

Sermon / 12 January 2025 / Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 / New Beginnings

Baptism is a beginning.

When someone is baptized, it is the beginning of their life in the church.  
When someone is baptized, it is the beginning of their life with Christ.

Baptism is a beginning.

That's what we are doing here today. We are all witnesses to our friend, Owen, beginning his life with Christ. As witnesses, we promise to help Owen in that life with Christ from this beginning and into the future.

Baptism is a beginning.

At the end of the Baptism ritual – after the water – oil will be anointed on Owen's forehead and we'll hear the words, "you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever."

Marked as Christ's own forever. Jesus Christ's own forever. Jesus Christ who came into the world, taught us to live the way God wants us to live, and then died on a cross to save us from our sins. Jesus who taught us love, compassion, acceptance, and forgiveness. We are marked as Christ's own forever.

Baptism is a beginning.

But it isn't just a beginning for Owen – the person being baptized today. Baptism is a beginning for all of us. At the risk of being redundant – Baptism is a NEW beginning for each and every one of us.

Baptism is a NEW beginning.

What I find so special about the rite of baptism in the Episcopal Church is that it isn't a spectator sport. We are all involved in making a promise to Owen – a promise that we will do all in our power to support him in his life in Christ.

And immediately after we respond to that promise with a resounding "WE WILL", we renew our own baptismal covenants. We make our promises to God that we will live our lives the way God intends for us to do.

We are reminded what we, as Christians, need to do to be true followers of Jesus.

We are given the opportunity of a new beginning – a fresh start – a reset – to align our lives and priorities to live into the gift of baptism that we are given.

A new beginning as we proclaim our belief in God as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God as our creator, our redeemer, our sustainer. God as the earth-maker, pain-bearer, and life-giver.

A new beginning as we ask for God's help as we promise to continue in the teachings and fellowship of Jesus, in prayers, and in remembering the love of Jesus through communion of bread and wine.

A new beginning as we ask for God's help in resisting evil and repenting when we sin.

A new beginning as we ask for God's help as we proclaim by word and example the Good news of Jesus Christ's teaching....in seeking and serving Christ in all people....in loving our neighbor as ourselves.

A new beginning as we ask for God's help as we strive for justice and peace among all people....as we respect the dignity of every human being.

Baptism is a beginning. Baptism is a NEW beginning.  
Baptism is the chance for us to be washed clean of the past and to start refreshed and new.

In today's Gospel Lesson, John the Baptist tells the people who have come to listen to him that he will baptize them with water but the Messiah who is coming will baptize them with the Holy Spirit and fire!

John says that the Messiah will have a winnowing fork to clear the threshing floor. They will gather the wheat and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire!

For those of us who are not ancient wheat farmers, a winnowing fork is similar to a pitchfork. It scoops up the harvested wheat stalks which are then tossed into the air. The heavy, useful grains of wheat fall to the ground and the useless – inedible – part of the plant – the chaff – blows away in the wind.

This image is most often interpreted to mean that we want to be wheat and not chaff. Because the chaff is going to be burned. Bad people – those who do not follow Christ – they are going to be burned in unquenchable fire.

Maybe. But what if this image of a winnowing fork, wheat, and chaff means that we are all on the threshing floor.

Jesus cares about each and every one of us. He wants to help us with this new beginning. Jesus uses that winnowing fork on us. The good parts of us are the wheat and stays behind. The parts of us that draw us away from Christ – that cause us to forget our promises of baptism – that’s the chaff that Jesus wants to burn away.

We are human. We do our best. But we fail. Time and time again we forget our baptismal promises and do things that pull us away from God. But Jesus doesn’t give up on us. Jesus doesn’t want to burn us like chaff. Christ wants to help us keep those promises. Christ wants us to be the best version of ourselves so that we can help spread that message of love, compassion, acceptance, and forgiveness.

Every baptism is chance for each of us to make a fresh start.

Every baptism is an opportunity for a new beginning.

Every time we gather together is an opportunity for a new beginning.

Every day....every minute....every breath....is an opportunity for a new beginning.

A chance for us to be more Christ-like.

An opportunity for us to get it right.

As Mother Sylvia and I have told you many times, the highlight of our week is being with the students of our Montessori School in chapel on Wednesdays.

This week I read them a story about a group of friends planning a party. Problems arise when the cupcakes they have made for the party slowly and mysteriously disappear – until there are none left. When the culprit is uncovered, many of the characters want to banish them from the party. But Pete the Cat – the party’s host – suggests they forgive the grumpy toad who ate all the cupcakes. The toad makes amends and provides twice as many cupcakes for the party.

As I closed the book, one of our young friends shouted, “Deacon David, can we hear that story again? Right now? Please?”

Can you please tell us about love, compassion, acceptance and forgiveness again?  
Right now? Please?

That's how we should all feel. That's what we should all ask.

Can we please hear Jesus' message of love, compassion, acceptance, and forgiveness again? Right now!

Can we please renew our baptismal promises again? Right now?

Can we please be reminded of Christ's sacrifice for us again? Right now?

Can we please have a new beginning. Right now?

Yes. Because baptism is a new beginning for each and every one of us.

With Gods help, let us all take that opportunity every time we can.

Let's start that new beginning.... right now.