

Sermons at Trinity

Christmas Eve 2008

“When your story meets its beginning”

The Rev. R. Cameron Miller

Merry Christmas.

I am standing here at the baptismal font instead of the pulpit because I want to take a brief moment to connect what we are doing here tonight with our Baptisms – yours and mine...or *potentially* yours, if you are not baptized. I'll come back to that in a moment.

Unless you spend a lot of time thinking about it, or reading about it, you probably think that the story of Jesus begins with an evening like this long, long ago in Bethlehem. But there are *many* stories about Jesus and none of them actually *begin* with his birth.

You see, the *earliest recorded story of Jesus, begins he* Jesus was a young man. It is the Gospel of Mark and it begins with Jesus being baptized. In that story, Jesus' life suddenly takes an unexpected turn and that is the *start* of Jesus as we have come to know him.

In Luke's Gospel, which is the one we heard tonight, the story begins *in utero* with the fetus-Jesus recognizing the fetus-John the Baptist when their mom's enter the same room. So Luke's story really begins with *Mary*, and God whispering to Mary about her son and how important he is going to become. And then, like the beginning of the first Star Wars movie, Jesus enters the story surrounded by an ominous evil empire, and with his birth witnessed by a cast of strange characters in the form of shepherds and angels.

Clearly, in Luke story, Jesus' *start* is an impoverished and endangered one that promises a dramatic turnaround.

Then comes Matthew's story of Jesus. In *his* story, Jesus begins 1000 years earlier where his genome is rooted in that of Israel's first king, David. Matthew's story too, has Jesus born amidst the shroud of an evil empire but attended to by royalty: three strangers from the East who bring him gold, frankincense and myrrh. Everything about Matthew's story proclaims the *royalty* of Jesus, so that his beginning is wrapped in the color purple just like he will be mocked by a robe of purple at his execution.

And finally, the Gospel of John's story of Jesus begins...well, "in the beginning." John starts *his* story of Jesus in the beginning of *Time* so that there is no time that Jesus wasn't – proving to his audience that Jesus was both God and human somehow. *In the beginning* there was Jesus, John says – declaring that Jesus doesn't *start* anywhere but is rather, the *start* of everything.

So four really different stories about where the story of Jesus begins: One way back in the beginning of time; one in utero; one as a new born king; one as a newly baptized adult.

On this Christmas Eve of 2008 I mention these very different beginnings for two reasons. The first is: If the four Gospel writers can have such widely differing opinions about Jesus, so can we!

In other words, you and I do not have to agree on who or what or how Jesus is whatever it is we claim for him. Isn't that liberating? We can have vastly different ideas about Jesus and still share the *communal* spirituality of Christianity.

Christianity has been a dynamic, diverse, and robustly divergent tradition from the very beginning. So please, do not imagine that there is only *one* Christianity or *one* Jesus or *one* Christmas for that matter. There is a cacophony of voices connected to, struggling with, and empowered by the Jesus, or Jesuses, at the center of it all.

Now my second point has to do with where you and I *start* our stories.

Were you and I called by God, by genes, by birth, by baptism, by our own peculiar life's experiences? Where did our story *begin*, or has it even begun yet?

I think about someone like Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was a Lutheran pastor from a privileged family with a long pedigree within his homeland, who found himself utterly confused in the midst of Germany under the Nazis. A conflict raged between his penchant for being obedient, his upper class values and his loyalty to country on the one hand; while on the other hand, he saw that those familiar values had led

him and others to violate the core values of the Gospels as proclaimed by Jesus.

That is where Bonhoeffer's story really begins; it is his turning point. His story starts with *that* conflict and it began when he changed directions; and it started when he joined a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. That is where Bonhoeffer's story gets its start.

Where did your story start, or has it started yet?

Rosa Park's story began when she decided, for whatever reasons she chose that moment, to sit down in the White section of the bus.

Rev. King's story started at the moment, whenever it was, that he went from being a pastor to becoming a prophet.

There is always *a beginning*...there is always *a start*. When was yours? Has it begun yet?

So I am standing here, at the Baptismal font, because this is where *we* say that *we begin* – it is where we say we *start* to merge our stories with Jesus' story. Baptism is a ritual not a *fait accompli*, so we may not have started yet...we may not have turned onto our turning point yet. Will we recognize it? Will we be ready for it? Will we take it when it comes?

Baptism, and being nurtured and supported and challenged in a *community of baptism* is how we get started when our story meets its beginning. That is what baptism is and that is what a *community of baptism* does.

Are we giving our children what they need in order for them to get started when their story meets its beginning? That is what baptism is and what a *community of baptism* does.

So, on Christmas Eve 2008, in the midst of an anxious time, when the banks and the markets can no longer hold our over-inflated confidence, there is something we can take to the bank.

Our story, yours and mine, *begins* when we are *called* – whenever and however that happens. What we can take to the bank is that we probably won't hear it or recognize it or have the courage to respond to it unless we also engaged in a *community* that understands that every story meets its beginning when God finally calls us into it.

Well...my Christmas wish for you, and for me and mine, is that if we haven't started yet that we will listen and we will hear and we will take that turn...that turning point that is our beginning...when our life meets the place where our story begins.

Merry Christmas.