

“All beginnings are hard.” So begins a novel by Chaim Potok called “In the Beginning.” David remembers his mother saying this when he was very ill as a child. His mother had fallen while he was in her arms. This gave him a deviated septum and the resultant infections and high fevers. “You will get well; all beginnings are hard.” He remembers his rabbinic teacher saying so when he was frustrated with a lesson. “People have spent their lives on this material; you expect to master it all at once? All beginnings are hard.” When David becomes a teacher, he says it as a semester begins. “I will try to shake all that you believe in, so that you gain a new and stronger understanding. All beginnings are hard. Especially a beginning that you make yourself. That is the hardest of all.”

Much of David’s story is painful and difficult. He becomes a scholar of Jewish origins using the historical critical method in a secular university. His family sees this as a betrayal of their ancestral faith. It is the 1940’s when the horror of the Holocaust is fresh, when David’s grandparents are among the dead. So he has the anguish of being misunderstood. Following his call means losing family acceptance.

The beginning of St Benedict’s rule announces a hard beginning. “*We hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome.*” Your heart sinks for the words indicate quite otherwise. He continues, “Do not be daunted by fear and run away. It is bound to be hard at the beginning.”

What does that say about the middle and the end? I believe that Jesus’ baptism was a hard beginning. It meant leaving the security of his family and community behind. It meant setting out on a project that would be misunderstood. It meant stepping out of the water, rising from the depths of the self, in order to follow God’s leading.

There was little to go on except the voice from heaven saying, “you are precious and beloved.” He had to figure out what to do next. Go into the desert, wrestle with his demons. Choose companions. Speak to the Nazareth synagogue, inspire and upset the people. Begin the journey to Jerusalem. That seems the crucial task: to choose a path and stick to it. Either refusing the deflections, or twisting back a sidetrack to re-commit yourself to the original mission.

The voice of God, heard at baptism, repeats its message from time to time. That happens at the transfiguration. Instead of going down into the water, Jesus goes up Mount Tabor, to a place where he can take the long view. The long view re-connects him with his forebears, represented by Moses and Elijah. The long view bathes him in light, which is usually obscured by clouds of difficulty. The long view attunes his ear to re-hear the message, “you are precious and beloved.” It gives enough to be going on with; it empowers Jesus to continue the trek.

Sometimes when we need the voice of God, it does not make itself audible. This is what the Gethsemane story shows. Jesus has reached Jerusalem, his chosen destination, but now he has some second-thoughts. Can he really face it, can he really go through with it? He asks that he be excused from drinking the cup, the cup of his destiny, the cup he started filling with the water of his baptism. And God seems silent. Yet by pressing the question, almost to an annoying degree, he eventually “hears” an answer. The story only implies it, but it goes something like this. “You are precious and beloved. I will be with you in the difficulty. Do not view it as deadly but as an opportunity and a challenge. It will lead to something even if it does not look that way. It will be a beginning.”

This gives Jesus the confidence, assurance, and dignity, to meet his adversaries. He actually triumphs over their cruelty and violence. That is one way of viewing the resurrection. It has practical implications for the way we meet our hardships, difficulties, and dead-ends. We could consider the possibility of a way through, to look for the new beginning God is giving, even if it is difficult.

Thus there is a strong line of connection from coming up out of the water to coming down the mountain to leaving the garden. Each of them involves God offering a possibility and Jesus taking him up on it. This is a pattern we might try.

But all beginnings are hard. At a significant point in David’s story he visits Bergen-Belsen. This is hard to do, but he is drawn there. He is very aware of the cup his people had to drink. “I walked along the paved paths between massive stone walls on which were written, here rest 2000 dead; here rest 2500 dead; here rest 5000 dead, April 1945. On and on the inscriptions go. The day had darkened. There was only the silence. But then I “heard” voices: my teacher, my father, my dead uncle who had been a scholar

too. They discuss my call and my choice. There is some perplexity, yet the three voices come to some understanding, some agreement. My uncle says, 'David, look at me.' Here is the past. Never forget the past as you nourish the present.' I opened my eyes and found myself alone. I said the mourner's kaddish, then walked back between the graves and drove away."

This is a good scene to ponder for its associations with today's stories, the supernatural voices from the other side being heard, the place of trouble and death being transformed into a place of possibility.

The difficulty of the beginning is not removed but it is given meaning, and that is enough. It is a model for what each of us may do with our experiences at Jordan, at Mount Tabor, at Gethsemane. We hear the voice, which gives us strength to come up from the water, to come down from the mountain, to leave Gethsemane. Knowing we are precious and beloved, the power of God goes with us.

Gabriel Myers, OSB