

THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

“Start of Something New”

The LORD said to Joshua, “Today I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you.” Joshua 3:7

Can you imagine what it must have been like to be Joshua? Moses was dead. Rightly considered one of the “greats” among men, a great prophet, and the deliverer whom God raised up to lead the Children of Jacob out of slavery in Egypt, Moses was larger than life. He had stood up to Pharaoh, parted the Red Sea, talked with God on the mountain and personally received His Law. He had interceded for the people, been their leader and guide, and gotten them right up to the edge of the Promised Land. And now, he was gone, and Joshua was to be his replacement.

Now, Joshua himself was no peon. Named Joshua, or Yeshua, which means “The LORD saves,” by Moses, he had been there from the beginning, commanding Israel’s army, winning a startling victory over the Amalekites at Sinai, and being only one of two out of twelve men famously sent to spy out the land of Canaan to bring back a good report, saying the land could be conquered immediately.

Still, he was no Moses.

It’s no wonder, then, God takes Joshua aside at the beginning of the Book of Joshua, which picks up right where Deuteronomy ends, with the death of Moses, and speaks to him these incredibly comforting words: “Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go” (1:9).

But God has a tendency to one-up Himself, and He does that here in Joshua 3. Not only does He assure Joshua with comforting *words*, but He follows up these words with a comforting *action*. He says, “Today I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you”—and then proceeds to basically replicate the parting of the Red Sea, only with the waters of the Jordan, so that there can be no doubt whatsoever that God is with Joshua.

And that’s important, because the last forty years hadn’t exactly been a picnic. There had been everything from hunger and thirst to war and sedition—and snakes! Why’d it have to be snakes? Everything that *could* have gone wrong *did* go wrong, and that wasn’t necessarily going to change in the Promised Land. They still had to *possess* the land, and that meant war with the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Hivites, the Perizites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, and the Jebusites. Nevertheless, God assures Joshua that

He is with him. Moses may be dead, but this is the start of something *new*, a new beginning for the people of God, and it begins right here, at the River Jordan.

Now, fast forward some 1,400 years, and *another* man named Yeshua receives a *similar* word of encouragement in the *very same river*. Jesus, so named because He will save His people from their sins (Matt. 1:21), comes up out of the water, and sees the skies parted and the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on Him, and hears the voice of His Father, saying, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17), strengthening Him for the difficult task ahead. In the very next verse, in fact, Jesus will go to war with the devil in the wilderness, spending forty days succeeding where Old Testament Israel for forty years had failed. And so, here, at Jesus’ Baptism, we recognize that this, too, is the start of something new, a new beginning for the people of God.

We like new beginnings. Never satisfied with the way things are, we relish the thought of starting over. That seems to be the main appeal of the New Year’s Day holiday. New Year’s is this supposed opportunity built into our secular calendar to put to death the failures and disappointments of the past and look forward in hope to the blank slate of a new year.

Last Sunday, January 3, *The Dallas Morning News* ran an article in their Inspired section with the headline, “The new year is full of promise. Own it. 21 ways you can shake off 2020 and start fresh.” Here’s a quote:

On this third day of the new year, the sun will rise and it will set, just like it did yesterday and 366 days last year...But today is more than a calendar turn different, because we can all but see, all but feel, all but smell newness, even a resurgence of hope.

Another article in the Business section recounts the woes of 2020:

We enter 2021 seeing glimmers of light at the end of the long, pitch-dark and deadly tunnel...2020 brought a global pandemic, divisive politics, skyrocketing unemployment, racial reckoning, civil unrest, record forest fires throughout the West, hurricane after hurricane, attacks on our election system and endless conspiracy theories. When we asked “What else?” murder hornets invaded our shores.

Now, whether or not you *agree* with the author on some of those points, the point *I’m* trying to make is that there seems to be this general sense out there that the new beginning we’re looking for, the new beginning we need, is to be found in the fact that we are now living in the year of our Lord 2021 instead of 2020; that there is, as it were,

between us and “The Worst Year Ever,” as some have called it, a great chasm that formed at 12:00 midnight on January 1, making this the start of something new.

OK, so 2020 wasn’t exactly a picnic, and pretty much everything that *could* have gone wrong *did* go wrong. But does that really make this new year the fresh start we’re looking for? Has anything really changed? What assurance do we have that anything *will* change? Or, as tends to happen *every* year, will we find ourselves right back here at the end of 2021 holding out 2022 as the year full of promise? We’re still wearing masks, aren’t we? If you were sick or unemployed on December 31, chances are you’re *still* sick or unemployed. The world is still fallen, and you still need Jesus. So, while it’s fun to *pretend* that everything’s new, and that things are really going to be different this time, it’s just not true.

But just because this new year, or the start of *any* year, is not the new beginning we’re looking for doesn’t mean starting over is *impossible*. With God, *all* things are possible. You just have to know where to look.

And for us Christians, it’s to our *Baptism*. Foreshadowed by the crossing of the Jordan in the Old Testament, and instituted by Christ Himself in the New, the Sacrament of Holy Baptism is the fresh start you’ve been looking for. Now, to be clear, I am *not* advocating for re-baptism. Baptism is not just plain water, but it is the water included in God’s command and combined with God’s Word—and that Word is final; it cannot be broken. *We* can go back on our word, but God will never go back on His. Because it’s *His* Word, *His* work, the promise that God made to you in your Baptism (to be your God) will stand *forever*.

But Baptism is not a one-time past event. Yes, at the font you *were* washed, you *were* sanctified, you *were* justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Cor. 6:11). But that washing of regeneration and renewal, in which the blood of Jesus cleansed you from all sin (1 John 1:7), *continuously* washes you clean *every* day that you cling to it in faith. It is a spring of water from which you may draw *endlessly*. That’s one of the advantages we have over the secular baptism of New Year’s: The world has to wait until January 1 to “start over”; *you* get to start over each and every day, putting to death the sins of your past and rising to live before God a new person. You are like Joshua, standing on the bank of the Jordan, with the words “I am with you” ringing in your ears; or like Jesus, the Spirit of God resting upon you, being strengthened by the words of your heavenly Father: “This, on account of my only-begotten Son, is *also* my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased.” This, today, is the start of something new—as is tomorrow, and the day after that. *Every* day is a new day in Christ, a new beginning for the people of God.

Which is why Luther, in his Small Catechism, encouraged the head of the family to teach his household to make the sign of the holy cross first thing in the morning and in the evening before bed, and say the words of Matthew 28:19. That little remembrance of Baptism, which we also use to begin our church services, is a great way to reorient yourself after a day/week of failures and disappointments. It's a way of saying, "You know, that was not great. Everything that could have gone wrong *did* go wrong, and I just want to start over. And because I am baptized, I get to. I have been crucified with Christ, and so today really is a blank slate for me. For my sins, though they were like scarlet, have become as white as snow."

This allows us to pray, as we do in Matins,

O Lord, heavenly Father, almighty and everlasting God, You have safely brought us to the beginning of this day. Defend us in the same with Your mighty power; and grant that this day we fall into no sin, neither run into any kind of danger; but that all our doings, being ordered by Your governance, may be righteous in Your sight.

Baptism doesn't just give us a fresh start; it also prepares us for *war*. Our sins may be washed away, but the Old Adam's a good swimmer. The devil may be cast out of heaven, but he's come down to us in great wrath. We have a difficult task ahead of us. But by hearing anew the promises of our Baptism, we put on the whole armor of God: faith to extinguish the temptations of the evil one, truth to defend against his lies, and the living and active Word of God to cut through our own sinful desires. God is with us, as He was with Joshua. He is with us in the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ. The wages for sin may be death, but this is the start of something new. It began right there at the font, but it continues today and on into eternity.

All of you who believe this, then, have the perfect resolution for 2021. There are many promises we make to ourselves, most, if not all, of which we break. But there is one that will stand forever: "I am baptized!" The world, and even fellow Christians, may laugh at that, but hold on to those words more dearly than any other pledge or promise you make to yourself this year. When failures and disappointments inevitably come, only the comfort of Jesus' cleansing sacrifice, which is yours by the washing of water with the Word, is enough to make the devil drop his ugly accusation, to give you joy, even in the midst of death and the fresh start you desire.

In the end, you *know* what it's like to be Joshua. And now, you have the same comfort and encouragement: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go." Amen.