

This Fall: Making a Fresh Start
Lamentations 3:22-23

Eugene Peterson (who translated *The Message* version of the Bible) tells a story of when he was just a young boy, growing up in Montana. Next door to the modest home he lived in was a farm owned by a big Norwegian man named Leonard Storm. Mr. Storm and his wife Olga were strange and a little scary to 5-year-old Eugene, so mostly he stayed far away from them. But he would stand behind the fence that separated their properties and watch Mr. Storm plow his fields. What that little guy really wanted was to ride on Mr. Storm's John Deere tractor. He would never ask—he was way too intimidated to do that—but he would stand at the edge of their property and just watch.

One day Mr. Storm spotted Eugene at the fence, from about 100 yards away. He stopped the tractor, stood up from the seat, and began waving at him with his big arms. Peterson says, “I had never seen anyone use gestures like that. He looked mean and angry... He was yelling at me, but the wind was blowing against him, and I couldn't hear anything. I knew that I was probably where I shouldn't be. Five year-old boys often are. I turned and left. I hadn't *felt* I was doing anything wrong—I was only watching from what I thought was a safe distance and wishing that someday, somehow, I could get to ride that tractor. But I went home feeling rejected, rebuked.”¹

The next Sunday, Mr. Storm called Eugene over after church. “Son, why didn't you come out in the field on Thursday and ride the tractor with me?” he asked. “I was waving at you to come. Why did you leave?”

He left, of course, because that waving motion wasn't what he thought “Come on over” looked like. He was waiting for something small, something that looked like one finger crooked toward him a couple of times. Small wasn't the way Mr. Storm did things; only little Eugene Peterson didn't know him well enough to understand him when he was offering a welcome.

A few days later, Eugene was back at that fence. This time, when that big sweeping motion of invitation came, he ran across the field and climbed up into the big green John Deere. Mr. Storm leaned down and scooped him up, and let him stand behind the steering wheel as they pulled that plow down a long stretch of field together.

Sometimes what we need most is another chance. Think of how many words in our theological vocabulary begin with the prefix “re”. *Religion*, which means to bind back together something that has come apart. Re-birth, re-member, resurrection. That prefix appears in our words about God because we don't always get it right the first time. *Re* is an expression of hope. It means that no matter how far away we might wander from the life God created us to live; we can always find our way back. And when we do, we will be welcomed back, every time, by the God whose arms are open. We have a God of second chances.

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, p. 158-9

This is good news for all of us. Because every one of us has intentions more noble than our actions. Even the best of us can be distracted, or discouraged, or enticed away from the right path, even if we had a glimpse of it once. The whole darn Bible is about how God deals with us in our human tendency to get off track.

Today we're inviting you to re-commit yourself to the kind of deepening spiritual life that perhaps you've made resolutions about before. Few of us are able to change ourselves the way we'd like to. None of us can do it alone. Finding a small group of people with whom you can be honest and authentic, a group of people who are facing in the same direction as you, hoping for the same kind of change you are seeking for yourself, can make all the difference. Small groups are where transformation happens. They are the places that make it safe for you to hold your own life up to the light and see the traces of holiness more clearly.

"God's mercies are new every morning," the writer of Lamentations says. Who would write that? I think it must have been someone who knew what it feels like to get to the end of the day and feel like all of today's mercies are used up. Like he's tried lots of times to get things right and has failed every time.

And then you wake up in the morning and you see God waving at you with a big arm, like Eugene Peterson's Leonard Storm, saying, "Come on. Let's do this!"

We come to you, God, you who are the trainer of hopes, physician for bruised hearts, companion to every one of us who has felt lost or forsaken.

We come wanting something we barely know how to speak or imagine. We yearn for something we have not yet learned to name.

But maybe what we seek is to experience anew the presence of your Spirit.

We confess that we take your presence for granted;

That we are reminded of it mostly when life spins out of control.

That we are often too busy or too consumed with the ordering of the next few moments to even *want* the fullness of life you offer us.

Let us find the time and the will to look up so that you can renew our souls.

We have lost our way.

We have become mind-weary. Some of us are body-bent. And still you call to us.

For ourselves and for your people everywhere we pray for healing—of mind, and body, and soul.

Strengthen those who feel they have little to hope for.

Comfort those who are living in night times of grief.

Startle us anew, God, with your spirit that brings healing even from ashes.

Call us, and then let us hear your call, to live our lives in faithfulness,

Doing your justice, living your kindness, walking humbly with you and with all those—beautiful and un-beautiful—in whom you live. Amen.