BEGINNING AT THE BEGINNING: JESUS AS THE BELOVED OF GOD

—a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
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"...the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending... and alighting on him; and, lo; a voice from heaven saying, 'This is... my Beloved."(Matthew 3:17)

This is a time of beginnings for all of us: first meetings of classes; a fresh schedule of activities; children going back to school; at the office, everyone coming back from the summer diaspora; and so on.

This is our first Chapel Service of the year, as well. It's a beginning in the sense that there were no services here this summer. It's also a beginning for many of you, who are new to this particular Christian congregation, and who are wondering what to expect and how this worship, perhaps, might be a part of your experience this year.

So it's fitting that our Gospel lesson this morning should highlight, the beginning of Jesus's ministry, his baptism. We. see Jesus himself being initiated into a beginning, which is of profound import for his own life history.

I want to focus on this baptism this morning, as a way of putting first things first, for all of us.

As a group of people who take the name of Christ, and who are struggling to understand what that means for our lives, it's surely a good strategy for us to consider the beginning that Jesus makes in his baptism, as a way of discovering the implications of Jesus's life for our own beginnings, and beyond.

I.

The story of Jesus's baptism, as we have it narrated in Matthew 3, is probably familiar to most of you. But it needs to be fresh in our minds as we proceed.

We first see the figure of John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea. John, it seems, may have been associated in some way with the Qumran community, that order of Jewish monasticism that gave us the now famous Dead Sea Scrolls. He preaches a message of repentance for the masses. He is a voice crying in the wilderness.

John's message, according to Matthew, was harsh, as his dress was simple and his diet was rudimentary. He condemned the religious establishment of his day with an intense vehemence. He proclaimed that the day of judgment for all was drawing dangerously near. He announced, indeed, according to Matthew, that One was coming who would make that day of judgment a present reality, who would baptize with fire.

Then Jesus emerges into the picture. He seeks to be baptized by John. We see John now recognizing the self-authenticating holiness of this chosen One of God, and protesting that Jesus should baptize him,

I suspect that you can empathize with John. I know I can. however full of the Spirit I might feel on a given Sunday, if Jesus were to walk into this Church and sit down to listen to my sermon, I think I would probably insist that he should take the podium, not I.

But the logic of Jesus's ministry, right from the start, was not the logic of ordinary human affairs. Right from the start, he came as one who was sent to serve, to submit in love to the holy will of his Parent in heaven, for the sake of us all.

So Jesus is baptized by John. Then he immediately comes up from the water, and behold, the story tells us, the heavens were opened and the Spirit of God descended upon him. And a voice from heaven said: "This is my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

To explore the meaning of the inaugural experience in Jesus's ministry, I want to point to two things: first, the context of the experience; second, the content of the experience.

II.

The context of this beginning is perhaps best revealed if we recall an image from earlier in the third chapter of Matthew, the image of fire.

John announces the coming of Jesus as the coming of one who is to judge the earth, as the coming of one who is to gather the chaff of evil and sin, and throw it into an unquenchable fire. "I baptize you with water for repentance," John says, "but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

In days gone by, this motif — fire — used to be championed by some preachers to the point of distortion. You all have heard about, if you have not actually heard, hellfire and damnation sermons. Likewise, if you know any one thing about Jonathan Edwards, perhaps the greatest Christian theologian in American history, you probably know about his sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," and the celebrated image be uses: depicting human existence as dangling like a spider, on one thread, over a bonfire of destruction.

But thanks to the work of many exegetes in recent decades, we are in a position to understand the fire motif much more adequately and in a way that is much more helpful for our own lives.

What the fire image points to generally is what is sometimes called by scholars an apocalyptic view of the world. This view of the world surely had pronounced elements of judgment, as we know from the Book of Revelation. But, more generally, it was in fact a very particular kind of interpretation of history.

Most of you probably know the classical myth about Sysyphus. He is the poor fellow who is condemned eternally to keep pushing this large stone up a hill, until he just gets to the top, when it rolls down, and he has to start all over again. And he must do tliis for ever and ever, world without end. No amen.

This gives us a glimpse of the classical view of history. For the Greek mind, history is essentially a meaningless sequence of events, fated, going nowhere, ending nowhere — except perhaps in a huge cosmic

conflagration, which would finally destroy everything, only to have the whole thing begin all over again, playing out the same futile story.

Some people today feel very much drawn to this kind of view of history. You yourself, on occasion, may be very much able to identify with the story of Sysyphus. Your life may seem like one damned thing after another.

In contrast, the biblical view of history, as it comes to one of its expressions in the visionary thought of the apocalyptic writers, did indeed see the negativities of human history in general — the tyranny and the oppressiveness of Rome, for example — and did see the plight of individuals, such as demonic possession or political persecution, but it didn't think of history generally or the story of individual lives as one damned thing after another.

In face of all the negativities of human experience, as we see most vividly in II Peter, the Book of Revelation, and, variously, in the preaching of Jesus himself, the apocalyptic visionaries looked for the dawning of a new day, when, God would purge the world of unrighteousness, wipe away tears from all faces, banish death, and create a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

So this image of fire here, as it points to the context of Jesus's baptism, does point to the notion of a comprehensive judgment, and to that degree suggests hellfire and damnation: but, more deeply, it is a profoundly hopeful image. It suggests a fire that purges, a fire that prepares the way for a renewal of all things.

And more. The biblical nuance is this. You see Sysyphus rolling that heavy rock up the mountain. Indeed you see the whole of humanity as Sysyphus, toiling under immense burdens. Then, as if you might be seeing history from another mountain top, you see not only that purging fire spreading over Sysphus's world, purging it of those burdens, preparing it for a new day. You see something else.

Lo and behold, you see tongues of fire, as the prophet Joel and the Book of Acts suggest, descending on all flesh. And there on the top of that holy mountain, enjoying a feast of fat things and wine on the lees, you see all the Sysyphuses of the world, prophesying: sons and daughters, young and old. So this fire not only purges the world and transforms it, but liberates every human creature, body and soul, for a dance of joy.

Such is the apocalyptic context of Jesus's baptism.

III. ’

But all this, as a matter of fact, is only so much dreaming,'by itself. Beautiful dreaming, to be sure. Hopeful dreaming. Wonderful dreaming. Would that it were true!

To stop here then, only having looked at the context, would be the cruelist of follies. It would be to leave you in the world of dreams, which, given the realities of history, all the anguish and the suffering, can sometimes be the most bitter and the most biting of experiences. Hope without any reality to sustain it can be tyrannical.

So vs have to attend to the content of Jesus's baptism, as well as its context, "...the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending... and alighting on him; and, lo, a voice from heaven saying, 'This is... my Beloved." This shows us how we get from the apocalyptic vision to the historical reality, from the dreaming of the biblical mind throughout the ages, to the concrete proclamation of the New Testament message.

The text shows us the heavens opening over Jesus. I imagine now something like a stream of powerful sunshine pushing its way through the dark clouds of a thunderstorm, that had been blocking out the sun almost completely. And the light falls on the chosen One, the child of God, who is to inaugurate the coming of the final day of light.

Ths light we now see falling so brightly on Jesus in this world of darkness is the Holy Spirit. This is the proclamation we hear in our text.

In order to hear now with greater understanding, let me' remind you that throughout the Christian tradition the Spirit of God has often been identified imaginatively with the love of God. So in trinitarian imagery the Spirit is seen as the bond of love that unites the Father and the Son in eternity.

Two summers ago a friend of mine, also a friend of some of you, embraced her nineteen year old son as he was about to depart for a mountain climbing expedition in Alaska. Now she remembers that embrace very deeply, with tears in her eyes — even as she had then, for she knew the dangers that lay ahead, for that was their last embrace. He met with an accident in Alaska, on one of that state's highest mountains, and was killed.

But she will tell you that that bond of love, which united them then, still unites them now, and that those tears which she felt then, and then felt so profusely as the news of his death reached her, are now still in her heart.

So I imagine God, dwelling in the mystery of eternity, reaching out with the Spirit of love, with a parental heart of compassion overflowing with tears, to embrace the Son, to touch Jesus and envelop Jesus-with love. So I imagine God, with tears in the Divine heart, knowing the way of the Cross that was to come, holding on to the Son, with deep compassion and anguish, through the Spirit of love.

Perhaps at that moment, at that preciously tender time when God embraced Jesus with the Spirit of love, perhaps the words that God had spoken through the prophet centuries before, came to recollection, like a whisper, and God spoke to Jesus: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm, you; when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."

All these nuances of paternal love and affection, and more, I believe, can be readily discerned in this one expression: "My beloved." All these personal touches of intimate parental embrace and tearful eyes we can see, as Matthew tells us about the heavens opening, and the Spirit descending, as he shows us the flow of that eternal bond of love uniting God in

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IV.

Hear this proclamation, then: that Jesus is the Beloved of God. This is the place where everything begins, as far as the New Testament is concerned, with this content. The apocalyptic context is surely decisive: without it we would be so many poor Sysyphuses staring without understanding at the coming of Jesus.

Yet we need to go beyond the vision of the purging fire and the tongues of fire to the reality of the One who inaugurates and embodies all those good hopes in this world. This is the beginning that makes all the difference.

See, therefore, this baptism of Jesus and the pouring forth of the Spirit of God: the opening of the heavens, the breaking through all those dark clouds, the dawning of a light in our history, which is the veritable bond of the Divine Love, embracing and enveloping Jesus, who is God's Beloved.

And then remember that by the grace of God you and I have been baptized into Christ, or if not, we can be: and that through our identification with his baptism that sweet love of God's Spirit is given to us, to dwell within each one of us.

In the midst of a dark and burdensome world, Jesus appears, right where Sysyphus is laboring. Jesus reaches out to him and embraces him with the Spirit of love. Jesus tells him that he can put his burden down. This'is the intimate Divine reality of hope, tangibly present in this world.

In a word: on this day of beginnings for us, God opens up the heavens and sees us in our distress and our confusion, and as we are identified with Jesus and touched by his Spirit, God speaks to you and to me, and says: "My Beloved."

Amen.