

The Start and the Beginning

A sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Canady III
Rector of Christ Church, New Bern, NC on January 10, 2016
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Everything has a starting point. The road trip. The swim meet. The concert. The ministry to which God has called us. Everything has that defining moment where we can say, "It started here."

The key goes in the ignition, and the car pulls out of the driveway. The sound is heard, and the swimmers dive into the water. The first note gets played to the thrill and anticipation of adoring fans. The first encounter of serving Christ by serving others. And the journey, the race, the concert, the ministry starts.

Or does it?

Before it can start, it has to have a beginning.

Long before the key can go in the ignition, the trip has to be planned. Locations researched, reservations made, or at least a quick text to see if someone has a sofa you can crash on. The weather checked, clothes packed. Arrangements made so the mail and the newspapers don't pile up and our pets are cared for while we are away.

For the swimmers, the race doesn't begin when the horn sounds. It begins when they first learn to get in the water and swim on their own. It begins when they find out they might be a little faster or have a little better stroke than their peers and that it's actually fun to propel yourself through the water, and you find yourself working harder and harder to get better and better.

The concert began long before the lights went down on the stage. Whether it's Mozart and Chopin being performed in a concert hall or Taylor Swift at PNC Arena, the concert began when the musicians were first so moved by the music that they had to help make it themselves, and they began to work (sometimes joyfully, and sometimes not) to hone their craft to the point that they can share that sound with thousands of people at once.

What we often think of as "the starting point" is rarely the true beginning.

By now, you have probably figured out that the ministry to which each of us is called did not start when we got involved in that ministry. It began even before the waters of Baptism washed over our heads, and we were marked as Christ's Own for Ever.

The First Sunday after the Epiphany is when we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus, an event marked in unique ways in each of the Gospels. Christian tradition holds that this marks the starting point of Jesus' earthly ministry. In fact, if our Gospel lesson today had gone one verse further, we would have heard Luke tell us, "Jesus was about 30 years old when he began his work."

But did Jesus' ministry begin at his Baptism? Or did it begin well before that? "In the beginning, was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," John's Gospel tells us. Long before the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us in the person of Jesus, the work of the Word of God was being done in the world. So that by the time Jesus was born and was of age to begin his earthly ministry, a foundation had been laid. Whether the people were ready or not, the precedent had been set for someone to speak on behalf of God and share the Good News of God's love for the world.

It's worth noting that in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, before Jesus says, "The Kingdom of God has come near!" he spends sometime in the wilderness, away from other people and the business of life. He's tempted to run away from his calling and his ministry, but instead he keeps his focus on God and the work to which God is preparing him for. We will hear more about that episode from Luke 4 on the First Sunday of Lent, February 14.

We mark two very different, yet related, events in the life of our parish today, two events that mark the start of something, but not necessarily the beginning. At the 8:45 service, we Baptize **Avery Ruth Witten**, the daughter of Hank and Liz, the sister of Zach, the granddaughter of Alice and Myra. As their family friend, the Rev. Steve Miller, pours the water over Avery's head and she becomes a full member of the church, she will, in many real ways, begin her ministry as a follower of Christ. I would contend that the impact of her ministry began when Hank & Liz first started thinking about bringing a child into the world, and maybe even before that. Avery will be supported in her Christian faith and life by all of us, so in many ways, her ministry began when you and I were Baptized, too.

At the 11:00 service, we formally install the 2016 Vestry, who spent Friday and Saturday in retreat at Trinity Center to consider the work ahead of us in the year to come. The ministry of each Vestry member did not begin when they were elected, or even when they arrived at Trinity Center on Friday afternoon. It began even before they agreed to have their name submitted to this parish family for a vote. Their ministry first

began when they heard the call or felt the nudge from the Almighty to be a part of the Church, that sacred and wonderful institution that reminds us we are part of something so much bigger than ourselves. I am very thankful for the many gifts and passions of this Vestry, and that they have chosen to answer this call to Baptismal ministry at Christ Church. It is an understatement to say that no two people on this Vestry are alike, and in that variety, they bring so many of the things we need for leadership in this parish.

I hope it goes without saying that they are not the only 12 people at Christ Church who are exercising their Baptismal ministry in this place and in the community. Each of us has a ministry rooted in our Baptism. Our readings from the Gospels over the next few weeks will be about Who Jesus Is and how he is revealed to the world around him. I hope that as you listen to those readings, you will consider not only *what* your Baptismal ministry is, but how God led you to that ministry, and what ministries God may be preparing you for as well. Epiphany is an outstanding time to rededicate ourselves to both the main task as followers of Jesus which is spreading the light of Christ in the world around us and to the ministries to which we are called.

We may even find that we start something new, but something that began long ago.