

A New Beginning

In the name of God's beloved Son, dear friends in Christ: Some things begin badly. It could be a young pianist at a recital; the child starts a piece of music, gets a few bars in, and due to nervousness the tune suddenly collapses into a confusion of discordant notes. It might be a conversation, like the ones that happen at my house when my better half is relating to me the events of her day and (admittedly) I'm not giving her my full attention. After several minutes and even more several hundred words, I realize I have no idea who or what it is she's talking about. It could be a relationship. Two people meet for the first time, one of them says something in jest that the other takes the wrong way, and the result is instant animosity. Though they might have become fast friends they are instead on their way to becoming lifelong enemies. Dozens of other examples come to mind, and I'm sure you could provide many of your own from personal experience. Regardless of the situation though, when something begins badly the remedy is the same: somebody who recognizes that things are going awry ought to say, "Wait. Stop. Let's start over. Let's go back and begin again."

I mention this because once again we find ourselves at the top of a new calendar year. It's a natural time to evaluate when and where things in the past year our lives got off track and headed in wrong directions into various moral quagmires, spiritual pitfalls, or maybe even over cliffs of sin, faithlessness, or despair. It's a time to ask "Where did I go wrong?" And then back up; reset, so to speak; and begin heading in the right direction once again along the straight and narrow path of faithfulness to the Lord Jesus. And to help guide us in this pursuit, it just happens that all three of today's Scripture readings are about new beginnings. Two of them I'll touch on very briefly, and then we'll focus on the third.

In the Old Testament reading we have the initial Creation, the very first words of the Bible. It's an event that we have to admit begins rather badly. The newly created earth is dark, chaotic, void of life; it's a total mess. It seems that nothing good can come of it. Ah, but then God draws near to it with his Holy Spirit who hovers over the face of the waters. And then the Father reveals his own presence by speaking. And when he speaks, what he speaks is his Word – his Word that we know to be none other than the second person of the Trinity, the Son. So he too is present and revealed to the Creation. More than that, because the Word of God spoken is "Let there be light", at that very moment the Word, who is the Son, is revealed in that light. That is to say, the Son takes on physical form. He is joined with Creation as he becomes the Light of the world. Taking it a step farther, because the light penetrates the water that covers the earth's surface, the Son and water are joined as well. Or to say it another way: *Jesus is in the water*. And God saw that it was good.

As you know, it didn't stay that way. Not long after God made everything so very good, we humans messed it up by our sin and disobedience. And that placed everything in Creation under the curse of God. In a spiritual sense all became dark, chaotic, void of life in time and destined to everlasting destruction. But God promised a new beginning – a new beginning that he would effect through his eternal Son born of woman. At Christmas we celebrated the first phase of that new beginning when the Word once again joined himself with the Creation by taking on human flesh and blood. He was born a child in Bethlehem. And in accordance with the word of the angel, he was named Jesus because he would save his people from their sins. And then for some thirty years we hear almost nothing except that he grew in wisdom and stature, living a perfectly sinless life as the son of Mary and his stepfather Joseph.

Until we arrive at today's Gospel reading in which we witness another new beginning as Jesus steps out of obscurity in order to launch his public ministry. He begins where all ministry begins: at baptism. He joins the crowds making the pilgrimage to where John is thundering against the wickedness in the lives of his hearers. Stricken in conscience and confessing their sins, John baptizes them in the Jordan. They emerge from the water forgiven, washed clean of sin. God has granted them a new beginning. Jesus too steps forward to be baptized. Unlike the others, he has no sins to confess. John tries to prevent him, but Jesus tells him no, we must do this to fulfill all righteousness. He means that the others are leaving their sins behind in the water. Jesus goes into the water to take all those sins on himself. This is how he begins his ministry – his ministry that will find its completion on the cross and with him dead, buried in the tomb. But the thing to see is that here again like at the Creation we have Jesus in the water, this time in the human body that will bear the sins of the world. The Holy Spirit descends upon him, hovering over the face of the water in the form of a dove. And God saw that it was good, as the voice of the Father proclaims, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

And that brings us to the Epistle lesson in which the Apostle Paul explains the purpose and power of yet another new beginning. In this case it is specifically *your* new beginning. "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

Wait. Stop. Don't let the meaning of those words escape you. I'm afraid that too often we look upon baptism as an empty ritual, a mere religious ceremony, a box to mark off a list of requirements for attaining salvation. Baptized? Yup. Got that one covered. I've got a certificate to prove it.

The Lord does not care about your certificate. He won't ask to see it on the Last Day. What he cares about is what he did to you when you were baptized. You had a bad beginning. Conceived of sinful parents, you inherited from them the curse that came upon Adam and all his descendants. You were in a spiritual sense dark, chaotic, void of life, and destined to destruction in Hell. You were incapable of anything but sin. The only power you had was to make your situation before God the Judge worse.

But the Lord in his mercy brought you to the water to where one of his servants like John was baptizing. The Holy Spirit hovered over the face of the deep. And God's Word was spoken. It – or rather he, that is Jesus – was united with the water. That water filled with Jesus was poured out on your head in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The Light of Christ shone upon your darkness. That light entered into you. And you were united with Jesus. His death for sin became your death to sin. His burial in the tomb became the burial of your sin nature. And his resurrection to life became your new beginning: the beginning of the life of faith and trust in Jesus, the beginning of life filled with the Holy Spirit, the birth of the new nature in you that is righteous before God by faith in Jesus, the beginning of your life that will never die. And God saw that it was good. He looked upon you and said, "You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased."

Yes, all that happened when you were baptized. But the thrust of Paul's teaching on baptism is not simply what happened then, but just as important, what it means for you now. He says, "We know that our old self was crucified with [Jesus] in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has

been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.”

Again, don't let the meaning of those words slip past you. Paul is saying that because your sin nature was put to death in baptism, it no longer has the power to control you. And when you were with raised with Christ in baptism, you were given a new nature – a new nature led by God's Spirit, a new nature that does not – in deed, that cannot sin, a new nature that delights in God's will and that gladly loves and serves other people even as Christ does.

The problem for the present is that these two natures exist within you side by side: one dead in sin, the other alive in Christ. Before baptism and your life of faith, you had no other option than to serve sin. But now that you've been raised with Christ in baptism, you can choose which nature you will follow, which one you will allow to have the upper hand. By the power of the Spirit within you, you can choose to do good rather than evil. So choose the good. You can do it. Consider yourself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

And yes, because in this life your sin nature is still always there, even the good you do will be tainted by its evil. Thus it is that we long for the final day when we will be raised with Christ completely free of sin. But for the present, we have the power of baptism to carry on the fight. And whenever and as often as necessary as you find yourself straying from the path of righteousness and faith, allowing your sin nature to have the upper hand, your baptism gives you the ability to say, “Wait. Stop. I want to start over. Let me go back and begin again.” Luther explains it in the *Small Catechism* when he asks, “What does ... baptizing with water indicate?” With St. Paul as his authority he replies, “It indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”

That's the key to living the Christian life. Your baptism has the power to make every day a new beginning. Use it. You'll be glad that you do. But even more importantly, God will see and declare that in his sight you are good through Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!