

“Baptism: A Fresh Beginning”

January 21, 2024, The Rev. Dr. Russell C. Sullivan, Jr.

I have many memories of children whom I baptized. There’s the child whose mother couldn’t keep her quiet in the service before the baptism, and so to quiet little Rebecca, she kept feeding her the bottle, kept feeding, and kept feeding. I was the one who got to burp her the moment I picked her up. Yes, you can guess what happened; I was the one who was baptized—and it wasn’t with water! Baptisms are filled with memories. Most of us won’t remember our baptismal day, and that’s usually the way it is, unless you are an adult. Someone has to tell us about it, and usually somebody has to tell us what it meant long after it happened. I am sure Dean’s family will be sharing the memories of this day with him.

Every now and then I encounter an adult who had a deeply moving religious experience and their faith is deepened, and they ask me, if he or she can be baptized again to mark this significant event. I tell the person that there was nothing wrong with how you began the Christian faith. We don’t re-baptize, but I also say that this deepening of faith is the result of that beginning, that baptism in which you are joined to Christ and marked as his own. And there are usually many such moments in a life that is growing in faith and in the knowledge that we are God’s children called to serve God. Life is a process of growth and maturity, and so is discipleship. You see, baptism is a beginning. It is the inaugural event in which the Spirit of God begins the great work of shaping us in the image and likeness of Christ. And every good beginning requires a good finish, and a good finish requires nurture.

And it was also true with Jesus. During Christmas we spent time talking about Jesus the baby or Jesus the child. On Christmas Eve it was all about Jesus the baby, about God, as the poet says, dwindling into an infant. We heard the beautiful story of Jesus’ parents taking him to the Temple to worship God and to be nourished by their tradition. Today, however, we hear of Jesus leaping into adulthood. One day Jesus puts down his carpenter tools because he is hounded by a profound question. It’s not an unusual question because in some form or other we all ask it: “What’s my life all about? What is its purpose?” It’s the question of vocation: what is God calling me to be or to do? Long before Jesus made his personal decision that day, the Spirit of God was preparing him. All along we are receiving hints about his vocation.

At this moment in the Gospel is when Jesus begins to act on the stirrings of the Spirit. He leaves Galilee, that little backwater province in Palestine, and goes to the Jordan, where his fire-breathing preacher of a cousin, John, is making quite a name for himself. John is calling for spiritual renewal. And Jesus lines up with the crowd. When he approaches John, John hesitates. It is as if he feels unworthy to baptize the one whose sandals, he declares moments before, he is unworthy to carry. “No, let us trade places. I should be baptized by you.” For John baptism was given for forgiveness and cleansing of sin, something that wasn’t Jesus’ problem. Jesus is not your typical baptismal candidate.

Jesus says, “No. Let it be this way now. It is right and good, according to God.” Jesus begins a journey that he is determined with God’s help is to finish. He is not being “dunked” and that’s the end of the deal. His baptism is not the end of his journey. It is only just the beginning for Jesus of his journey into his ministry and calling. But what a beginning! John complies with Jesus’ request, opens his arms, and supports Jesus, as he lowers him gently into the waters of the Jordan River and baptizes him. When the two men emerge from the cool, rushing water, the sky opens. And the people watching the heavens open, know from the scriptures about Moses and Elijah, that the thing to happen next is thunder and fire. Instead, the Holy Spirit, falls gently on Jesus. And a voice calls out from heaven: “This is my Son whom I love and who pleases me greatly.”

And suddenly the carpenter from Galilee has a name, an identity. A claim has been placed upon him. He is the beloved One, the Son. He has been marked and sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, marked as God’s person forever. This baptism is his inaugural moment in the mission God has for him. And it’s just the beginning for Jesus. In the very next chapter, we read that the same Spirit that landed on Jesus in his baptism also led him into the wilderness, the difficult wilderness of temptation where Jesus wrestles with his

vocation and understands what it means to be God's Son. That afternoon in the Jordan was the beginning to a life of obedience and fellowship with God, the beginning to a life of service and self-giving. And at the end of his life hanging from the cross he proclaims, "It is finished." His baptism was then complete. Baptism for Jesus wasn't only about forgiveness and repentance, and for us baptism too is more than forgiveness and repentance. In baptism we too are called child of God and given the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This beginning requires a journey and a finish. Most beginnings to any significant enterprise are inauspicious when you think about. We celebrate them. We mark them with anniversaries. But they aren't the fulfillment of the journey. I can't tell you how many weddings I have done in which brides and grooms sweated over every detail of the wedding ceremony. And I always tell them that I hope they put as much effort into working on their marriage as they have in planning their wedding ceremony. Every beautiful and precious beginning requires a good finish. Baptism requires that also.

That's why making promises is at the heart of our baptismal service. In baptism God promises to love us forever. God calls us his beloved. In baptism we hear his voice calling us and naming us as his children. In baptism we get our marching orders to follow God into the world as his servant. God promises that we are not alone in the task of ministry and that God has put his Spirit upon us. In baptism the Holy Spirit of God sweeps over us to bring out the new, to give us resources and courage to face the temptation to be less than what God wants us to be, and to give us that Holy Spirit-driven energy to go with us wherever the difficult journey of discipleship takes us. Jesus needed that energy to face a difficult journey that ended in the cross. Paul Tillich once said that Jesus is the only person who has been completely true to the voice he heard at this baptism. Jesus gave everything, all his dreams, all his life. He gave himself to the people of God and stood in solidarity with his hurting people. God promised never to forsake him. Jesus was baptized not at the end of his ministry, but at the beginning. And that is true for us. Baptism prepares us to live a life of purpose, integrity and meaning. It begins for us a lifetime of living into the call of God. It paves the way for a journey and our quest for justice, peace, and wholeness, in all the relationships to which we are called as Christians.

Promises matter for the finish of that journey. Today God promises in baptism to be with little Dean Alan Hudson. This morning Dean was washed in the waters of baptism, received the mark of Christ on his brow, and received Christ's blessing. His parents were asked to care for him as a child of God, to treat him as Christ's future disciple, and to see that he grows to love Christ. They will work as parents to make sure that this good beginning has a good finish. And we in the church are Dean's baptismal family, and we have promised also to bring all the love, teaching, and support that is necessary for Dean to have a great finish. None of us finishes a great journey of growth and sacrifice alone. We need each other. No parent can possibly impart to their children the fullness of life's meaning, the teaching of good morality, and the call to love and forgive one another. Children need a church to mentor them. We can only mentor children if we are willing to live into our baptismal promises and to finish the journey we began in baptism. We have a calling to grow and to learn and to follow Jesus Christ.

There is a famous story about the great reformer, Martin Luther. Throughout all of his life, Martin Luther struggled. This great man of faith struggled with doubt, depression, and the sinking feeling that perhaps he could not finish the journey God called him to. When those feelings came upon him, he would repeat to himself: "I am baptized. I am baptized." That belief, supported by the promise of God, enabled Martin Luther to stay the course and to finish what he had begun.

When we are discouraged, when the task of faithfulness seems too arduous, remember your baptism. Remember God's promise, and that in a world of problems and personal dilemmas, God is forever steadfast. In those moments of memory God's Spirit will come to you again to help you endure, overcome, and finish what you began. For we are God's children, God's beloved!