

In the Beginning. – January 7, 2018
By Wayne J. Schneider – Soli Deo Gloria

"In the Beginning."
St. Mark 1:4-8

Even the most critical New Testament scholars, those who question almost everything, agree on today's Gospel lesson: Jesus' baptism happened. These critics agree, not because this story appears in the synoptic gospels, Saints Matthew, Mark, and Luke; but because the early church did not need to record it if they didn't want to.

The baptism of Jesus is difficult to explain and even a bit embarrassing. Why would Jesus, God's Son, need to be baptized for repentance? If the sacrament of baptism is for the forgiveness of sin, and Jesus is without sin, then what does his baptism mean?

St. Matthew shows us the John the Baptizer was himself anxious and reluctant. St. Luke writes as little as possible about the event, calmly mentioning it after noting that John was in prison. And, St. Mark uses only four verses to cover the baptism of Jesus. The church is vexed explaining this story.

A part of this problem is John the baptizer himself. He charges out of the wilderness, eating honey and a bread-like fruit, as Marv pointed out last Sunday, declaring a new Kingdom, coming in fire and in water; alerting, especially the religious people, of the fury that is coming. The baptism of John is world-shattering. The baptizer treats Jews as the Jews treated pagan converts; requiring them to be baptized and calling them to repentance.

Enormous crowds flocked to John to be baptized; yet, he knows his ministry is preliminary and incomplete. There is someone coming who will baptize not with water, but with Spirit. Soon, The Anointed One wades into the shallow, muddy water of the Jordan river. When Jesus walks out of the river, the heavens open wide

with the Holy Spirit falling as a dove, and God the Father says "*This is my beloved Son.*"

The crowd by the river is oblivious. The crowd does not understand what this baptism means because they don't hear or see what Jesus and John do. I'm sure they assume that Jesus has become another of John's disciples. Without the rest of Jesus' ministry, his baptism is inconceivable.

When you look at the baptism of Jesus through his healing, loving ministry, then you begin to understand that his baptism was not for forgiveness, but a baptism of commissioning for service.

In the days before Jesus' death, the religious leaders confronted Jesus saying, "*By what authority do you do these things?*" and Jesus replies, "*Was the baptism of John from heaven or not?*" This is a conundrum for the religious leaders, no doubt.

In his baptism Jesus understands the Holy Spirit's summoning him to speak the truth, and to live in and with grace. Jesus obeys that voice. He dedicates his life, hopes, and dreams to God's people: listening, sharing, and healing. When he cries on the cross "*It is finished!*" he also means his baptism is completed.

The sacrament of baptism, as with all beginnings, comprehends its significance following the event. Starting, in and of itself, is of little consequence. Starting is easy. Finishing is often problematic. Bobby Knight, the famed basketball coach who doesn't get quoted in many sermons, was asked about a player who was performing well off the bench, "*When will he get to start?*" Knight responded with, "*You don't understand the game. It doesn't matter who starts. It matters who finishes.*"

I am not sure how many marriage ceremonies I have officiated at, but almost without exception, the couples start their marriage convinced that theirs would last forever. In their premarital counseling, I often tell couples, "You get no points for getting this far. On your wedding day, almost every couple is capable of creating a

life together filled with faith and joy; and almost every couple is capable of creating something worse than your nastiest nightmare."

The actual meaning of any decision takes time to be fully understood. Your first draft never looks like the printed copy. The moments of initiation take on meaning when we're true to the promise of that beginning.

We frequently believe that what we need is a new start. Our culture has an insatiable craving for all things new. "Brand-New" is not necessarily evil, but if that's all we search for, it is an endless pursuit of the trivial. Instead of searching for "what's new" we need to be looking for "what's best" or, "what's true." We don't need "new beginnings" as much as we need to understand "old beginnings."

Beginnings, by themselves, lack meaning, so our baptisms wait for completion. We are given a map, but we have to complete the journey. It requires our entire lives, and all of our days are a commentary on our baptisms. Repentance, conversion, and growth require a lifetime.

When Martin Luther the Reformer was tempted to quit following Jesus, he would sit in his study and repeat, "*I am baptized. I am baptized. I am baptized,*" as a kind of mantra.

It may be beneficial to look back to when you were baptized. Are you grateful for the grace of God? What are you going to do tomorrow to mark your baptism? We are always answering the question; "Why was I baptized?"

What is your answer? Alleluia. Amen.