

Genesis 1:1-5

Psalm 29

Mark 1:4-11

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

On this first Sunday after the Epiphany we stand in a place of new beginnings. Our scripture readings today recall both the beginning of creation and the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and in our hearing of these beginnings we ourselves have just begun the new year of 2012.

On Epiphany, which was this past Friday, the author of Matthew recounted the story of the visit of the Magi to the baby Jesus in Bethlehem. These mysterious Eastern travelers, bearing costly gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, were guided in their journey by a star that "stopped over the place where the child was." When they saw Jesus, they "knelt down and paid him homage" and offered their gifts. We celebrate Epiphany as the time when the light of Jesus is revealed to the whole world, as represented by the Magi.

It was the light of a star that led the Magi to Jesus, and today in the reading from Genesis, we learn about God's creation of light, indeed about the beginning of all creation: "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."

The writer of this narrative of creation proclaims that in the beginning, the spirit of God swept over primordial unruly chaos. The writer is addressing people mired in the chaos of exile in Babylon. Exiled Israel knew chaos all too well and longed for a word of hope. The narrative told them---and us---that God spoke in the midst of this dark watery void, and God's word began to create new things, to order the world, both temporally and spatially. God first spoke light into being, and by separating it from darkness, created the morning and evening of the first day. God went on to speak new things into creation for six more days. At the end of the sixth day, "God saw everything that (God) had made, and indeed, it was very good," and God rested on the seventh day. We are left awestruck by the power and majesty of this transcendent God whose words could create the newness of the world---its wholeness, its dependable order, its fruitfulness, and its liveliness--- from chaos.

In Psalm 29, which we chanted, the psalmist is also awed and praises the creative power of God's voice, saying,

The voice of the Lord is upon the waters.

the God of glory thunders;

the Lord is upon the mighty waters.

The voice of the Lord is a powerful voice;

the voice of the Lord is a voice of splendor.

It is this voice of power and splendor that Jesus hears as he emerges dripping wet from the waters of the Jordan River after his baptism at the hands of his cousin John. "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." Does anyone else in the crowd hear or see this apocalyptic voice or vision? We don't know. We are only told what Jesus sees and what the voice from heaven says. Is God once again naming into being a new creation? Setting loose a profoundly new thing in the world---the ministry of God's

Son, the Beloved? At the beginning of time when God beheld the heavens and the earth and all things that creep and dwell therein, God declared them good. Here on the banks of the Jordan, God tells Jesus “with you I am well pleased.”

The very next thing that happens to Jesus is that he is immediately challenged--- driven out into the wilderness by the Spirit to struggle with the temptations of Satan. Only then, after forty days of testing, does he come to Galilee, “proclaiming the good news.” He can now say authoritatively, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” He knows himself to be the good news, the kingdom of God that has come near. Jesus, the Word spoken by God into the world has God’s power to create new beginnings--- even to create new hearts within people who have hearts of stone---people just like us.

But why would the Word that was with God in the beginning, and was God---why would he come from Nazareth of Galilee to join the crowds from the whole Judean countryside and Jerusalem as they confessed their sins and were baptized by John? Why is he in line with sinners? In her sermon, “The River of Life,” Barbara Brown Taylor observes that Jesus doesn’t seem concerned about being mistaken for a sinner. “In him,” she says, “God’s being-with-us included God’s being in the river with us, in the flesh with us, in the sorrow of repentance and the joy of new life with us.”

This first Sunday after the Epiphany, when we remember Jesus’ baptism, is traditionally one of several appropriate times for baptism. When we are baptized, we join the household of God, becoming God’s sons and daughters. God speaks words into our hearts: You are my child, the beloved; with you I am well pleased. We, like Jesus, are spoken into the world by God as God’s beloved. When we are baptized, whether we are carried or walk to the font or baptismal pool or stream bank, we hear our brothers and

sisters renewing *their* baptismal covenant, as we will do in a moment. The covenant reminds us of salvation history and articulates our participation in that salvation. We are called to community life, to repentance, to witness, to service, and to justice and peace. We acknowledge before God and each other that we can do none of these things without God's help.

Again and again as we grow and mature in our faith and as we lose our faith to doubt and fear, as we despair and as we rejoice, God's Spirit moves over the chaos of our lives and the words come to us again and again: You are my beloved child in whom I am well pleased. God is not overcome or overwhelmed by our chaos. Rather God's love is constant, before time and infinite. Again and again God speaks us into new creation so that we may be set loose in the world to act out of God's heart, with God's help.

Let us pray.

O Merciful God, with your revelation in Christ, may we turn to the world you love. May the mercy you grant us become our offering to others. May your quest for justice in Christ become our vision for daily life in the world. And may your hope anchored in Christ be the good news we bear to those beyond our circles. Amen.

