

In the Beginning God  
Genesis 1:1-5  
Mark 1:1-11

“In the beginning, when God began to create 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.”

You could say that this is the second Sunday of the New Year. Or you could say that this is the First Sunday after Epiphany. You can begin again in January with yourself to fix. Or you can begin again in Epiphany with the God who forgives. You can mark time by the Roman calendar, crossing off days as if life were one damn thing after another until you die. Or you can mark time by the story whose main character created time in order to dwell in time with us until we dwell in the eternity that is God. Where you begin and how you tell time has everything to do with the meaning and purpose of the life you have been given by God to lead.

This morning we have two stories of beginnings: the beginning of everything in Genesis and the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry in Mark. Both beginnings have to do with our own beginning again in this season and particularly in a week when something other than the air has chilled us to the bone.

While Exodus was the real beginning of the story of God and God’s people, Genesis is the way they imagined their legendary beginnings. It is a long story that might have been told to answer a child’s question concerning why there are twelve tribes instead of two, or why siblings kill each other, or how they all ended up in Egypt under slavery, or who made the sun and the moon, the heavens and the earth. Yet I think the two stories in the first three chapters of Genesis were told not so much to answer the questions of a child as they were told by a people needing to begin again at the apex of their history in the land and at the null point of their exile in Babylon.

“The opening chapter of this ‘prequel’ (Genesis) to the ‘main story’ (Exodus) was so

important to the later generations of this people,” exegete Richard Boyce writes, “that the final form of the Scriptures insists on telling it twice: once by the Priestly writers, here in Genesis 1, and once by the Yahwist, in Genesis 2.” The earliest of the two stories is the second, imagined by a writer known as the Yahwist (the name he gave to God). He wrote “during the days of the united monarchy, the high point in Israel’s collective history, then and now.” This is the story of Adam created out of dust and of Eve created out of Adam; both placed in the land and given dominion; both tempted to think themselves equal in knowledge and understanding with the God who created them. We know this story as the story of the fall, a story that set the story of redemption in motion. “This is a story of creation for our *strong* days,” Boyce writes, “when we may be tempted to overreach.”

The first chapter of Genesis, which is the later story of origins, was written by the Priestly writer “during the days of Babylonian exile, when all the earlier order of Israel’s worship in Jerusalem had been brought to naught.” No land, no monarchy, no temple, no God in evidence. Living as captives among a people who followed a different calendar and worshipped other gods, it was easy for God’s people to forget where they had come from and to whom they belonged. We more and more know the feeling, I think. You lose your bearings, confuse the darkness for light, feel as though chaos *is* the order of the day, watch the waters rising beyond your control, gasp for breath. “In the beginning,” you remind your sleepless self, “when God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep....” When God began to create, you repeat, telling yourself in spite of the evidence at hand, that God is still the God who brings order out of chaos, shines light in the darkness, separates the deathly waters from the dry land, gives breath when you cannot catch your own. There is no Fall in this story; only the relentless repetition, evening and morning, night turning into day, and “it

was good”; no mention of dust, but rather the reminder that we, who are of no account in Babylon, have been created in God’s image; no judgment, no expulsion from the garden pronounced over those already expelled; only the doxological judgment that finally everything God made was very good. “This is a story of creation for our *weak* days,” Boyce concludes, “when we are tempted to despair.”

This is the story for the day when the phone rings and it is the doctor telling you it is cancer; for the day when your spouse of seven years or twenty-seven years or thirty-seven years tells you that you are no longer the love of his life; for the day when you wake up to the twin towers falling or two soldiers ringing your doorbell or the breaking news brings word of yet more senseless massacres; for the day when your teenage son is fished out of the Schukyll; for the day when the world no longer remembers the kidnapped daughters of parents who love them no less than you love your own; for the day when you are tempted, for no reason in particular, to despair. On those days it matters more than on the days when you are strong, it matters where you begin. In the beginning of those days, begin with the God who began to create and is still creating order out of chaos, who is still saying, “Let there be light” in the darkness, who continues to recreate what feels like worthless flesh and blood in the image of love.

Now it seems to me we also have two stories about beginnings at the beginning of Mark’s Gospel, stories that continue the stories we tell ourselves about the God who, in the beginning, began to create. The first is the story of John the Baptizer in the wilderness where God’s people began their lives with God long ago. Proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, I think it fair to conclude that John is working out of the second chapter of Genesis. He begins with the dust that we are and the sin into which we have fallen. How in the world do creatures such as we begin again? As the story goes, toward the end of the days of the united

monarchy, God spoke through prophets who told God's people that they had confused their ordering of the world with God's, had mistaken their power for God's, had identified their truth for God's. One way or another, the prophets said, "Repent." John was the last of those prophets. He had been sent to say the same in the wilderness, to cleanse and purify God's people in the waters of baptism, to prepare them for God's new beginning.

Repentance is God's word to us on our *strong* days, on the days when we have outgrown the childish notion of believing in a God who had anything to do with our being at all; on the days when we have thrown in with the Roman calendar and resolved with the help of the latest technique to become the person we want to be; on the days when we conclude that our return, and the return of those we love, to dust is a sufficient ending for a life immortalized by a building or a painting or a book with our name on it. Repent, John says, and confess your sins. Die in the waters of baptism to the life you are living without God and begin again: chastened, cleansed, and purified. For God is on the way to you!

Clearly John knew that water alone could not give God's people the new beginning they longed to be given. Remember, Mark is writing just as the temple had been reduced to dust, just as God's people had run from Jerusalem into the wilderness to save their lives, just as Rome began crucifying Jews for insurrection, just as God's people, once again, cried out for some tangible manifestation of God's ordering and providing, of God's governing and directing, of God's tending and shepherding of their lives. "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me," John proclaimed. "I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

"In those days," Mark writes, marking time by the movements of the author and giver of life, "Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee": a nobody from nowhere came to where God's

people were. Wordlessly he entered the waters of baptism and emerged as the heavens split, the Spirit descended and a voice only he could hear said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." The voice reminds me of the God who, in the beginning, was pleased with the creature he had made in his own image, an image that every death-dealing power in the world has tried to destroy from the beginning until now. Until now, when the heavens split and the God, whose dwelling place on earth had been destroyed, came from Nazareth of Galilee to do business with death.

This is not the story of a human being become God at baptism, but of God become human, of God made manifest, in the life and death of a Jew from Nazareth. Mark counters the ubiquitous stories of Roman demigods, born of virgins and immortal, with the gospel of him whose suffering and death reveal the suffering and death of God with us and behind us, God before us and beside us, God beneath us and above us, God in quiet and in danger, God come to comfort and restore us.

The story of Jesus' baptism in Mark is a story for our *weak* days, a story we tell each other not when we are tempted to sin but when we are tempted to despair. Prone to debilitating depression, Martin Luther would write with his finger on the table in his study, "I am baptized." I think he meant that the image of God in which he was made was indelible. He could deny it, forget it, overlook it in himself; it could be gunned down or dishonored or trampled under the feet of others; but no one, including the devil of Luther's depression, had the power to make him anything other than the creature God made him to be in God's image. That is why, when we are weak, we begin with our baptism and with the baptism of Jesus, lest we forget that the image of love in which and by which and for which we were made is indelible, eternal, stronger than death.

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