
The Start of Something New

A sermon by Clayton Harrington, Seminarian
Epiphany 1 – Year A

See, the former things have come to pass, [says the Lord,] and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them. Isaiah 42:9

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

We all have turning points in our lives. These are the moments through which we enter into new and different phases in our lives, for better or for worse. For me, my most recent turning point was my move to Atlanta two and a half years ago. I had never lived more than twenty miles from the house that I grew up in and had never had to experience a big change in culture or location. I had family and friends that I had known all my life and a church that I had attended since I was an infant. But all of that changed when I was accepted to Candler School of Theology – prompting my move to Atlanta. Let me tell you that Atlanta is quite different from Buies Creek, North Carolina, the town of my undergraduate college; a town of less than three thousand people. Moving to Atlanta was a turning point, as I was in a very different place, and living a rather different life than before. I lived in a different city, went to a different school, met different people, and went to a different church. I began a new chapter in my life as I worked towards the goal of a Master's degree, and my life was changed forever. Moving to Atlanta was the start of something new.

In today's text, we are witness to the baptism of Jesus, a story that has often led to the question, "But why?" Why does Jesus need to be baptized if he is sinless? He answers that very question when John initially refuses to baptize him. Jesus says that "it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." This righteousness is not in the sense of legal justification, but as an aspect of the plan of God for the redemption of the world. It's part of God's plan to bring humanity back into right relationship with God's self. Jesus' baptism serves as his commissioning and marks the beginning of his earthly ministry. Baptism acts as a turning point in the life of Jesus. The Spirit descends and rests on him and the Father endorses Jesus' identity as God's Son. And then Jesus' ministry begins. For Jesus, his baptism was the start of something new.

This image of Jesus' baptism clearly echoes the words of our reading from Isaiah, known as the First Servant Song. "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations." We see through the life of Jesus that his baptism was not simply a check marked on the checklist of God, but an intentional act through which he began ushering in the Kingdom of God on earth. Christ entered the role of the servant, bringing justice and love by serving those he encountered.

Isaiah continues, "I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness." That is what Jesus did. He reminded and assured the people of Israel of their eternal covenant with God. He was a light to the nations of the world – as the Gentiles would be invited into relationship with the God of Israel. He brought sight to both the physically blind and the spiritually blind. He set people free from the prisons of illness, darkness, and death. In all of this Jesus worked toward his mission of the reconciliation of God and humanity that was begun at his baptism.

Today, we will witness and participate in the baptism of new Christians. We will commit to pray for them and we will

welcome them into our community of faith. And we will also reaffirm our own baptismal covenant. We covenant, with the help of God, to continue in the life of the Church, to resist evil, to proclaim by word and deed the Good News of God in Christ, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves, to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being. We who are baptized are commissioned to a ministry of our own.

For us, baptism is the start of something new. “See, the former things have come to pass, [says the Lord,] and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them.” After Jesus emerged from the River Jordan and received the affirmation of the Father and the Spirit, he was brought to the wilderness to be tempted for forty days and then began preaching and calling disciples. “He broke bread with outcasts and sinners, healed the sick, and proclaimed good news to the poor.”^[1] His ministry would lead to his death and resurrection, by which God reconciled the world to God’s self. And we are called through our own baptism to be ambassadors of that reconciliation. To love others and be messengers of God’s love to the world. Through our baptism, we live the rest of our lives with a divine mark and mission to participate in the ministry of Christ. Just as we are baptized into the death of Christ, we are invited into continuing the work of the life of Jesus – to speak hope into the lives of those who are hopeless, to suffer with those who suffer, to remind our world that there is a God who loves us all. In faith, we follow Christ into the waters of baptism. And from there we must follow him into the world.

Amen.

^[1] “Eucharistic Prayer 2,” in *Enriching Our Worship 1*, (New York: Church Publishing Inc, 1997), 61.