

The Waters of Creation

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Genesis 1:1-5

1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2 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. 3 Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. 4 And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 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. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 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. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 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. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

A NEW CREATION

It's fitting that we begin a new year with a lesson from the beginning of the Bible. In Genesis we read about the creation. We think back to that time before time when God created the heavens and the earth.

It's also fitting that we begin the new year with a lesson about the baptism of Jesus. Baptism marks the beginning of Jesus' ministry and also the beginning of a new Christian life.

In baptism we are reminded that just as the world began in the waters of creation, so we are new creations in Christ Jesus.

In fact I would even say that the baptism of Jesus marks the beginning of a whole new world.

A SACRED CREATION

In our Old Testament lesson for today God forms the world from the “formless void.” God actively participates in the creation, speaking the world into existence.

From the very beginning God does not stand apart from creation. God is incarnate. God is involved.

God stirs the waters, and life is born.

And since God created the world, the world is sacred.

When I attended General Assembly this past summer, some Native American commissioners sat behind me. We had some group building exercises, and I got to know them a bit.

Their perspective on the Assembly was quite different than the average commissioner. They had opinions on all the “hot topics” that we were debating.

But, in their very polite way they said in essence that they didn’t think that most of our debates were all that worthwhile.

However, when it came to environmental issues they were passionately involved.

They came from a culture that really appreciated the words of the Psalmist, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.”

And they were greatly distressed by what we are doing to God’s good creation.

I’m afraid many in our culture have forgotten the importance of those words, “the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.”

The world is not our tool. We do not have the right to do whatever we want to do with the world.

It's not ours. It's on loan to us.

This is the meaning of stewardship.

We are caretakers of the good world God has created. God spoke the world into existence and now we get to help maintain that creation.

But, we do not own creation.
We are a part of creation.

A SACRED CREATURE

I know this seems rather basic, but it has some broad implications not only for how we are to treat the world but also how we are to regard our own lives.

Paul put it this way, "We do not live to ourselves ..." (Romans 14:7)

As I said last week paraphrasing a famous line, "We are not captains of our own ship and masters of our own fate."

We are a part of a greater plan and purpose. The whole world is in God's hands.

And we are in God's hands. All life is sacred. And our life is sacred as well.

The Psalmist wrote, "Know that the Lord is God. It is he that has made us, and we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture." (Psalm 100:3)

Note how this is quite different from what we are taught in the modern world. In the modern world we are taught to believe in the self-made man or woman. We get what we deserve and earn.

Thank God we do not believe that. We are not our own creation. It's not all up to us.

We are God's creatures. This is our Father's world. And it is our sacred privilege to be a part of that world.

GOD RULES CREATION

If this is our Father's world, then we believe that light will eventually overcome darkness. Even in the midst of evil and terror there is room for grace and hope.

One of our choir members notes that I'm always referring to hymns in my sermons, and once again a hymn comes to mind.

"This is my Father's world. / O let me ne'er forget/That though the wrong seems oft so strong, / God is the ruler yet."

We've had another week when extreme violence has been in the news and people have wondered once again, "What is this world coming to?"

Christians have an answer to that question. We believe that God is still the ruler. We believe that though the wrong seems so very strong that in the end the world is not headed toward destruction.

The world is headed toward the fulfillment of God's creation. The world is headed toward a new heaven and a new earth.

CREATION IS A PROCESS

You see our Father's world is still in the process of creation. God's plans for the salvation of the world are ongoing. The Spirit still stirs the waters of creation.

If we were left to our own devices we would no doubt turn the world back into a formless void. The world would once again turn dark.

But, the Spirit of God works against that. God still speaks a word of creation to a world bent on destruction. God continues to bring new life into the world.

This is literally true of course. We speak of the miracle of new life and wonder at how life can survive and thrive in so many challenging conditions.

But, this is spiritually true as well.

Baptism is intimately connected with creation.

When we are baptized the Bible says it is as if we have died to the old way of life in order to rise in newness. We are in essence a new creation, a new person.

And this creative God who made heaven and earth isn't finished with us. God continues to form and reform us all the days of our life. Baptism is only the beginning.

Some commentators emphasize that the first words of Genesis ought not be in the passive tense. A more accurate translation might be, "In the beginning, as God began creating the heavens and the earth ..."

Do you get the difference? This translation makes it plain. Creation is not something that is once and done. It is a process that continues.

From a scientific standpoint this is absolutely true. The forces that created our universe continue to act and change things on a daily basis. The world we saw yesterday is not the same world that we see today.

PROVIDENCE

But, for people of faith this continuous creation is also a reflection of an important Christian doctrine, the Providence of God. Our first hymn put it well, "Morning has broken like the first morning."

For the person of faith, each new day is a testimony to the power and glory of the creator.

Pastor Martin Copenhaver uses this analogy. He said that creation is not like a painting that God creates, hangs on the wall and then leaves alone as He goes on to other endeavors.

God's work in creation is more like how a cellist creates a sonata. If the creator would ever stop creating, so creation would end.

So, if God is still creating, what does that mean for us?

It means we cannot cling desperately to the past. And it also means that we cannot despair when it comes to the future.

The God of creation is still on the move and taking us along for the ride.

The question before us is not, “What should I do?” The question before us is, “What is God doing in the world and how can I help? How can I become a part of the plan and purposes of God?”

There’s an old Christian saying that goes something like, “We might not know what the future holds, but we do know who holds the future.”

That’s true. And this basic sense of trust in God allows us to strike out into the future with a sense of confidence and hope.

AHEAD OF US

Jesus’ disciples assumed that when Jesus died on the cross that meant the end of everything. But, the angel at the tomb told them, “He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.” (Mark 16:7)

Jesus went ahead of his disciples. He was the firstborn of the dead. He arose. And he led his disciples into the future. He was waiting for them in Galilee.

Jesus goes ahead of us as well.

Wherever our paths take us, Jesus is already there, waiting for us.

In Psalm 139 the Psalmist wonders where he can go to flee from the presence of God.

Can he escape God at the “farthest limits of the sea”? Can he hide from the Lord in the darkness?

He decides that even if he were to ascend to heaven or descend to hell he could not escape God.

Why?

God knows him too well.

God made him, and God would be with him from the time he was knitted together in his mother’s womb till the time when his days would come to an end.

God was always ahead of him. (See Psalm 139:7-18)

And God is always ahead of us as well.

The God who made the heavens and the earth, the God who made us, and the God who came to us in Christ goes ahead of us and meets us in that place to which we are called.

IN LIFE AND IN DEATH

In the uncertainty after nine eleven a theologian wrote this to his child,

“My child, the world is always a dangerous and threatening place where death surrounds us. [But] when I brought you for baptism I acknowledged that I could not possibly guarantee your [earthly] future.

I handed you over to the God who loves you and with whom you are safe in both life and death.

There is no security to be found elsewhere, certainly not from me or those like me.

Live with courage, therefore, and, if it must be, do not be afraid to die in the service of what is good and just.”

(Gilbert Meilaender wrote this piece two weeks after September 11, 2001.)

The funeral service in our Book of Common Worship makes this connection between baptism and eternal life very plain. When the pall is placed over the coffin the minister, using the words of the Apostle Paul says,

“When we baptized in Christ Jesus, we were baptized into his death.

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live a new life.

For if we have been united with Christ in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” (Romans 6:3-5)

This means that from birth to death our life is lived under the promise of baptism. Or as the Creed puts it, “In life and in death, we belong to God.”

GRACE HAPPENS

Pastor Hedi Armstrong wrote about the cynical philosophy of our world. It was summarized for her in a sanitized version of a popular but profane bumper sticker.

It read, “Stuff happens.” This is a reflection of the seemingly random and absurd nature of life. Stuff happens.

But, the more important question is what do we do when stuff happens? Where do we go for comfort and solace?

Hedi suggests that we turn to Jesus. She wrote,

“Our hope is not simply in circumstances changing, or things improving, or that certain stuff won’t ever happen, but that our lives are guided by him, our future is in his care.”

We do not believe that the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune have the final word.

Yes, stuff happens.

But, we also believe that grace happens. We believe that into this world of woe God sends a Savior, and His name is Jesus.

That’s what baptism is all about. That’s what baptism means.

Grace happens.

Right in the middle a world filled with injustice and sorrow God intervenes.

The heavens are ripped open and for a moment we get a glimpse of God’s future.

REMEMBER YOUR BAPTISM

Whenever Martin Luther was ready to give up, whenever worry for his own life and the life of the Church he loved overwhelmed him, it is said that he would touch his forehead and say to himself:

"Remember Martin, you have been baptized."

This reminded Martin that he was saved by grace through faith. And this helped him stand strong for the faith in the face of overwhelming opposition.

I would suggest that this is a very good reminder for us as well. Baptism reminds us that we were born in a state of grace, and grace will lead us home.

We all have those days when everyone is "losing their heads and blaming it on us."

All those accusations have a way of taking a toll on us. The world is telling us, "You're a nobody." And sometimes we live down to their expectations.

In a world that often seeks to put us down we are called to remember the baptism of our Lord. Instead of judging sinners he identified with them in his baptism.

In fact he took sin upon himself.

Instead of putting people down he lifted them up. The heavens were opened and the Spirit of God descended upon our world.

The Creator was recreating our world in a new a dramatic way. And the process continues.

We do not believe what the world tells us, that we are nobody special.

We are somebody ... not because we have done great things or because we are always right. We are somebody because God has called us.

Remember your baptism. Remember that you are somebody because God says that you are somebody.

You are his child. He loves you. His Spirit resides with you both now and forever.

Amen.