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Good Beginnings

Texts: St. Luke 3:15-17, 21-22; Acts 8:14-24

It was August of 1988. The president of the college where I was chaplain had called a meeting of all those in the administration who were responsible for meeting and orienting the freshman class that was about to descend upon the college in a few short days. He opened the meeting with two bold and startling predictions: first, that then vice-president George H.W. Bush would fail in his presidential election bid; second, that the new Jack in the Box restaurant that had just opened in town would go under by Christmas. At first we were puzzled by the utterly random nature of the remarks. But as it turned out, he really did have a point. Good endings, he went on to claim, are dependent on good beginnings. Bush's campaign that year had gotten off to a terrible start, and, having sampled the cuisine and service at the Jack in the Box, he could assure us that Jack's start was terrible, too. If, then, we wanted the school year to go well, he urged us, we needed to make a good beginning with the incoming class.

Well, as to his two predictions only one of them came true, as Bush recovered from a bad beginning to beat Michael Dukakis. The Jack in the Box, however, blessedly closed by Christmas. As to the freshman class, well, it was greeted with enthusiasm but in the end turned out to be as mediocre as other freshmen classes in the past. So it appears that the claim that good endings depend on good beginnings is not exactly a law of nature. But even if it is not unerring, still, I think, he was by and large right in making the claim that he did, and using it as a motivational point to begin the school year. It is at least a useful rule of thumb in any sort of venture, and one we instinctively accept for ourselves. For example, it is actually one that we regularly use at the

beginning of a new calendar year. After all, it is because most of us do believe that good endings depend on good beginnings that we make New Year's resolutions. We know that if we want the year to go well, we need to start making it go well right now. We also know that a bad start usually only turns itself around by accident.

The claim about good beginnings is worth bringing up for liturgical reasons as well. The first Sunday after Epiphany, which is the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, is always either the first or second Sunday of the new year and so coincidentally helps mark that beginning. More important, however, is what it celebrates, namely, baptism; the fact is that baptism itself is a beginning. And so for that reason this morning I want to talk about what sort of beginning baptism is, and how it is a good beginning. Or perhaps better put, I want to say something about how important it is with baptism to make a good beginning.

I put it that way because although baptism is the beginning of the Christian life, and although baptism is a good thing, nevertheless it is not always thought of in such a way that people make a good beginning with it. For example, there are those who seem to believe that it is no beginning at all, but something more like an ending. That is to say, they seem to believe that after baptism they never have to do a thing again. Now, these folk come in a couple of different varieties. On the one hand there are those who subscribe to the theological view that if one has a significant spiritual experience, that experience is demonstration of God's predestinating favor. Thus as a result, and upon baptism, they can claim to literally know that God has saved them. They can, and do, talk about being "saved" in the present, not the future tense. Since God's will is unchangeable this means that there is then nothing one ever has to do after this experience. Indeed, even if one is a rotten, dissolute reprobate, one's future blessedness is guaranteed if one has the saving experience, whereas a seemingly much better person without this experience will

have to despair of heaven. With respect to the Christian life, it has always seemed to me that these people are those Christians whom Kierkegaard once suggested were like children that a mother sends out in the morning to play until noon, and who then come back in at nine am saying they are done. Somehow, they just didn't get the point.

There are also those who treat baptism as an ending in a somewhat different way. These are the mothers, and even friends and relatives of mothers, who call the church office and want to schedule a baptism to get their son done. They are not members of the church they are calling, or any church for that matter. In fact, in most cases they themselves have not gone to church since childhood, and given their current state of religious practice, it is pretty clear that the baptismal service of their child will be the last time they do go for quite awhile to come. Yet, when the pastor then tells them that he or she cannot baptize the child under these conditions, they are shocked and willing to lecture the pastor on what Christian duty is. But what else could pastors say? Since at baptism parents make promises to bring children up in the Christian faith, which includes regular participation in the life of the church, to baptize a child whose parents do not take those promises seriously is simply so much wasted water. That, of course, they are shocked to be told. For such people, baptism is not a beginning at all; it is the end of their church life. It also seems to be something like a natural right and not a rite of the church.

Some of this last group overlap with yet another group that also fails to make a good beginning in baptism. This is the group of magical thinkers, those who think of baptism as something like a magical talisman, a token that will get them into heaven. Now, some of these people, it must be admitted, do take baptism very seriously. They just don't understand it. For example, in one pastorate some years ago I remember getting repeated calls from a woman in town who had discovered that her best friend's twelve year son had not been baptized. So

concerned was she that she was desperately calling all the churches in town to get a priest or minister to baptize him. The mother herself was utterly indifferent to the whole thing. Now, of course, in one sense the friend was very well meaning; in another, given that she thought that the child's religious life could be completed simply by the outer form of the sacrament without anybody involved having inner faith is purely and simply superstition. Given that every priest and minister in town turned her down, it is pretty clear that we all agreed that it was superstition. Still, I don't think she got it.

Superstition about baptism is as old as the church itself. For example, in today's lesson from the *Book of Acts*, Peter and John come down from Jerusalem to Samaria to lay hands on the newly baptized, an act which was the completion of the sacrament of baptism then, for it was in such laying on of hands that the Holy Spirit was given. Simon the Magician who is one of the ones who has been baptized and who has given every outer appearance of having converted from paganism to Christianity, watches them and thinks that he has now discovered the secret of their power, a power by which he is impressed and in which he would like to share. As a professional magician he knows that secret tricks do not come cheaply and so he offers a hefty sum of money to them in order to get it for himself. The two apostles, of course, are outraged and tell him so. But it is hardly clear even then that he understands why they are angry, so confused is he about the meaning of the sacrament. Because he thinks magically, it is to him no more than a magic trick. He is simply the first in a long line.

Yet at this point let me offer some sympathy, but only some, with this way of thinking. Because baptism is utterly a matter of grace, it can be easy to misconceive it, and to think that by a ritual wave of the hand some great effect has been accomplished. It is easy to misconceive it in this way because, well, some great effect really has been accomplished simply by a wave of the

hand and a simple formula. A great effect has been accomplished and it has been accomplished without any effort on our parts. We don't have to do anything at all.

Now, theologians and pastors have for a long time have tried to explain how this works without turning it into magic. One of the better efforts was the one in the 1950s by the great Protestant theologian Paul Tillich in a particularly well-known sermon on God's grace that applies directly to baptism. Tillich's great catch phrase in the sermon was "accept that you are accepted." His point was that God freely, and without *any* merit on our part, chooses us and accepts us. This is why we, for example, believe it appropriate to baptize infants. For even though infants cannot respond and certainly do not know what is happening, none of that matters. In baptism, the direction is one way. God accepts us, as we are, and does so even before we are able to respond in any way. God even accepts us when we are sinners and do not deserve anything from God, except hard feelings. So, yes, grace has something akin to magic to it. When the priest or minister puts water on the head of the one being baptized, and says "I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit," that person becomes a new person altogether. Even though a sinner, he or she now stands justified in front of God; she is now a living part of the living Christ. All that it takes for that to happen is that formula and that sprinkling.

This has always been a helpful way to explain the gratuitousness of grace. But this is only part of it. For once grace occurs, it doesn't rest; instead, it should make us restless and make for us a beginning. That is the pattern of the baptisms of which we are told in the New Testament. Consider here simply the two New Testament texts we read this morning. In the first, Luke, tells of Jesus' baptism in an almost backward looking way, a tale told in the past tense. But it is also very clear in Luke that this baptism of Jesus is a very important beginning. When the voice of the God the Father booms from heaven saying that "This is my Son with whom I am well pleased,

Listen to him” that voice is announcing a beginning, he is announcing the beginning of a mission in which Christ will teach, will heal, and ultimately die in order that the world might be brought back into God’s life. Similarly, when John and Peter go to the city in Samaria to lay on hands, they lay those hands on men and women who have just been baptized. The reason for that laying on of hands is that the Holy Spirit might be given to the baptized. And the point of that? Not so that the new believers don’t have to do anything more. It is to equip them for the mission that they are now part of – part of by being living members of the living Lord, and part of by virtue of the fact that it is now also up to them to participate in the mission of bringing the world back into God’s life. The gift of the Spirit is to make them catch on fire to do this. This is, I want to urge, what the other half of Tillich’s phrase means. You are indeed accepted, and there is nothing for you to do to make that happen or to change that. But, Tillich also rightfully said that you need to accept that you are accepted. What does that mean? Well, it means that you are to let the Spirit blow over you and through you. Don’t fight it. But it also means that you need to make sure that you join your spirit with the Spirit. To be part of Christ by virtue of baptism is to be part of his mission of giving hope to the hopeless, of showing faith where there is cynicism and meaninglessness, and loving everywhere and in everything. In accepting that you are accepted, you let yourself be changed, and, then being changed, you do something to live out the change in the world that God is making.

That is the difference between magic and grace. Magic is an attempt to change the world without ourselves being changed. Imagine how great it would be to have magical powers – we could clean the house, or paint it, or drive some very nice cars simply by a wave of the hand. But in each and every case, the wave of the hand is meant to accomplish something we desire and nothing more. The one thing it does not mean to do is change us. Nor is it meant to change what

we desire; it is just meant to get what we think we now desire. But grace is different. To be sure, it does happen in a formula and in the wave of a hand in baptism; it happens again much the same way in communion. But unlike magic it isn't something that we are in charge of; rather, it is something that happens to us. It is a gift freely given to us. But it is also a gift that is meant to change us, and meant to change what we desire. It is a gift of transformation that we are to pass onto the world. It is in that sense always a beginning, for in it we are reborn and we start over. And if we are willing to make it a beginning, then we will have aimed at a good end as well.

On this day we celebrate many beginnings. We celebrate the beginning of a new year. We celebrate Christ's baptism and the beginning of his mission. We look forward sometime this year to making a beginning with a new installed pastor. But in celebrating these beginnings let us not simply be observers of them, let us each also take the time to acknowledge to ourselves that in our baptisms, even if they took place many years ago, a new beginning was made for us, and a new adventure was begun. In acknowledging that let us accept the challenge of that new beginning.

Let us then make a good beginning to this year. How? Let us not rest on our spiritual laurels or on our past experiences. Rather let us take the time to live out the faith and the spiritual transformation, the spiritual adventure, that was begun for us so many years ago in baptism. How? By being persistent in worship. By welcoming strangers and getting to know them, by finding out what new thing they have to offer and by encouraging them to share. Do it, too, by sharing the Good News with others. Do it by giving of your time, your treasure and your talents. Do it by not letting others continually provide for the church's ministry when you are in fact a partner in it. In short, do it by committing yourself fully to the ministry of the body of Christ which you became a living part of when you were baptized. Make that good beginning, and in so doing accept the fact that God has prepared a good end for you.