



Beginning with Baptism

Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17; Acts 1:21-26

“All beginnings are hard.”¹ So begins one of Chaim Potok’s novels. Indeed, the beginning of that novel is hard to read, as it traces how difficult making a beginning can be. A young boy struggles to make a new beginning in his life against the flow of tradition which encapsulates him. To struggle against the flow of how life has been organized around him is a daunting challenge. It is not for the faint of heart. In our walk of faith, how different is our challenge to make faith a new beginning?

John came preaching a new beginning. Out in the open countryside of Judea, he called on Jews to begin a new life in repentance. They were to prepare themselves for the coming of Messiah's reign by changing the way they lived. In repentance, they were to begin a new life as converts to an authentic faith in *Yahweh*. Far beyond following Judaism’s prescriptive faith, they were to begin living according to the highest ethics of God’s will, treating one another as loved by God.

For many, John’s words made little sense. After all, John was preaching to the folks who were already God’s family. They were ready for Messiah—long past ready! They were the people of Israel. They were the Chosen of *Yahweh*’s promise and covenant! They already had the Torah—God’s instructions on how to live and how to rectify things when they stepped out of line. They were more than ready for Messiah to come and throw off the yoke of Roman political oppression. They were ready for God’s political solution to their individual and national plight.

Then comes John the Baptist, telling them that they need to become Jews! Why was he asking them to become what they already were? John wanted them to convert. That’s what baptism was all about. It was a rite of initiation, converting to a new religious identity. It was how a Gentile convert would declare before the world that he was relinquishing his old way of life to enter into the covenant of God’s promise to Abraham and Moses. Baptism and circumcision were initiation rites. Since they were already circumcised, John called them to be immersed in repentance. He wanted them to begin life anew under allegiance to God.

It took a while for the message to sink in. John said that claiming identification with Judaism by following the rites, rituals, and procedures was just not enough. It was not sufficient to go through all the prescribed motions. They must change their entire attitude toward God. They must change their attitudes toward one another.

John was tired of a sterile religious experience. He was tired of watching people go through the motions of attendance and following the rites. He was tired of seeing expressions of religious worship that did not translate into caring for the people around them. He was tired of seeing folks consumed with their own lives and petty issues. He was tired of seeing the religious neglect to become participants in God’s will to rescue, redeem, and care for those in need. He was tired of people going through the motions of worship and never serving anything other than themselves.

Like all his companions and countrymen, he longed for the messianic age to begin. He knew that Messiah needed more than a people given to routine, ritual, and tradition. He knew they needed to be willing to look beyond their own interests and see the needs of others. John took up the task of getting

them ready. He would preach and whip them into shape so that Messiah could finally lead them to freedom, release, and God's purposes.

Then Jesus comes and messes things up! He was supposed to appear and baptize John, showing his superiority and claiming his title of deliverer. Now that he was on the scene, he should have made a big show of his identity, rally the crowds, and kick out Rome to bring Israel to its long-awaited new beginning. Now it was John who did not know what to do.

John was confused. You see, he had it all right, but he had it all wrong. If everyone were converted in baptism, things were supposed to be right for Messiah's grand entrance. God's Reign could be finalized. People would convert to God's way, and that was all there was to it. Baptism was to be the end-all, make-it-or-break-it step in bringing about a new age under Messiah's reign. By slipping into the waters of the Jordan, Jesus proclaimed a different truth. Baptism was just a beginning.

You see, John had it all messed up, mixed up, turned around, and backwards. He saw the coming reign of Messiah as a static reality. It was an entity to be seen and admired. He had a vacation concept of life, the kind where you show up, prepare no meals, do no housekeeping, do no work, and entertain yourself silly. Jesus saw his reign as a dynamic reality we gradually enter step by step. It is a new beginning, to be sure, but the beginning of a new way of life. It is just a beginning, and all beginnings are hard.

Jesus stepped into the water to identify with John's preaching on make a fresh start on a deeper level with God. He stepped out of the water, however, to model for us how that fresh start is lived. He identified with John's baptism as professing our need for a new beginning. He showed in his ministry that it was merely that—a beginning, a springboard into a life of discipleship.

After the resurrection, the disciples gathered to chose someone to take Judas' place in bearing witness to Jesus. They looked for someone who could go back all the way to Jesus' own baptism. Why? Baptism was the beginning of Jesus' own ministry, teaching, and example.

As important as that beginning was for Jesus and is for us, it is still only a beginning. Our challenge is to see it as such. You see, Messiah's reign did not simply arrive because Jesus had come. Messiah's reign did not bloom like a flower that would remain open, perfumed, and brilliant forever. It did, rather arrive with the promise of what could be as we walk in this new way of life in God's presence.

As mixed up as John was, he had one thing right. He knew the people needed a fresh start. He knew they needed to begin their lives over. He knew they needed to give up on religious rite, ritual, and tradition. He understood that they needed to embrace God's redemptive character as their own. Baptism marked the beginning of Jesus' ministry. What do our lives proclaim regarding the Christ into whom we were baptized? Are we becoming more like Christ as the days and years go by? Beginnings are hard, but they carry us forward into a new way of living. Are we ready to embark upon that journey of faith?

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¹ Chaim Potok. *In the Beginning*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1997.