

# “In the Beginning”

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Baptism of Our Lord – Year B

Readings from Scripture: Genesis 1: 1-5; Mark 1: 4-11

*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 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. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.*

*Genesis: 1: 1-5*

*John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’*

*Mark 1: 4-11*

Please pray with me:

Loving God we pray now that the words we have brought with us this day in our hearts and minds and souls—the words of your sacred scripture, the songs that we sing and the prayers we offer would be touched now by your Spirit, so that the Living Word, the word anointed in Baptism would come forth and be among us—Jesus Christ, here, now and forever. It is in his name that we pray. Amen.

The other night I was sitting at home rather late and I happened to stumble across the evening news. If you have been in worship the last several months you know that one of my favorite jousting partners in the sermons I preach is the evening news. I still am trying to understand the thought behind what happens in the first 15 minutes of a television news cast. It seems as I was sitting there one after the other I hear these 30 second headlines about 5 people shot in Chicago in a drive by and about a calamity in Kansas and a disaster in Florida and I realized as I sat there that what I was being given was a litany of horror. The one thing after another after another after another just piled up on me until I turned the channel to the next news program. Guess what I got there? A litany of horror all over again. It seems that our country, at this time, when so much turmoil is happening, we are becoming increasingly addicted to this really negative news, what I am terming “Litany of Horror.”

It reminded me of a conversation I had not too long ago. I went to Seattle right after Christmas and was looking forward to having a conversation with a friend that I had known a long time. Now maybe most of you don't have friends like this, but I do. I knew that several years ago he had started a new job, and there was a lot of excitement about his new job, so I was really excited to sit down and have a conversation with him, to hear what was going on his life and what he is looking forward to in the year ahead. And I made the fundamental mistake that so often happens after I take one sip of coffee, I asked him, “So what's new in your life?” (long pause followed by laughter) Thump (David's head hitting the podium). Oh, my goodness, talk about litany of horror.

“How's your new job?” “Oh, it's further away than my old job, and the commute is just terrible. It takes me 30 more minutes each way every day and I have to get on the ferry and then I have to get on the bus and I don't like riding the bus because you know what kind of people are on the bus.” I said, “What kind of people?” He answered, “Oh just a lot of people and they're all over and I have no space.” So I said, “What is it like when you get to work?” He said, “Well, the engineers that I work with, I thought it was going to be a lot of fun, but they are kind of fastidious and picky and very oriented on details and they don't talk much.” And I'm thinking to myself, “That's sounds exactly like you,” but I didn't say that. As I hear the detail of his whole life, about how horrible things are, one thing after the other, I said, “Since it is the New Year are you looking forward to anything?” He answered, “Well, I'm looking forward to it getting better.” I thought, “What? You have got to be kidding me?” This guy could find tarnish in any cloud with

a silver lining. It is amazing. It is like he walks around with this doom and gloom dragging behind him in this bag and he can't break free of it. I was thinking about the litany of horror that I heard on the news and from him, and I'm sure you don't have friends like this, right? When I sat down with these texts from the gospel from Mark and then from Genesis, I thought, I wish my friend would be here today because I think there is something amazingly powerful in these stories for anyone who drags around doubt or gloom or fear. The stories from today are all about new beginnings.

“In the beginning...,” Genesis says. And today we celebrate some amazing new beginnings in the life of our church. We welcome Scott Smith as our new Associate Pastor, something we have been talking about and praying about ever since I started here two years ago. We celebrate the inclusion of Quest Class members who are beginning their life of faith and full membership into the life of the church and we get to watch them grow now from young adults into mature adults in the faith and pretty soon we will be celebrating the ordination of new elders and new deacons. So, today is a day full of new beginnings in the life of our church. And as we are here at the beginning of the year 2009, I want to offer up what a new beginning might look like for all of us in the year ahead and I am going to draw it from these two passages. The most important thing to remember—the most important thing to remember about making a new beginning and what I would say is even about being a Christian is this fundamental message in Genesis that we as reformed, frozen, chosen Presbyterians—double predestined, blah, blah, blah often forget—God did what God did in the beginning and said, “It was good.” It was good!

How often do you hear people talk about God or faith and begin all the way back there and say, “You know what, no matter what happened later, at the beginning it was good.” I wanted to grab my friend by the lapels and shake him as he was talking and say, “Yea, Yea, Yea, BUT remember back at the beginning, the idea of getting a new job was good, you were excited and then life happens.” And we know that life happens—we know it better than most. But in the beginning when God is at work creating what God is creating, God says, “It is good.”

Jesus begins his ministry in the gospel of Mark by having a lunatic, baptizing preacher go out before him and proclaim to the whole world, “Repent for the kingdom of God is near.” I love preaching on this text in catholic rich St. Louis because when I say, “Repent for the kingdom of God is near,” many people get the image immediately of the little tiny phone booth called the “confessional,” with the screens that they have to go in and they are usually over there on the side in the sanctuary. We have such a warped sense of what crazy John the Baptizer was doing to the people. He wasn't walking in the streets saying, “You better get your act together, you better go confess all your sins, you better go say you are sorry and then God's kingdom will come near.” That's not what he was saying. What he was saying in the Greek, and what he is saying to you and to me and to everybody who has ever heard this message is for you to see the kingdom of God near, you need to repent—and that word is “metinoua.” You need to change how you think, how you see, how you make meaning, how you understand everything. You cannot understand God's kingdom if you are addicted to a litany of horror—you won't see it.

I sat there for 5 minutes stunned as I heard about one tragedy after another, after another, after another and I thought, “Wait a minute, there is more going on. I know that Scott is coming, I know a Quest class is coming, I know people are being ordained—there's more

going on,” but I had to see differently to understand that reality. And that is what John the Baptizer was trying to do for everyone because what was coming, the one they talked about, was not what they expected. In the litany of horror, we want someone who comes in and says, “Stop it all, everything is wonderful,” and that is not what Jesus did. Jesus showed up and did something else. When Jesus comes at the very end of this story and goes to John and says, “Baptize me,” one of the most amazing things for all of us as Christians happens because we, as baptized Christians, get to participate with Jesus in his baptism. So every time you have got that twinge, every time you kind of wonder, “What's going on with me and God, is everything OK?” Remember that if you are baptized, you have God saying these words to you, “You are my child—you are my beloved—in you I am well pleased.”

It seems that we promote religion always toward the negative. “You are a bad person, but if you believe in Jesus you will be made better.” But in the beginning of Genesis and the beginning of the Gospel of Mark we hear a different story. We hear about goodness—we hear about changing how we understand the world, and about how God says to all of us—all of us, “I love you and I care for you and you are pleasing in my sight.” I pray for us as a community of faith in this place, that as we go into the year ahead, we can always remember—not the frustrations that are right in front of us—but the goodness that undergirds us, the invitation to see things with new imagination and hope, and to always know—no matter what—we are loved by God. May it be so. Amen.