

1 Epiphany - The Baptism of Our Lord – Year B – January 8, 2012

Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

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How exciting to be here today, with all the promise of a New Year ahead of us. The days are lengthening, so there is more light in our lives physically. Spiritually, Epiphany is a time to celebrate Christ's presence as the Light of world. Today is a new beginning for Nancy as we welcome her into the Body of Christ. It's also a day of rebirth for each of us as we renew our baptismal vows. Even better, today we have the opportunity to reflect on the opening verses of the Book of Genesis, aptly meaning beginning, birth and origin. Even though Genesis is ordered first in our Bibles, it's not the earliest writing from the Hebrew Scriptures. The Book of Genesis was written in the sixth century B.C., at the time of the Babylonian exile or shortly thereafter. These verses are a liturgical poem, and a statement of faith giving hope to the Israelites in a time of great darkness, and terrible violence. At the time, the covenant people had experienced an overwhelming defeat by the Babylonian army. Forcibly removed from their own land, and exiled in strange and unfamiliar territory, they thought that Yahweh had abandoned them. That is the One God of Israel, who is the great I AM, and the God we too worship in the Judeo-Christian tradition. This poetic confession of God's continuing acts of creation is a grace-filled affirmation of God's character. It also carries profound insights into God's intention to be in relationship with all of creation.

Genesis is about beginnings, but not a scientific treatise. Genesis is about God's gracious creativity, but not a history of how the world came into being. The categories of science and history both fail to honor this proclamation of faith. They are modern overlays that are entirely alien to the context in which Genesis was inspired and written. Both put limits on God's intent in and through this statement of faith. Trying to put human-made boundaries around the mystery of faith stultifies our right response to God for the infinite beauty of creation. The only relevant response to the ever-present grace of God with us in Christ Jesus our Lord, and the incredible gift of life is to give thanks and praise to God. William Blake's *Auguries of Innocence*, captures the essence of our call to hear God's word with new ears, and experience it with open hearts. As Blake writes, let us also "...see a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower, hold infinity in the palm of your hand and eternity in an hour.... God appears, and God is light, to those poor souls who dwell in night." Centuries before Blake, Julian of Norwich expressed a similar truth in her *Showings*, "And in this he showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying the palm of my hand... I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought: What can this be? ... And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God."

How then does the infinite love of God speak to us today in creative ways? How does the light of God give us hope in our darkness, and the chaos of modern life? How does the Spirit of God move over the formless void of our modern-day exile in an indifferent world? Bob Ekblad shares a true story of two prisoners in his book, *Reading the Bible with the Damned*. Both prisoners are in solitary confinement, but have been studying the Scriptures independently with Ekblad by phone. His voice brings the light of Christ's love to them in the darkness of their isolation, and deep loneliness. Ekblad discovers that they have also been speaking to one another. Since the first verses of Genesis speak so profoundly to the situation of the exiled and marginalized, Ekblad introduces the reading to the prisoners. It helps them to discern the hope of God, and the power of God in their lives to create a new beginning from the chaos and mess of drug abuse, and violence. One prisoner has shared a beautiful insight about the character of the Spirit of God who hovers or sweeps over the face of the waters. Since human beings are mostly water, he reasons that the Holy Spirit's constant presence hovers over the emptiness of his own life, as the Spirit once swept across the formless void of the earth's watery beginnings. In his conversation with the two prisoners in solitary confinement, Ekblad discovers that they've been communicating through the pipes that connect the toilets in their isolation cells. When they each flush their toilets at the same time, the empty pipes make a perfect

conduit for sharing God's word with one another. Ekblad writes, "I'm caught off guard by an unexpected rereading of [these verses of Genesis]... God comes with such humility that God is not ashamed to speak even through the soiled ceramic lips of toilet bowls."

Now perhaps some of us are offended by this. If that's the case, we really need to revisit Jesus' life in the world. Because it strikes me that this is typical of God, coming to us in the most unlikely of places and circumstances, as well as the messiness of daily life. Christ doesn't shun the waters of Mary's womb, or an ignoble birth to an unwed teenager in a dirty stable. God's angels come first to a bunch of ignorant and unwashed shepherds to announce our Messiah's birth. Jesus spent more time with the unclean and marginalized than he ever did with the rich or famous. And above all, our Lord willingly gives Himself to a shameful and dishonorable death on a Roman cross, for the life of the world. The whole movement of Scripture expresses God's preferential care and concern for the orphan and widow, the outcasts, and prisoners. In fact, we should expect God's presence in the lowliest of places, because no one, no place in all creation, and nothing in God's world is outside of God's care or God's love. Ekblad writes, "God's presence is real, even in the midst of darkness and chaos. God is creating. God's Spirit is hovering, and God's Word comes freely, bringing light into dark places."

Water and light are repeating themes that help us understand the mystery of God's steadfast love through Christ, our Lord. John the Baptist's waters of repentance prepare us to welcome Christ's light into our hearts and our lives. It's a beginning. The water of baptism is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace that presages another beginning, the start of our new life in Christ. The first step in our ongoing transformation into Christ-likeness. God's constant movement, His creative revelation in Christ Jesus begins to unfold in us and through us when we put our faith and trust in Him. Christ is the light of the world. By our faith in Him, we are empowered to carry that light to all who still live in darkness. We find true freedom in the light of Christ. Our baptism takes us into and through the waters of all creation, from darkness to light, out of sin into right relationship with God, and out of death into everlasting life.

The Genesis story brings a word of hope, especially when chaos seems to reign. God proclaims the light and all creation as good. God values each of us so much that we're entrusted with continuing His creative work. We are works in progress, constantly invited to experience the healing presence of God's love and light in every facet of our lives. As someone once wrote, "The seed of wholeness is inside us in the form of the image of God. That seed will blossom mightily if we water it with love, community, and companionship" (Nanette Sawyer). What an incredible blessing, and what an awesome gift to share the Good News, knowing that God's word spoken through each of us is also a creative act, bringing new life and new birth to others in the world. Genesis is the beginning of God's invitation to new and abundant life in Christ. As we read in the prophet Isaiah 55:10-12, "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace".

May God's will be done, and a blessed New Year to all!

Amen.