

THE CHRISTIAN STORY – JESUS' AND OURS

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Where does the Christian story begin? With the prelude of prophecy perhaps? With the expectations of a young woman who would bear a child of David's line, a branch from the stump of Jesse, born in David's city of Bethlehem, one who would rule not just with might but with justice and compassion and gentleness and love? Is that where the Christian story begins?

Or does it begin perhaps with birth? With angel visitants, adoring shepherds and worshiping Magi? Is that where the Christian story begins?

The gospel writers Mark and John and the apostle Paul, if they know anything about Jesus' birth, they don't mention it. For Mark the story begins not with birth but with baptism. For Mark nothing before Jesus' baptism is important, not his birth, not his presentation in the Temple, not his audacious interactions with the Rabbis during his youth, not his growing up, not his maturing. For Mark the Christian story, the story of Jesus, begins with his baptism. Regardless of what went on before, it is at his baptism that Jesus is affirmed in his identity, identified for his mission and empowered for that mission. It is at his baptism that God expresses delight and pleasure at who Jesus is and will be. It is at his baptism that the heavens are torn apart and God's Holy

Spirit descends upon him like a dove. As at the time of creation, at his baptism a new day is born and a new humanity is shaped.

Jesus was baptized into ministry and went forth to resist Satan's temptations, to call disciples, and to teach and heal people. It was from his baptism that a new community was born and grew. For Mark, Jesus' baptism marked the beginning of the Christian story and the beginning of the gospel, the good news awaited and prepared for.

Where does our Christian story begin? Where does your Christian story begin? Does it begin with the prelude of our parents perhaps? Does it begin with the expectations of a woman and man of the birth of a child from their line and heritage? Does it begin with the hopes and dreams of parents for us? Is that where our Christian story begins?

Or does it begin perhaps with birth, with our birth? With our reception into our homes by whatever means we got there? Is that how it begins?

Or does it begin as with Jesus at our baptism? Our baptism through which we enter a new community, the community Jesus began at his baptism, the community that grew from apostles and disciples. At baptism, our baptism, we enter the community of Jesus and its ministry, the ministry of Christ that he undertook at his.

We in our tradition baptize children, even infants. Many, perhaps most of us, were baptized as children. Do children enter into ministry through baptism?

A comment I have heard frequently, and I'm sure you have as well, is from parents who say they aren't going to take their children to church. They want their children to grow up without prejudice for one faith over the others so that they can choose for themselves. What their children usually choose is the same faith as their parents, that is, no faith at all. They have no basis upon which to make a choice except the experience of their parents, namely, that faith is not important enough to pass on to their children as part of their heritage. When it comes time to shape their lives, their lives have already been shaped.

Consider for a moment by way of illustration the shaping of a shepherd's crook. People who know say that the way to make a proper shepherd's crook is to take a green olive branch still growing on the tree and to bend its smaller end around another branch and bind it tightly. That way as it grows and matures it takes on the shape of the shepherd's crook, the symbol of ministry.ⁱ

What a suitable image that is for our Christian story. The shape of our lives and ministry begins when we are young and green, and as we are bound to the living branch of the Spirit in the church, we grow spiritually taking the contours of the Spirit

into our very heart. As we grow up in the church, we are shaped by what happens here from the earliest days.

At baptism, our parents made that choice. Our parents chose for us in what direction our lives would be shaped and they gave us over to the Holy Spirit to work on us and shape us as Christians and as ministers. They decided that education is important, that examples are important, and that their faith is an important part of their children's heritage. At baptism, children become part of the faith community. They receive the first installment of their heritage. More importantly though they begin to participate in the life of that community. They begin to become ministers and their ministry already begins to take shape.

Our Christian story begins at baptism, but it does not end there. Baptism equips us for that ministry through the gift of the Holy Spirit. At baptism, Jesus received the Holy Spirit. Likewise, at baptism we receive the Spirit as well.

In the 19th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, there is a story about an eloquent man from Alexandria by the name of Apollos who spent some time in Ephesus. He was an apostle of John the Baptist and taught the people about the good news of the coming of Jesus. He baptized many, but he baptized with John's baptism.ⁱⁱ When Paul arrived, he discovered that although the people had been baptized they had not received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, they knew nothing of the Spirit. "We

have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit,” they said.ⁱⁱⁱ And so, Paul spoke to them about John saying that his was a baptism of repentance in preparation for the one who would baptize not just with water but with the Spirit. Hearing this they came to Paul to be baptized in the name of Jesus. When Paul did so and laid hands on them they received the Holy Spirit, and they exhibited signs that they were now equipped to preach the good news and to minister in Jesus’ name.

At baptism, we too receive the gift of the Holy Spirit equipping us for ministry.

I have always felt that Luke’s writings are the most instructive on the role of the Spirit. If you follow through Luke’s gospel and his second book, the Acts of the Apostles, you will find that it is the Spirit who instructs, directs, guides, empowers, and encourages ministry. People become instruments and tools for the Spirit’s activities.

A story is told of a man who was out in the country for a walk when in front of a farmhouse far off he saw another man pumping water at an old-fashioned hand pump. He watched a while and was fascinated at the man’s steady rhythm. He pumped steadily and evenly, up, down, up, down, never looking up. Steady, even work. Never missing a beat. Never a stop. Never a falter. Never a hesitation.

Amazed by this he wanted to get a better look at this remarkable worker so he walked closer. When he got close

enough, he realized that it wasn't a man at all. It was a painted wooden figure. The arm that pumped so steadily and tirelessly was hinged at the elbow and attached to the pump handle. Water sprung up from an artesian spring. It wasn't the man who pumped the water, but the water that pumped the man.

It is the same way with us and with ministry. Just like the water pumping the wooden man, the Holy Spirit pumps the human person; it's the Spirit that produces the results. We each must allow the refreshing water of our baptism to work through us, to allow the Holy Spirit to be active in our lives. All we need to do is to keep our hands on the handle, to remain focused on the Spirit, not resisting but allowing the Spirit to move us.^{iv}

Does that mean children too?

Almost twenty-five years ago now my brother-in-law's father died. He was only 67. A few months earlier, he had his bladder removed with cancer but the doctors said they got it all. After a short time, he had constant pain in his back. It turned out that the cancer had spread and he had between two weeks and six months to live. After a mere 10 days he died.

This was his family's first experience with death. The sorrow and grief were heavy. I led the celebration of his life. His son in halting words gave tribute to his father's life and what he meant to him, and to them all. I preached about the presence of God in the midst of our dying, and our death. But the grief was heavy and the day was dark.

When I finished one of the granddaughters, Abby, 7 years old, came to the front. In the car, she had been singing a song and she wanted now to sing it for her grandfather. There she stood alone, hands in front, slight figure with blond hair gathered with a black and white checked bow matching the sleeves of her dress of black velvet. There was strangely no tension or anxiousness as she serenely began to sing. "God our Father looks on us with love all the time. He says, I will love you forever...He says, I am with you forever...He says, I am with you forever all the time, all the time." The song was like the breath of angels. Frowns became smiles. Just at that moment, the sun broke the clouds and shone down upon her.

And do you know what we saw? Do you know what we saw through tear-filled eyes? We saw God.

Such was the ministry of a child. The Christian story begins at baptism – Jesus' and ours.

So may it be for you and me. So may it be. Amen.

ⁱ Jan Bush, *Marks of the Maker*, Northstone Publishing, (1997).

ⁱⁱ Acts 18: 24-28.

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 19: 2.

^{iv} A story by Rev. A. J. Gordon, told by John Smallman in *Aha!!!*, (January 9, 2000) p. 12.