was allowed to have was a Bible, which he devoured. In conversation with other captives, he regained the Christian faith of his youth. When asked what kept him going, he points to the people who were with him, his faith, and his stubbornness.

There was nothing Anderson could do to escape or break the physical bonds that held him, but he exemplified the same kind of expectant waiting that Viktor Frankl practiced and later wrote about when he was a prisoner in a Nazi camp during World War II.

Look forward with hope and then wait expectantly, not passively — that's the first step in making a new beginning.

Charles Dutton was born in Baltimore. Raised in a housing project with parents who were divorced when he was three, Charles found his acceptance and satisfaction on the streets where the tough, older guys became his heroes. He quit school in the 8th grade and spent his time with street friends. His life hit rock bottom at the age of 17. In a fight with a neighborhood young man, he was sentenced to 18 months in prison. Paroled after 7 months, he was soon back in prison again. This time the sentence was 3 years.

His penchant for fighting and trouble followed him into prison. Nearing the end of his term, Charles instigated a prison riot. Eight more years were added to his sentence.

He did not participate in any of the prison activities. His only outlet was reading, and through his reading, he found a pathway toward a new life. He decided one day to read a play, Day of Absence by Douglas Turner Ward. When he persuaded some inmates to join him in putting on the play, something happened. "I knew right away," he said, "that this was what I had been meant to do. I wanted to act more than I had ever wanted anything else in my life."

How does a 22-year-old man, without a high school diploma and with an unfinished prison term, realize his dream to become an actor? It wasn't easy, but it combined looking forward with hope and expectant waiting. He began by earning a high-school-equivalency diploma while in prison. His progress convinced the parole board to release him in 1976. This enabled him to enroll in Towson State University in Maryland to study acting. Through the passion of his dream and the uniqueness of his skill, Charles impressed the chairman of the department. He encouraged Charles to apply for a scholarship at the Yale Drama School, which he was awarded in 1982. At the age of 34, Charles was on Broadway playing the role of a black trumpet player in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom by August Wilson. The New York Times referred to him as "one of the season's most talked about actors."

From jail to Yale, and even beyond that, is the story of Charles Dutton, a young man who made a new beginning by looking forward with hope and combining that with expectant waiting. Looking forward with hope means having a dream and then using the time in whatever way possible to help that dream happen.

The second step in making a new beginning is to leave some things behind. And that's not always easy. Charles Dutton had to leave behind his street gang friends and his tendency to get into trouble. He had to leave behind his old self before he could begin working on a new self.
But it's not easy. We human beings do not like to let go of anything, even those things which hurt us. We have difficulty letting go of our mistakes and failures, our grudges, our hates, our resentments, our old assumptions, and our bad habits. We hang onto these things as if they were the most precious possessions we owned.

There are many losses in life which are necessary because we grow by losing, leaving behind, and letting go, and at the same time by looking forward with hope, filled with expectant waiting.

That's what the Apostle Paul was writing about in his letter to the Philippians when he said, "But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Jesus said it another way: "Anyone who puts their hand to the plow and looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God."

But why do we have such difficulty leaving behind our old assumptions and bad habits and accepting new ideas in order to make a new beginning? Why do we have such a hard time dreaming new dreams and considering new ways of doing things?

Because we are always more comfortable with the familiar, even though it might be wrong or not work as well as doing something in a different way. A psychologist, Edward de Bono, has studied how the mind forms (and resists) new ideas. He compares the process of thinking to digging holes and uses this example: "It is not possible to dig a hole in a different place by digging the same hole deeper. Logic is the tool used to dig deeper holes. But if a hole is in the wrong place, then no amount of digging it deeper is going to put it in the right place. No matter how obvious this may seem to every digger, it is still easier to go on digging in the same hole than to start all over again in a new place."

This disinclination to abandon a half-dug hole (which is like questioning an old assumption) is partly a reluctance to abandon the investment of effort that has gone into the hole without seeing some return. It is easier to go on doing the same thing rather than figuring out or dreaming up a better way.

To use another metaphor, it is not possible to look in a new direction by looking harder in the same direction. No sooner are two thoughts strung together than there is a direction, and it becomes easier to string further thoughts along in the same direction than to ignore it or question whether we are going in the right direction in the first place.

This is why repentance is such a persistent theme in the New Testament and in the Christian faith. What is repentance? It is the willingness to re-examine our basic assumptions, to make a turn and start off in a new direction, to make a new beginning and leave behind our old bad habits, wrong thoughts, and disabling prejudices. Unfortunately, repentance is too often thought of in negative terms, whereas it is the opposite. It is leaving our mistakes behind. It is a fresh start with the slate wiped clean. It is the goodness of God that leads to repentance — not God's harshness, not God's judgment, but God's goodness. With God, your present and your future are always more important than your past.

Life is a series of sharp turns, of being willing to make new beginnings and of not being afraid to explore alternate ways of doing things and think new thoughts.

How do we make a new beginning? By looking forward with hope, by leaving some things behind, and third, by living joyfully in the present. All three are intimately connected and actually are one. For example, if you are not able to look forward with hope, then it's very difficult to live joyfully in the present.
People of hope always seem to have great projects afoot. With a boundless confidence in the future, they have a tendency to wring everything possible out of today — planning, tasting,

touching, reaching, growing. Because they have ideas as to where they are going, the present has more meaning.

On the other hand, there are those who try to live only in the future or in the past and as a result miss much of the joy of the present. Here's a parent who can hardly wait for the child to grow up and be on its own. That mother or father can miss enjoying the child in the present. The opposite mistake, of course, is to try to freeze a child because we cannot bear to let go of the present.

When Peter, James, and John went with Jesus on the mountain to pray and had a deep and moving spiritual adventure, Peter wanted to freeze the experience. "Let's build a shrine and stay here," he said. "Let's stay in the present moment always." We know the feeling. We've all wanted to stop and freeze certain moments or times in our lives. Sometimes it is difficult to let go and move on. But Jesus would have none of it. He led them down the mountain. He knew that life moves on, always to new beginnings, but that does not negate the enjoyment, the savoring, of the present.

With each day, God affirms each one of us with God's blessing. Breathe or say a prayer of thanksgiving, and then move on to where God is leading.

As you begin this new year, remember to look and move forward with hope, leave your excess baggage behind, and live joyfully in the present. That's how to make a new beginning, and that's how to follow where God is leading. Amen.