Third Sunday after Epiphany
Isaiah 9:1-4, 1 Corinthians 1:10-18, Matthew 4:12-23

In college, I double-majored in math and logic. Though the first two logic courses I took were standard courses in the Philosophy Department with 15-20 students enrolled, the remaining logic classes I took to complete my major were with just two other students, essentially small group study. These courses were the hardest courses I took while in college. On one of the exams, all three of us performed miserably. I can’t recall exactly, but I believe my score was somewhere in the 30% range. I was devastated that I performed so poorly. Yet, I will always remember my professor sitting down with me after he returned the exams – he could see I was upset. He said to me, “Jeanne, think about how much you know. You understand 30%…all new material you didn’t know before.” He was a good guy. In his kindness, he taught me a lesson that has stayed with me: we have a choice in how we approach life, how we understand life. Scripture, this morning, invites us to reflect on how we approach life. We can choose to open ourselves to the gift inherent in God’s Creation. Scripture proclaims: we can live with the awareness that new life is all around us. “The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.” Jesus illuminates the ever-present, new life that is integral to Creation.

One of the many reasons I love living in the Mid-West is the change of seasons. I love the beauty of the first snow fall in winter. Yet, we all know that feeling we get, usually in March, when we have just about had it with the cloudy days, and the piles of dirty snow, and the bundling up in layers. But, then the sun comes out and the temperature rises and suddenly we notice the crocuses and our spirits lift…the wonder of nature is that from a dormant winter
comes new life.

I am awed by the ability of the human body to heal through different circumstances and in different ways. Consider the emotion of anger, how upset we can get about something that just seems so wrong. But, with time, we cool off. Maybe we recognize that we jumped to a conclusion and we are able now to see the issue in a new light. Maybe we realize we can take action; there is something we can say or something we can do that will turn a wrong into a right. Maybe we are ready to turn it over to God and trust there will be resolution. There is healing and new life.

We know the pain of losing someone close to us to death. But, through the grieving process we are able to heal. God has given us the ability to work through the stages of grief, as first proposed by Kubler-Ross – denial, anger, bargaining, depression – not always in a linear fashion, but we work through the stages of grief to come to a place of acceptance, of understanding that death ends a life, not a relationship, and so we can live in a new way with our loved one in our hearts. There is healing and new life.

Perhaps we have experienced the pain of estrangement – a break in a relationship with a family member or good friend. We get ourselves into such a difficult place because when the problem doesn’t get resolved, the hurt grows and we begin to feel raw from the mixed emotions, the emotion from the wrong we feel has been inflicted on us and the emotion from being honest with ourselves about the hurt we have contributed to the situation. With time, healing does occur. Perhaps we discover there has been a misunderstanding. Perhaps we find the strength to be vulnerable with each other and talk through the disagreement. Perhaps we come to believe that the relationship is more important than coming to an agreement. Patience and prayer bring healing and new life.
I am awed by our ability to heal emotionally and by the ability of our body to heal physically. Our immune system fights off viruses. Wounds heal when platelets form a clot and white blood cells fight off infection and new tissue forms. Of course, not all diseases can be cured, not yet at least. But, God is loving us through all of life and desires for us to know peace in that love. I recall being with a parishioner while he was dying. His wife and their two daughters were with us, gathered around his hospital bed. I was so moved by this man who had arrived at a place of peace, accepting the diagnosis, choosing not to chase procedures unlikely to extend his life. Of course, there was sadness. But, more so, holiness was palpable in his decision to trust and to rest in God’s love. There is healing and new life.

New life isn’t always experienced easily or readily. A year ago, at the end of November in 2015, we held All Things Advent for the first time here at St. Paul’s, an all parish event celebrating the beginning of the Advent season. One of the activities at this event was bulb planting. We were given a glass vase and some small rocks to put at the bottom of the vase and a paperwhite bulb to place on top of the rocks. When we got home, we added water. And, over the course of the Advent season, we waited for the bulb to bloom, a daily reminder during the season of Advent that we are waiting for Christ’s birth. The bulbs should take about four weeks to bloom, so the timing is great. The bulbs should bloom right around Christmas. So, I waited. I checked my bulb every morning before I left to come to St. Paul’s and every evening when I arrived home. Nothing was happening. Christmas came and went and I continued to wait and wait and wait. One day I mentioned my waiting to Meg von der Heydt, our Director of Children’s Ministries and organizer of All Things Advent, and learned that she, also, was continuing to wait for her bulb to bloom. So, we waited together. Neither one of us wanted to give up. Low and behold, right around Easter, we were both delighted when our paperwhite took
off….growing so fast it seemed to be growing right in front of our eyes.

“The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.” Jesus is the light of the world. Jesus’ life illuminates the ever-present, new life that is integral to Creation. In his life, Jesus inspired us to move beyond a strict set of rules telling us everything we cannot do. Rather, he urged us to be all that we can be. Creation offers us the ever-present opportunity to be growing and maturing into our complete selves. New life is ever-present. New life comes through the change of seasons, through our immune system, through reconciliation, through grieving and acceptance and trust, and, of course, through our ability to love and to create and to reason. It is a wonder that we are created in this way, God’s gift of love…that the human body and the human heart can heal and become new again. The Holy Spirit is inspiring us to see this new life all around us. Thanks be to God. Amen.