



## BAPTISM OF OUR LORD SERMON

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“In the beginning...” opens the book of Genesis. (The title itself, of course, means ‘beginning.’) The writer takes us back to the start: before there were people, plants, or animals, before stars and planets, when there was just....

what?? Some would say ‘nothing,’ and there’s a school of theology that talks about God creating ‘ex nihilo’, from nothing.

But, did you notice, that’s not exactly what Genesis tells us. Instead, it describes God creating out of mess...out of chaos. “The earth was a ‘formless void,’ and ‘darkness covered the face of the deep,’ while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Earth, deep, and waters are not ‘nothing’! Rather, God came blowing over the writhing, roiling turmoil!!

By the way, the Hebrew word ‘ruach’ can be translated as wind or spirit or breath, depending upon the context. So, God blew/flew/breathed over angry seas, sulfurous smoke, swirling muck. God goes to work to make sense of the mess, establishing order, taming the nasty forces down below. (Think, maybe, of mom setting out to tackle the wilds of her teenager’s room!)

And Genesis 1 goes on to tell us what extraordinary power God had to accomplish the work. Unlike Mom, God doesn’t even break sweat. God simply utters a word—that holy breath becomes speech—and creation comes into being. “Let there be light; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good.”

You know how the rest of that story goes, I’m sure. With determined order and purpose, God separates light from darkness, land from seas, water below from water above. God puts a sky up there—in Hebrew cosmology it was a physical dome, like an inverted bowl to hold back the ‘water above’—and he fills the sky with stars and planets. God then gets going to create living things: in the water, on land, and in the air, culminating with creatures made ‘in

his own image': men and women. "Good, good, good, good, good, very good," says God. Then it's Sabbath Day—time for a nap!

While to some the story may seem quaint, even juvenile, I do love that image of God taming the wild forces, with his word overcoming noise, ordering the chaos, bringing light from darkness, making wondrous life to teem over the earth. By the time we get to the 7<sup>th</sup> day, we've got the most blessed, peaceful, harmonious picture imaginable: "God's in his heaven. All's right with the world."

Then comes Genesis 2!: Adam, Eve, serpent, sin, punishment, pain and death. (So much for the 'quaintness'!) It is as if evil discovers cracks in creation and finds ways of seeping through to spoil the 'good' with a return of mess/turmoil/chaos. And so the rest of the Old Testament chronicles centuries of struggle as God works to get his people to listen to his word, to follow the light, to choose a righteous life over the pitfalls of sin and death.

By the time we get to the end of the Hebrew Scriptures, there is a great deal of mess and even more longing for what could be. The Promised Land, gift from God, was ruled by pagan foreigners; the king (also gift of God) was dethroned. The 'chosen ones of God' had become a second-rate people, lamenting the past and licking their wounds, with little hope, to be honest, about the future.

And so, we come to the start of the earliest gospel, Mark, who begins his story of Jesus not with shepherds, manger, or magi, but rather with his baptism at the start of his ministry, about age 30. As Mark tells it, there are echoes of Genesis: swirling water, the Spirit of God, this time tearing open the heavens to come down, and the word of God declaring Jesus 'my beloved Son.' Water, spirit, and word bring to birth a new creation: as before, order from chaos, light to the darkness, but more in Jesus: forgiveness of sin and eventually life from death.

Mark tells us that John the baptizer proclaimed "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins," and we might well wonder why Jesus would need such a bath. There's no sure answer 'why,' but it seems to me it is at least Jesus' way of identifying with those he came to save. Just as he would come to know our temptation, hunger, pain, rejection, sorrow, fear

and death, so here he walks through those Jordan waters of repentance, turning to God the Father as his source of direction, strength, and hope, calling us to follow.

So this morning we remembered our own holy washing, as it took place however many years ago. We were born children of a fallen humanity, and in those waters were reborn ‘children of God, and inheritors of eternal life.’ It seems so simple a thing—water, word, spirit—but by God it becomes a life changing/life shaping event, powerful enough to deal with the chaos and chase the darkness that invades our own lives.

You understand what I’m getting at, I trust. We know how all it takes are the results of a blood test or biopsy to turn our calm and certain life upside down. Or, the whole thing can come undone with the loss of a job, with a broken relationship, dealing with an addiction or depression, or the death of a loved-one.

“Chaos, darkness, becoming unglued, spinning out of control” are ways of describing the experience. I’ve heard them countless times, so often accompanied by the questions: “What did I do to deserve this?” or “Why is this happening to us?” or “How in the world will I get through it?” That’s why, I think, remembering our baptism is so important, week after week, day after day.

It reminds us, first of all, that the world is not as God intends it. Created ‘good,’ it has gone bad because humanity has used its freedom to ignore God. But God doesn’t call it quits. Rather, in Christ, God begins the process of re-birth. His kingdom is breaking in, but is still on the way...’now, but not yet.’ St. Paul describes the whole earth writhing in ‘birth pains,’ and it’s been a very long labor!

When those chaos questions arise, as pastor I must admit I don’t have an explanation for the ‘whys,’ except to admit that this world is broken, and our lives are broken, and there’s plenty of evidence of that to go around. But that’s not all I have to say! In those same baptismal waters that called us to repentance, we are sealed with the promise of God that nothing will ever separate us from his love.

St. Paul puts it: “Neither dangers, nor peril, nor sword, nothing in life or in death, will keep God’s love in Christ from you.” Just as that knowledge carried Jesus through wilderness temptation, repeated rejection, and heart-rending disappointment all the way to the cross, so

God's promises provide for you and me the anchor/the foundation/the lifeline (pick your metaphor!) for our own trials, assaults and stumbles.

Once again, as pastor, I've seen the power of that trust and faith at work time and again. (I know you have, too!) There in the hospital room, through a counseling session, in the funeral home I've seen God's love lighting up the path, stilling the storm, ordering the chaos. As has been the case for 2,000 years, holy communion and blessed community—body of the risen Christ—continue to work the miracles of life abundant and love eternal.

We have this new year looming before us, and we look forward to some things we've got planned: our visioning work, weddings, fellowship events, new organ. It is, of course, the Unknowns that can be so fearsome: politics in the Middle East, economy in Europe, changing of the guard in N. Korea, presidential elections at home, new mayor in Reading, whatever's next in the Reading School District...the next doctor's visit, phone call, knock at the door.

There are no working crystal balls or fortune cookies. You know that. But we do have this: water, word, bread & cup, and sisters and brothers in that Christ whose love will simply not let go...no matter what. Thanks be to God! Amen.

