

“The New Beginnings of God”
August 28, 2022

Obadiah 1:1-21

One of the great things about living in Iowa City is that there always seems to be new opportunity to start again.

January arrives and it’s a new year—a new calendar with new possibilities.

January also brings the start of a new semester at the University and Kirkwood—another chance in the dark and cold of winter to build on the successes of the fall or to set aside the failings of the past and do it right.

The springtime brings, well, the newness of spring as well as the celebration of Easter with its promise of resurrection and new life. And we keep that going for seven weeks.

Then comes commencement—which we think of as an ending or high school or college days, but the word is really about beginning, isn’t it: commencing something new.

And as summer winds down, we discover to our delight that another new year is starting—the 2022-23 academic year with all of its promises and opportunities. This year the newly gilded dome of the Old Capitol shines over the Pentacrest and we have a new art museum to explore.

At any time of year, people of any age can begin once more in this town.

It wasn’t much of a surprise, then, a few years ago when Sperling’s *Best Places* named Iowa City as the best city in the United States for starting over. If you’re looking for a fresh start, this is where you want to be. “Iowa City really is a nice town,” the report said. “It has an attractive downtown, a well-educated population, and a great community feel to it.”

You know what they mean, don’t you?

The short book of Obadiah that we heard this morning might be our guide, a how-to manual for our fresh starts in this place. The prophet is concerned with how people are able move forward after tragedy, after suffering harm, and even after *inflicting* harm.

And here’s the surprising thing about all of this that we discover in these 21 verses: God extends the opportunity to start over to all people, to the good and the bad, the survivors and those who have been called “guilty bystanders.”

Obadiah starts by addressing the guilty, so let’s begin there as well. After all, that’s often the group we find ourselves in, isn’t it? (I don’t think I’m talking only of myself here, but I don’t know. There might be *some* innocent people out there.)

The prophet’s concern is with the nation of Edom, a name that means “red region,” and whose sins, as Isaiah put it, were “as scarlet.” The red clay and cliffs gave Edom its name. The city of Petra, carved into those cliffs and seen in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, was in the region of Edom.

Now, often when we read scripture, we hear of nations that went down to the dust long ago. They or their unfamiliar leaders are condemned and we really don't understand why. So, when God speaks through Obadiah and says to Edom, "I will surely make you least among the nations; you shall be utterly despised," we wonder what's going on.

Edom was Israel's neighbor to the southeast. There was a close relationship between the people of the two nations—and also great hostility. Edomites were understood to be the descendants of Esau, the twin brother of Jacob. Genesis tells the story of the two of them wrestling in the womb and throughout their lives. It was a story that sought to give an account of the ongoing family feud between the two nations. They were relatives *and* enemies—you might know what that is like.

The Old Testament scholar, James Limburg says that as Jerusalem and Judah fell to the Babylonians, "the Edomites gloated a bit, even rejoiced, and then finally joined in the looting themselves. When Jewish survivors asked them for sanctuary, they saw it as their civic duty to turn the refugees over to the occupying troops. According to the prophet, this was all wrong. They should have *stood with* their neighbors; they chose to *stand by*." And they were not *innocent* but *guilty bystanders*.

After killing his brother, Abel, Cain asks God: "Am I my brother's keeper?" The Edomites might have answered, "No," but that does not seem to be the prophet's judgment.

Standing in the long line of faithful Jewish thought that runs through Obadiah, we hear Jesus telling his followers that what they do to the least of people, they do to him. Perhaps the followers of Jesus needed this reminder—and *still* need this reminder—because we followers of Jesus have something of the Edomites in us. "When did we see you hungry or thirsty, a stranger or naked, sick or in prison?" we ask, only to be told that we see Jesus in all manner of need at all manner of times.

It is still all too easy to turn away, to stand by instead of to stand with.

The wrong we have done, the good that we have failed to do, cry out. "Your allies have deceived you," Obadiah says to the Edomites. Even without allies, we are far too good at self-deception.

Such actions and such inaction have consequences. Those who inactively stood by will find themselves abandoned by friends; those who gloated will be despised; those who looted will be plundered.

How might such a people, start over? How might we, after the wrong we have done and the good we have failed to do, start over?

Obadiah comes to this—but first we need to consider the victims, the survivors. And such are some of you as well, I am certain: those who, at some point in your lives, went through some terrible times, those who have known betrayal, great difficulty; those who are experiencing trials even today.

Healing is not always rapid—you know that.

Starting over is not always easy.

Obadiah speaks to such people—those who made it through the siege of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon, or perhaps even to those who have returned after exile. Their lives are in shambles, their city in ruins.

They are told that the suffering they have endured will be experienced by others—especially the despised Edomites. In words that echo Joel’s talk of the cutting, swarming, hopping, and destroying locusts that we heard a couple of weeks ago, Obadiah speaks of fire, of burning, of stubble, of all things being consumed.

Of course, no one takes that much comfort from the punishment of others—even if it provides some satisfaction at first. Vengeance wears thin.

So the survivors also hear: “On Mount Zion”—that is, Jerusalem—“there shall be those that escape, and it shall be holy...Those who have been saved shall go up to Mount Zion.”

After disaster, to those who have survived, to those who want to start over, to those who *must* start over, Obadiah speaks as so many prophets do, not only of the reversal of fortune, of the punishment of the guilty, but also of the ultimate providential care of God.

In the end, the final word is an affirmation of the sovereignty of God who rules over all people: the good and the bad, the survivors and the guilty bystanders. “The kingdom shall be the Lord’s,” the prophet concludes, a statement of the mystery in which all of life is lived. And that realm is a realm of forgiveness, compassion, and renewal for all.

When trouble comes upon us and when we bring trouble to others,

When disaster and suffering befall us and when we wreak disaster and suffering on others,

We discover again that we live in the presence of the living God from whom we can neither run nor hide.

Sometimes starting over must begin with confession and the repentance that both turns in a new direction and makes amends. An honest assessment of what we have done and what we have failed to do might leave us feeling something like those Edomites, reduced to stubble, burnt, consumed. But through such fire we once again know the forgiving love of God as an ever-present reality. And in that love, we are able to rise and walk, to create a future for ourselves and others that is better than the dismal present.

Sometimes starting over begins with the difficult acceptance of all that we have been through, of all the hurt we have experienced, and even, yes, an acceptance of the ways in which we have hurt ourselves. If we are to know the promised “escape,” it will be found as we unflinchingly recognize the pain we have known, the pain we still live with. Then we will once again be able to see the longed-for “salvation”—the wholeness, the healing presence of God that is there for us at all times, restoring, renewing, rebuilding.

Iowa City is a great place to start again, to start over. In these days we are given another opportunity to do this. And really, that opportunity comes to each of us, in whatever condition we find ourselves, at all times.

Now is the time.

Now is *your* time.

Do what you need to do.

Once more enter into the new beginnings of God.