

June 12, 2022
Matthew 28:16-20

Holy Trinity
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“The Very Beginning”

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ...”

“Let’s start at the very beginning, a very good place to start.”

Oscar Hammerstein, Jr.’s words from *The Sound of Music* are very profound, since no story makes sense unless we start it from the very beginning. No one would open a book in the middle and hope to make sense of what is happening, since the beginning of a story sets the stage for the ensuing material. Arriving late at a movie puts a viewer at a disadvantage, since the opening scenes often reveal critical information for understanding the rest of the film. Family histories and stories always go back to the beginning, to the family’s origins in their homeland and how their ancestors came to this country. When I meet with couples to plan a wedding, we inevitably begin with how they met and fell in love, a story that they will share throughout their married lives. We can only fully understand a story – be it fact or fiction – unless we start at “the very beginning.”

The Bible traces the origins of God’s history with God’s people to “the very beginning.” The opening words of Genesis bring us back to “*in the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth ...*” (Genesis 1:1). While scholars have debated exactly when this beginning was in history, there is no debate that God is the creator of the heavens and the earth and is still involved in the creation that God declared was “very good.” In the *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther teaches that “*I believe that God created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties.*” Our beginning is in God’s good creation, a creation that we still enjoy in the presence of the Lord. The Gospel of John brings us back to this same beginning in this Evangelist’s proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ: “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*” (John 1:1). The story of Jesus does not begin with his birth in the manger in Bethlehem but in the beginning of God’s story of creation, for we believe that Jesus Christ is “*true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary, [and] is my Lord.*” Our origin story as Christians is rooted

in the one who we believe is “*God from God, light from light, true God from true God.*” (Nicene Creed).

As our story as Christians starts at its beginnings that are proclaimed to us in the Word of God, our own stories as people of God start at our beginning when we are claimed by God as God’s beloved children. As we mark our birthdays each year as the beginning of the story of our lives, it is on the day of our Holy Baptism that our story as children of God begins. In our Confirmation classes, I always ask our students to find out about their baptisms, especially where and when they were baptized along with any other details about this day. They often return with their baptismal certificates, photos of that day, and other details about the pastor who presided at their baptism, the names of godparents, and other memories that their parents shared with them. I encourage them to remember the day of their baptism every year as the day when through water and the Word they were “*reborn as children of God and made members of the Church which is the Body of Christ*” (ELW Holy Baptism).

This weekend, I will be privileged to preside at the baptisms of two children whose stories as baptized children of God will begin. Baptism is both a privilege and responsibility for all ordained ministers of Word and Sacrament; at ordination, pastors are charged with the responsibility to “*be diligent in your study of the holy scriptures and faithful in your use of the means of grace*” (ELW Ordination). From my first baptism in 1983 to this weekend’s baptisms, it has been my privilege to share this special day with parents, godparents, family, friends, and the church into which we are baptized and traces its beginnings to the day when we were born anew as sisters and brothers in Christ. On this weekend, we will rejoice with the families of Luna and Beau as their stories as children of God begin when they are baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

In the Lutheran Church, Holy Baptism is one of two sacraments (along with Holy Communion), which we believe are means of grace through which God’s presence and steadfast love are bestowed upon us. A sacrament in our tradition must meet three criteria:

1. It is an act that is commanded by Jesus Christ.
2. It uses an earthly element (water for Baptism, bread and wine for Communion).
3. It is accompanied by God’s Word of promise (the Words of Institution in Holy Communion, the baptismal formula in Holy Baptism).

The command of our Lord Jesus Christ to baptize is in today's Gospel lesson from the end of Matthew's Gospel. This is the first scene in this Gospel in which the disciples have appeared since they fled during the arrest of Jesus (*"Then all the disciples deserted him and fled."* (26:56). They remained in Jerusalem until they received the announcement from the women who were commanded by the Risen Lord to *"go and tell my disciples to go to Galilee; there they will see me."* (28:10). On the basis of this message, the disciples returned to the mountain that Jesus had appointed for their post-resurrection rendezvous (*"But after I am raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee."* – 26:32). The disciples have thus already come to faith in the risen Jesus and the reconciling message that they are again/still his brothers; the basis for this faith is the testimony of the women to whom Jesus appeared.

Like the women who encounter the Risen Lord on Easter morning, the response of the disciples is not amazement, fascination, or curiosity, but kneeling in worship: *"when they saw him, they worshipped him"* (28:17). There is also an element of hesitation and doubt; "doubt" here is not theological skepticism, but the risky wavering of one who must decide when more than one possibility seems reasonable and right:

- "Whatever the nature of the resurrection event, it did not generate perfect faith even in those who experienced it firsthand. It is not to angels or perfect believers, but to the worshipping/wavering community of disciples to whom the word mission is entrusted." – Eugene Boring.

Jesus' final words to his disciples begin with a statement as to the basis for the commandment he will issue to them: *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."* (28:18). The basis for Jesus' words of commission is the claim of the risen Christ that his instructions result from the authority he possesses, authority of which he spoke earlier in the Gospel when he states that *"all things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."* (11:27). The risen Lord Jesus Christ was proclaimed by the early church as the Lord of heaven and earth, the cosmic ruler in God's stead:

- "Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." – Philippians 2:9-11.
- "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him

all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.” – Colossians 1:15-18.

The babe worshipped by Gentiles as mocked at the Crucifixion as the “king of the Jews” (2:1; 27:11) has assumed the throne and begun to reign as “King of Kings and Lord of Lords.”

It is with this authority that Jesus issues his commission to his disciples to “*go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.*” (28:19-20a). Invested with this authority, Jesus confers a missionary mandate on the eleven (Judas Iscariot is no longer in their midst). The entire world is now a mission field, its diverse peoples and communities being the “many” for whom Jesus shed his blood (“*Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*” – 26:28). The disciples are sent out to the “nations” (*ethne*, “Gentiles”) to make disciples; Christian discipleship is a total way of life, a decision to pattern one’s daily actions and decisions after the example set by Jesus and his followers (“*Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.*” – 1 Corinthians 11:1). Discipleship begins with a sacramental initiation, when in obedience to Jesus’ command the disciples baptize “*in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*”

- “In recognition of the divine authority Jesus possesses, his followers are also to be marked through baptism – not in John [the Baptist’s] name or the Spirit’s name alone but ‘in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.’ The Son is evoked alongside Father and Spirit to identify the power that acts in baptism. It is a baptism that fully acknowledges the authority the Son possesses.” – Susan Hynlen.

The commission to baptize is accompanied by a command that the disciples teach the newly baptized “*to obey everything that I have commanded you.*” Discipleship consists of two actions: hearing the Word of God and responding in obedience to that Holy Word. Mary the mother of Jesus has been identified as the first disciple of her son when she responds to the announcement of the angel Gabriel “*here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*” (Luke 1:38). In her

faithful response, *“Mary becomes the first Christian disciple because she is the first one to hear the word of God and to consent wholeheartedly that it be done.”* (Raymond Brown). The command to the disciple community to teach is the basis for the church’s learning ministries that begin with the charge at baptism for us to *“teach them the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments, place in their hands the holy scriptures, and nurture them in faith and prayer, so that your children may learn to trust God, proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace.”* We instruct our children and all who are baptized so that they may know that the Word of God is *“a lamp to my feet and a light to my path”* (Psalm 119:105).

Jesus’ final words in Matthew’s Gospel are a promise of his continuing presence in the life and mission of his disciples and the disciple community: *“And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* (28:20). The disciples are not left to rely on their own resources as they march forth with the Gospel; *“Jesus is there to unleash its power and to prepare the hearts of all who receive it.”* (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri). All who are claimed by Christ in the waters of Holy Baptism live with the blessed assurance that *“I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.”* (John 10:28).

- “Matthew’s aim was not to convey a fully developed Trinitarian theology but to spread the good news about Jesus. Part of that good news is that Jesus fully shares the authority of the Father and the Spirit. He is a powerful healer, judge, and teacher, because his power is the same divine power known throughout the stories of the Old Testament. Through this power, those who become disciples may experience his mercy and learn to live by his teachings.”
– Hylén.

When I ask our Confirmation students to share stories and photos of the day of their baptisms, I go into my files and bring in my baptismal certificate, along with a photograph in which my mother is holding her six-week-old son on the day of his baptism on April 28, 1957. She is standing on the front steps of our family home along with my father and grandparents, the people into whose family I was born and who brought me to the waters of baptism so that I might also be born anew into the family of faith that is the Church of Jesus Christ. My story as a Christian began on that day and continued throughout my life as I learned in my home church and Sunday school about the love of God, about what it means to be a Christian, and how I might live out my baptismal covenant in my daily life. Fourteen years later, I affirmed these baptismal promises on the day of my Confirmation; and during my

childhood I experience the call to ordained ministry which I have been privileged to practice for 39 years. My life as a child of God has its origins at the very beginning, when my parents brought me to the waters in which I was reborn as a child of God with the promise that *“neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever.”* (ELW Hymn 781).

- “Being immersed in the water of baptism indicates that we too die in Christ, but emerging again from the water means and imparts to us new life in him, just as he did not remain in death but rose again ... Thus we are not said to be ‘united with him’ and, as it were, baked into one loaf, and we receive in ourselves the power of both his death and his resurrection, and also the fruit or consequence of it is found in us, since we have been baptized in him.” – Martin Luther, 1535.

The very beginning is indeed *“a very good place to start,”* because it reminds us that every day we are called to live and serve as baptized children of God whose very lives are defined by what happened at the beginning when we were born anew to a living hope through our baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As the children baptized this weekend will be reborn as children of God and made members of the Church which is the Body of Christ, may we be reminded of the very beginning of our lives as Christians and endeavour to walk as children of the light, sharing the light and love of Christ that abide with us from the moment of our baptism until the day when we are gathering into our eternal home; for *“as it was in the beginning, is now and every shall be, world without end.”*

Amen.