

Homily at the Baptism of Cameron Ryan Everett

Sunday, May 8, 2016 Φ The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove
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Beginnings are important.

This truism works for all the processes that I know of. For example, cosmologists say that exceedingly tiny variations in the distribution of stuff during the first infinitesimal instant of the beginning of the universe has had a lasting effect on the distribution of matter throughout time and space ever since. At least so they deduce from the appearance of the universe today; no human being was there to witness the birth of the universe. But surely you could say that our story began back then, billions of years ago.

The version of the story of creation that God provides for us through Holy Scripture does not deal with the beginning of things the way scientific cosmologists do. God, realizing we could figure out the science of it all another way, chose to reveal through his Word the part people need to pay attention to whether they know anything about science or not, which is that God is intimately involved with how things came into existence, how they keep going, and what all this means. God is the principal author of the story. It begins with his free decision to create...well...anything at all and everything there is.

God has remained involved with everything he has made, and in an interesting way. He does not compel people to pay attention to him or to use good judgment. He lets it be known

that there are consequences if we ignore him and behave foolishly, and he gives every indication that he would prefer to have our communication with him be a conversation rather than a one way street (in either direction), but neither side can compel the other. Magic does not work, and we are not God's puppets.

When you set up a universe this way, there is a risk that things can get pretty out of hand. That's what has happened, and therefore the conversation has gotten pretty intense at times. But so determined has God been to stay in the conversation that at one point he joined it in human form.

Beginnings, as I said, are important. The gospel according to Matthew and the gospel according to Luke describe the beginning of Jesus' life on earth. Between his birth and the point in his adulthood (at about thirty years of age) when he began his public ministry a lot must have happened, but very little is reported in reliable sources. What *is* reported—his impressing the scholars at the temple as a boy of twelve—reveals remarkable characteristics, but mostly that span of time is covered by saying that he “increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.” (Luke 2:52, NRSV)

The beginning of Jesus' public ministry was a new beginning in his life, and beginnings are important. For such a beginning, the blessing of his Heavenly Father and the presence of the Holy Spirit in power were vital. And indeed it is reported in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke that at Jesus' baptism the Holy Spirit descended upon him and the Father voiced his approval.

After that, Jesus went on retreat into the wilderness. Going on retreat is a practice connected with new beginnings to this day. I went on retreat before I was ordained priest; so did my wife Julie. And I recommend it for people preparing to receive any important sacrament, or to begin any important shift in their calling or their ministry. Taking a baby about to be baptized on retreat seems a bit silly—unless you consider that it is the *parents* (and the sponsors) who may need to grow closer to God as they contemplate raising a young human being in the life of Christ. A retreat makes even more obvious sense for adults who are about to be baptized—or confirmed, confirmation being a sort of follow-up to baptism. Now, since Jesus went on retreat *after* his baptismal ceremony, we can do it that way too, but we usually consider that Jesus had been preparing himself for this ceremony of commissioning throughout his whole life up to that point; most of us are not that focused, not that steady, not that ready! We need preparation.

I spoke just now of Jesus' baptism as his "ceremony of commissioning" for his public ministry. Isn't baptism more than merely "commissioning" for ministry? Yes, for us it is much more than that. However, for Jesus baptism had mainly the function of commissioning or empowering him for a particular job of work.

Jesus' baptism did not cleanse him from sin, because he did not have any sin. It did not make him part of the covenant community of God's people, because that had already happened when he was circumcised. But he did need to affirm, in the context of a public ceremony, the call he had

from his Heavenly Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to go forth and proclaim the Kingdom of God. In short, he needed what we call commissioning—in order, as he puts it in Matthew 3:15, “to fulfill all righteousness.”

What, then, does baptism do for us? It gives us a new beginning, and I find it convenient to describe how that happens under three headings: regeneration, incorporation, and commissioning.

First: regeneration. We begin our new life in Christ by being washed clean of sin—indeed, by dying, by *drowning* to sin and swooshing up out of the water into new life. Baptism looks ahead to our resurrection, and back to the creation of the universe. It is re-creation; it is re-birth—which is what regeneration literally means.

Second: incorporation. We begin our new life in Christ by being made part of the community of believers, the Communion of Saints alive in all times and places, on earth and in heaven. Baptism initiates us, incorporates us into the Body of Christ—the Church as it really is, as it appears to God in the blessing of his love, not as it appears to us in the middle of the turmoil of the world. Incorporation literally means being made part of a body, in this case part of Christ along with all other Christians.

Third: commissioning. This is the part that we tend not to hear as much about as it would be good for us to know. The original meaning of commission was something given in trust that certain actions would be performed. We begin our new life in Christ by being given a job: to proclaim by word

and by deed the lordship of Jesus Christ. Through baptism, we are all commissioned ministers of the Gospel. The particular form ministry takes for each one of us needs to be worked out, day by day and year by year, in conversation with the Most Holy Trinity. There may be more commissionings along the way, but baptism is the big one for us; it lays the foundation of our Godly work in the world, as baptism did for Jesus.

The baptism of every person is a new beginning. It stands us in the water where Jesus stood. It brings God into the story of our life in a new way. It admits a new intimacy into the conversation between God and the portion of his creation that is us. It admits a new power into our life—the power of the Holy Spirit—and it forges a new connection between us and our Heavenly Father. No longer can we say—no longer *dare* we say—that God is far away. He is not. He is in us and we are in him as never could have been but for the life of Jesus Christ. That is what baptism means, and that is why we will remember our baptism when, in a few minutes, it comes time for us to join together in reciting the words of the Baptismal Covenant. As Cameron Ryan Everett is regenerated, incorporated and commissioned, we will raise our voices in support and celebration of his new beginning.