

New Beginnings

- Baptism of Our Lord
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- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

Do you believe in new beginnings? As we get into this new year, at the end of this first week of class of a new Quarter, on this last day of the Christmas Season before Ordinary Time begins tomorrow, it is a good time to ask ourselves if we believe in new beginnings. I need to ask it in this 19th year as president and at the start of my 56th Quarter. Do we believe in new beginnings or is it all just regular order the “same old, same old”?

The experience of Jesus at his baptism in the Jordan may help us. He is something like 30 years old. It is important to know that we now know that life expectancy at his time was 28 years old. Without modern medicine people just died of one thing after another at any age. So what has Jesus of Nazareth been doing all this time? We know he knew the scriptures of his people, knew them deeply, listened to and heard them, perhaps held most of them in memory. The first we hear of him he is in the temple among those who taught the scriptures and we are told he was “listening to them and asking them questions”, not teaching them and giving them answers. So something he has been doing all these years is absorbing the word of God, taking it in and pondering it.

We also know that he worked and was known by his villagers as the son of the “carpenter”. We misunderstand this if we think of Joseph and Jesus having a shop with a sign in the window saying “Custom made chairs, tables and frames”. The word means more a maker of things, a person who works with his hands, a builder, a construction worker. Most likely he hired himself out with the other villagers as a day laborer working on building the Roman towns not far away. (No wonder he tells the parable of the laborers hired at different hours of the day.) Life was very ordinary, little new about it, quite continuous for this Jesus of the village of Nazareth, profound lover of the word of God and peasant laborer. No sign of any new beginnings there.

Then he goes prompted by what has been deepening in him from God’s word, God’s presence, God’s purpose, goes to his cousin in the desert where there is a religious renewal movement ritualized by being baptized. Jesus comes to this in continuity with his customary life, probably not knowing what is ahead but moved to be part of the people being baptized in expectation of God acting among his people in a new way. There it happens: a new beginning, coming up out of the water of the Jordan after having been plunged in it and prayed over by John, our gospel says while Jesus “was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.’” This is such a new beginning for Jesus from Nazareth that he does not return home, but is driven out into the desert by the Spirit to fast and to pray and to learn what his new beginning means and what it asks of him. The rest of the story will be picked up in what we call Ordinary Time and then Lent. It all hinges on this new beginning at the Jordan and his retreat in the desert.

We believe then in the new beginnings for Jesus. We can't know what was building in him before this over the long years, what was deepening—though we will know it by its effects later on—and we can't know everything of what he experienced and learned and believed in this Jordan experience. We are given only the gist of it: 1) one with the people in expectation of something new from God, 2) plunged into water as into death and purification, 3) praying afterwards, 4) experiencing even bodily the Spirit of God come upon him, 5) hearing not as if he's talking to himself but as unmistakably coming from God—"You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased", and 6) so powerful and changing that he is compelled to retreat into the desert to absorb it. Hinge, pivot, dividing line, demarcation, before and after, new beginning, the last day of the Christmas Season, and the time of preparation... now it's not Jesus of Nazareth, but Jesus for the people, and Jesus, son of the father. Wouldn't we all want to be there, to understand this more deeply, to know him and his prayerful, faith-filled experience more truly? Yes, but the place we do this is not at the Jordan but here in the assembly and in our own prayerful, believing hearts, in our own new beginnings.

We not only believe in new beginnings, but our whole faith is one of new beginning in baptism, in sacraments of reconciliation and confirmation and life, and marriage and healing in our own being truly raised to newness of life already in the risen Jesus and the gift of his spirit upon us, and ultimately in the new beginning of the Kingdom of God in a transformed world. The gist of our new beginnings, any day, any time, are the same as they were for Jesus at the Jordan: 1) being one of the people, 2) knowing mortality and need for purification, 3) praying deeply, daily, 4) receiving the Spirit, especially through the assembly where the spirit abounds, 5) knowing God saying to me personally, "You are my beloved son, my beloved daughter; with you I am well pleased, in you I delight", and 6) being compelled to ponder this in time and place apart. The paradigm of our new beginnings at all times in all years of our lives is given in Jesus' baptism at the Jordan. It's the gift of this day, the final gift of this Christmas Season, for the time ahead called "ordinary", only in the sense that new beginnings will be an ordinary part of our Christian lives of faith and living and public action in the days and weeks and months ahead. Believe in and allow new beginnings in your Christian life, you who are beloved of God and in whom God delights.