

Epiphany 1 (B)
Pastor Ed Harkey

Genesis 1:1-5; Romans 6:1-11; Mark 1:4-11
TLC, Keene, NH

“BEGINNINGS OLD AND NEW”

“In the beginning, God ...”

Introduction

Well, with all of the verbosity and verbiage, true and false, floating around of late, it has become increasingly difficult for the simple commoner to know what to believe, or not. Opinions on a wide range of – medical, social & political – topics abound.

But, here are a few *false* facts, I’d like to try on you this morning:

#1: Books write themselves without the need of an author.

#2: Cars build themselves without the need of a manufacturer.

#3: Music composes itself into beautiful symphonies without the need of a composer.

#4 which, unlike 1-3, countless proponents continue to propagate and promote: This cosmos and creation came into being through a process of random happenings and beneficial mutation ... without the need of a Designer. Where, contrary to the obvious, from the greatest architects to the Lego creations of a 1st – Grader, nothing invents itself. Every house must have a builder. [Adapted <https://ministry127.com/resources/illustration/4-false-facts>]

Main Thought: Yes, “all of life, all aspects of order, and all possibilities within reality are dependent upon the primordial creative act of God.” (Price, *Feasting on the Word*, B, 1:222) It is true in creation, and all the more in our recreation.

Therefore, let the Epiphany people of God rejoice. Wherein ...

SPIRIT, FATHER, WORD CREATING, ALWAYS BRINGS A NEW
BEGINNING.

Amen.

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Genesis 1:1 **In the beginning, God ...** created the heavens and the earth.

² The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. ³ And 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.

"That is," says Donna Schaper, "the whole story in a nutshell."
(*Feasting on the Word*, B, 1:218)

Where, clearly Genesis 1:1 is not a baptismal text ... but it certainly could be ... as we fast-forward to what once transpired by way of the Savior, some muddy water, and the Spirit of God. For what do you get when you take souls lost in the "formlessness and void," ensconced in the "darkness" of their sin and separation from God, and then add the Holy Spirit, water, and God's creative and re-creative Word? Light! Baptism! Yes, like the first creation, you get a new creation ... where, as the Spirit "hovers over the waters," God speaks His life-giving Word, and a child of faith arises from the river ... now a child ... of light!¹

By those simplest of means, miracles happen. By those same means, *you* happen. Even in the midst of chaos! Wherein, God speaks into that chaos, and something beautiful occurs.

Wherein, "God creates," says Joseph Price, "not out of coercion or obligation, but out of freedom. The creation is neither accidental nor random, nor is it self-generated (Genesis 1:2). It is intentional."

It's what always happens when God utters forth His Word.

Yes, proclaims David in Psalm 29: [1-4, 7-9]:

¹ "Just as the original act of God inaugurated the first creation ... the baptism of individuals inaugurates their new creation, the world of creation is seen as dependent on the creator and as living and sustained by the continuing power of the Divine," so, too, do we come to faith by the creative and redemptive hand of God in the waters of Holy Baptism. (Craddock, et. al. *Preaching Through the Christian Year*, B, 73)

“The voice of the LORD is over the waters ... the LORD, over many waters. The voice of the LORD is ... full of majesty. ... The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness ... The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth and strips the forests bare, and in his temple all cry, “Glory!”

God speaks. Creation happens ... in all of its vast array. Still growing. Still expanding. Never to be fully explored or comprehended by our finite minds.

Wherein, to that Voice ... the Spirit of God, by means of water and His Word “calls realities and new conditions into existence.” (Craddock, et. al. *Preaching Through the Christian Year*, B, 73)

Yes ...

“When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior ...” (Titus 3:4ff)

Hallelujah! Hooray! For the work of God taking place in the simplest of elements. Through the spoken Word. In the humble forms of bread and wine. With water! Life-giving ... recreating!

Where, in their holy and re-creative work, the entire Trinity is involved, evidenced by a grace that names and claims you, declaring you to be God’s child ... for now ... for eternity.

SPIRIT, FATHER, WORD CREATING BRINGS ABOUT *OUR* NEW BEGINNING.

Just as when ...

*“In those days **Jesus** came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and **the Spirit** descending on him like a dove. And a [**Father’s**] voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”*

Child of God, Jesus didn't step into the water for Himself. He didn't need it. But you did. Yes, you and I needed Him to identify Himself so closely with us in our sin, so that we might so closely come to be identified with Him in His life. Wherein, He steps into the water a King, and comes out a servant. We step into the water as servants and "beggars" [Luther], and come out kings and queens ... again, "children of the heavenly Father."

It's what creation brings us to ... this point in the life of the Savior ... "*the beginning of the Gospel Jesus Christ*" ... which brings about a new beginning for you and for me.

For many of us, this was, says Tish Warren, "the first word of grace spoken over us by the church." Yes, before we cognitively could grasp who Jesus was ... before we could articulate or affirm the deep truths of the Apostles' and Nicene Creed ... before we would "sit up, use the bathroom, or contribute significantly to the work of the church," grace came to us, welcoming us into the still ever-widening circle of God's care ... again, before we could contribute anything.

Writes Warren, "Before you know it, before you doubt it, before you confess it, before you can sing ["Jesus Love Me"] yourself, you are beloved by God, not by your effort but because of what Christ has done on your behalf." [*Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life*, IVP, 2019]

Thanks be to God through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ ... for what this new beginning brings us to ... its blessed effects:

FIRST that we, by way of our Baptism, have now been brought into God's history. Where, I can just see Moses, in his old age, perched on Pisgah heights, taking pen to parchment - "*In the beginning God ...*" - only to pause and ponder his own journey ... borne itself of water, when he was rescued from the waters of the Nile ... or again, of Israel's own baptismal beginnings, as they passed through the Red Sea, and the river Jordan with "unmoistened foot." You, too, are a part of that history - of "His Story!"

Wherein, SECOND, having been birthed by God, whose names are now written in the Lamb's book of life, we will also be sustained by Him. Which is to say, Baptism is God's living and enduring guarantee that He will never leave you nor forsake you.

*“But Zion has said, ‘The LORD **has** forsaken me; my Lord **has** forgotten me.’”*

Chaos and uncertainty abound. Just in the light of this past week ... “Will all that we cherish – the religious freedoms, the right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” the voices of our unborn and our terminally ill – hold fast?”

“Can a woman forget her nursing child,” inquires the Lord of Isaiah, “that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands” [49:14-16]

Child of God, Baptism is the gift that reminds us of who and whose we are ... even when the chaos and the void seek to overtake us ... even when we lose our bearing in this confusing and tumultuous world ... even when sin gets the best of us. It's back to the water we go, where Father, Son and Holy Spirit met you once. It is there, they meet us time and time again. “Hold on, and do not lose hope.” (Boyce, *Feasting on the Word*, B, 1:221, 223)

Wherein, FINALLY, as our Lord's own Baptism reminds us:

“We do not have a Savior who is unable to sympathize with us in our weakness.” [Hebrews 4:15]

Yes, says St. Paul in Romans, while the story of our Baptism is about sin and its cleansing, it is also a story of our “solidarity” with Jesus, or rather, His with us. Wherein, the account of the beginnings of creation, says Richard Boyce, are “heard as the first in a long series of stories about God creating order out of chaos: at the beginning of ordered time, through the waters of the Red Sea, in the muddy waters of the river Jordan, and down to the chaotic situations of God's people today.” (223)

This is our theme. This is our story:

SPIRIT, FATHER, WORD CREATING ALWAYS BRINGS A NEW
BEGINNING.

Conclusion

Lawrence Wood notes that at the end of Act 1 in [Thornton Wilder's play] *Our Town*, Rebecca Gibbs mentions a letter that a friend got from her minister, addressed in this most peculiar way:

“Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover’s Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United State of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God.”

“Which,” says Wood, “brings us to baptism, the genesis of Christian life. Here too God assures us that we are not too small for notice; that in fact we matter immensely.” (*Feasting on the Word*, B, 1:221)

Yes, you do, child of God. Yes, *you* do! Which no chaos, confusion or commotion can conquer or overcome.

The Father creating this planet with but a Word establishes it. That same Father sending His one and only Son to redeem us *from* and sustain *in* the chaos proves it. That Father and Son who send forth the Holy Spirit to mark you as redeemed seals it.

SPIRIT, FATHER, WORD CREATING ALWAYS BRINGS A NEW
BEGINNING.

Where, once again we are brought to the waters – over which the Spirit still hovers – only to see that still, “In the beginning ... the middle ... and the end ... God!” (Adapted from Wood, 223)

Amen.

[1/11] Grace and blessings on this Monday morning “sermon rewind,” where yesterday I sought to capture the essence of the life that God bestows *on*, and continues to sustain *in* us through Baptism. “All of life, all aspects of order,” says Joseph Price, along with “all possibilities within reality are dependent upon the primordial creative act of God.” It *is* true in creation, and all the more in our *recreation*.

Wherein ...

SPIRIT, FATHER, WORD CREATING, BRINGS ABOUT OUR NEW
BEGINNING.

Which leads me this morning to elaborate a bit on the idea of “source” – as in, the source of continued blessing that is ours as the baptized and redeemed of Jesus. Here, “God creates,” continues Price, “not out of coercion or obligation, but out of freedom. The creation is neither accidental nor random, nor is it self-generated. It is,” he concludes, “intentional.”

It’s not unlike what transpires each week, or daily, to write a sermon. Where, one of the fathers of the Missouri Synod, C. F. W. Walther, once remarked, “The children of my pen are always borne in great travail.” Where, it always comes back to the source, or in many cases, sources for me. Yes, there is the Word itself and the Holy Spirit, but often people will ask me how I continue to do it – continue to turn out a sermon week after week and still remain fresh.

For me, a part of the answer is the many different sources I have used over the years, not for the sermons themselves, but for the ideas they spark, those pearls of wisdom that others before me have cultivated while studying God’s Word. In fact, I sort of liken myself to bumble bee, who flies from flower to flower, seeking out the nectar where it can be found, cross-pollinating here and there until – by the Spirit of the Lord – the finished copy is done. Some of those catalysts have been Eastern Orthodox, some Roman Catholic, others non-denominational.

Of course, discernment is always in order when we take up such readings, but I am continually amazed at the breadth and depth of the Spirit's work in the life of His Church ... of the Spirit's work in you as His child ... a child who seeks to know Him ... who steps out in faith, and in the promise from His Word that says in Hebrews 11: *"For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him."*

Which brings us back to our Baptism ... that eternal source of blessing for the child of God. Where, I just loved that idea by Tish Harrison-Warren, in her book *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life*, which, by the way, won *Christianity Today's* 2018 awards for Spiritual Formation & Beautiful Orthodoxy. Where, she notes, for many of us, "the first word of grace spoken over us was by the church." That before we cognitively could grasp who Jesus was ... before we could articulate or affirm the deep truths of the Apostles' and Nicene Creed ... before we would "sit up, use the bathroom, or contribute significantly to the work of the church," grace came to us, welcoming and bringing us into the still ever-widening circle of God's care. Tish writes, "Before you know it, before you doubt it, before you confess it, before you can sing ["Jesus Love Me"] yourself, you are beloved by God, not by your effort but because of what Christ has done on your behalf."

Thanks be to God for the life that comes to us as God's children through the waters of Holy Baptism ... where no amount of chaos or commotion can conquer or overcome the life that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have borne in you. The Father creating this planet with but a Word establishes this promise. That same Father who sent His one and only Son to die and rise again for us, thus redeeming us *from* and sustain *in* the chaos proves it. That Father and Son who sent forth the Holy Spirit to mark you as one baptized and redeemed of God seals it. May it be these healing waters – over which the Spirit still hovers – that lead you to see today, and every day, that as your life's source was, it is still, "In the beginning ... the middle ... and the end ... God!"