

The Baptism of Christ
St. Matthew 2:1-12
January 12th, 2020
St. George's Episcopal Church
Fr. Chris

Beginning Life

Baptism

The Baptism of Christ in the Jordan River marks the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. It is the moment in His life in which he reveals who he is and what he is here to do. This is affirmed by John the Baptist who came to "prepare the way for Him." John exclaims, "Here is the lamb of God." God confirms Jesus' identity and ministry when a voice from heaven declares that this is God's beloved.

Baptisms are about beginnings. Today we celebrate the beginning of Anya Katharina's new life in God. We have many beginnings in life. How we begin something is very important.

When you apply for a job, it is said you should try to make a good first impression. When you start building something, you carefully prepare for the project, drawing up plans, preparing a "punch list", counting the cost first and ordering the needed supplies and equipment before you lay the shovel to the ground. When the shovel hits the soil, this is the ritual marking of the beginning of the project.

When you start a new business, you advertise and tell the community about what you have to offer to them, and publicize what you are doing as best as you possibly can. The same would be true when you are trying to make a fresh start in a church community.

How do you begin a new job, career or calling?

Politicians carefully prepare for their campaigns and hire consultants and advisors to help them to begin their campaign and get out their message. As I thought about the beginning of presidential campaigns, one came to mind quickly, and I found it hard to recall the beginnings of many others. No matter what your political views or opinions, you have to concede this to our current president, who made a very powerful and memorable start or beginning to his presidential campaign four years ago. We remember Donald Trump began his campaign by descending an escalator in Trump Tower to announce he would be a candidate for president. This image is burned in the collective memory of the country. It was very symbolic and metaphorical, and no doubt, it was carefully planned to be so. Here he was, descending from up above to the people below to become their leader. The way he began his campaign was powerful and effective.

How we begin things is vitally important, and foreshadows what will take place in our lives and in the community in which we live. This is very true when it comes to the Church.

Here the question is: how do you begin your ministry? Most clergy who start as a new pastor of a parish community will have a special service led by the bishop, entitled, "A Celebration of New Ministry." I just attended one of these last month at the invitation of the new pastor of an Episcopal Church in Hartford. Many clergy came to support her as she officially was named the "rector" of her parish family. It was an exciting event and gave a hopeful boost to her as she began her new ministry. It showed her congregation that she had a lot of support in accomplishing the work of the Lord in that place. More than 15 clergy showed up to support her. It was a happy and joyous occasion.

In truth it takes time to become either a leader of a parish or even to start a new job out in the secular world. It took me almost 5 years to really become the rector or pastor of my inner city church, despite a nice ceremony installing me in the position. I had to earn the trust of the congregation to become their pastor. It was about whether the members of the congregation could trust me and how authentic I was in my work. When you start a new position or job at work, you may be given a title and an office, but you must earn the trust of your superiors as well as those who work with you and for you. Beginnings and first impressions are always vitally important here. Bad or false starts may not be so easily redeemable later on, at least my experience has taught me. It never hurts to have a supportive celebration as you begin your new job.

In the church we have various beginnings we experience and celebrate, the chief among which is becoming a member. Today, in a very literal sense, Anya Katharina Tilley is becoming a member of this parish church, as many have done so before her. Baptism was an adult choice when it began in the early church, in response to the call of faith and the leading of the Holy Spirit, to a life following Jesus and God's teachings and to live a life of peace and grace. It is the beginning of a new ministry in the world as they grow and are led by their parents to do so. Katie and Maya Michel were Baptized and began their Christian lives here and they became volunteers handing out toys and games and greeting other children who came with their families to the Foodshare Truck in our parking lot. And Theo Kupchunos, our youngest volunteer on Tuesday mornings, (next to me,) at first attended the Foodshare distributions, greeting our guests from his stroller, and now he hands out the food, placing it in the bags of our guests, and he isn't even in kindergarten yet! These moments for me remind me of how Baptism marks the beginning of our lives in Christ. We witness this also in the faces of many of our young people who have volunteered to be acolytes, and played other rolls in the congregation and leading worship.

When we speak of Baptism, the more appropriate question would be, how do you begin a relationship? It is appropriate because Baptism is about beginning a new relationship with God and with God's people.

When we begin relationships, again we want to make a good first impression. We put on nice clothes and prepare ourselves to meet new friends and neighbors. This is very true when you go dating. You want to make a good start, a good first impression. You choose a nice place to meet, and perhaps go out for a nice dinner at your favorite restaurant. The question we all ponder before starting what may be an important relationship is, "how do I begin a relationship?"

Relationships need attention. New relationships that you hope will be important in your life must take priority in your life and you must set aside extra time for them, not only in

the beginning, but going forward. Imagine the man who finally convinces the woman of his dreams to marry him after investing a lot of his time, only to ignore her a couple of years into the relationship while nightly fooling with his tablet or his I-phone or ignoring her for his work which he has been bringing home from the office. Then he starts staying late in the office. You guess the rest. Relationships need to be a priority in our lives, both in our hearts and with our primary resource, not so much money, but time.

So too with God. We need to make God a priority in our lives. We need to stop and be quiet and pray, at least once a day, for a few brief minutes, and thank God for God's blessings upon us. We need to spend time with God if we want to have a relationship with God. This is done in moments of quiet, prayer, and meditation. It is done in worship here at church. The strange thing is, that God is faithful in this relationship, even when we are not. God still loves us and wants us, unlike the husband who ignores his wife in the relationship I described before. God is patient with us and waits for us to come home. Hopefully we do.

The journey home begins in the baptism that we celebrate this morning as we remember our own beginnings in the faith long ago. AMEN