

Baptism of Our Lord – January 7, 2018

Genesis 1:1-5 and Mark 1:4-11

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. “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.” There’s a whole lot to talk about in just those first two verses of the book of Genesis. This past week I read an entire article on just two of the words in the first verse, which might strike you just a little crazy since this is just a simple story of God creating the world. Except of course that it isn’t, and by now you probably guessed I was going to say something like that. Every time the Genesis stories come up I like to remind you that these ancient biblical texts are not the kind of texts we’re used to dealing with in the modern first world. They are not history, they are not science, and they are not journalism. What they are is theology, and attempt to grasp what God is doing in the world and in our lives. And that makes them so much more interesting and meaningful than the simplistic, literalistic understandings that seem to get all the attention in the media – you know, the tired old stories telling us how the Bible contradicts modern scientific theories about how the earth came into being and life evolved here.

Biblical scholars who are more attuned to modern, disciplined methods of research, help us to see more deeply into these texts. They have figured out that the creation stories in Genesis were probably edited into their current form during a period of acute crisis in the history of the people of Israel and Judah. This was the period of the Babylonian exile, when the last of the 12 tribes were conquered, the capital city of Jerusalem was sacked, and its temple looted and destroyed. This is much more than just historical trivia. It is a key to understanding the meaning of not only Genesis, but also the other books of the Old Testament, and then by extension the rest of the Bible as well. At the time of the Babylonian exile, all seemed lost to those who had understood themselves to be God’s chosen people. Their kingdom was in ruins. Their leading citizens were in exile in a foreign land. Chaos reigned and life seemed empty and meaningless.

Do you relate at all? Have you ever felt that way about your own life? Are you maybe feeling that way now? If so, it probably is only made worse by the bone-chilling cold and the darkness of this time of year. What I’m saying is that you have to be in that kind of place, or at least be able to relate a little to that kind of outlook on life, in order truly to be able to appreciate what the Bible intends to convey, especially here in Genesis, but also in the Gospel of Mark. I’ll get there in just a minute, but let’s stay with Genesis for the moment. Those two words I said I read an article about this week are translated in the New Revised Standard Version as “formless void.” In Hebrew the words are “tohu wa-bohu,” chaos and emptiness. That’s what it was like when God got to work creating the heavens and the earth. Chaos and emptiness. And didn’t I just say that that is what the original audience of the Genesis stories was experiencing? It’s not a coincidence. Their questions in the midst of chaos and emptiness were, “where is God?” and “what’s the point?” And the answer of Genesis is, “God right there, in the midst of the “tohu wa-bohu,” the chaos and emptiness. God is right there creating something out of nothing, calling forth light from darkness, land from the sea, plants from the land, and declaring it all to be good, worthwhile, and meaningful. It was that way at the beginning, and it’s that way now, even in the ruins of your cities and villages, even as your families are torn apart, your loved ones killed and deported. The message is that God will bring good from this, because that’s what God does. It’s what God has always done.

The baptism of Jesus has a similar meaning in the Gospel according to Mark. Scholars tell us that Mark was probably written within a decade of the sack of Jerusalem and the destruction of the second, rebuilt temple by the Roman army. Once again, God's people were wondering, "where is God?" "What's the point?" Mark's answer, and the answer of the early Christian community, was essentially the same as Genesis' answer: "God is right here in the midst of chaos and hopelessness, but this time among us as one of us in Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Jesus' baptism evokes the first creation story in Genesis. Jesus comes up out of the water and there is the Holy Spirit, the "wind of God," hovering over the waters again, and the voice of God the Father speaking meaning into the world again, "with you I am well pleased" "It is good." Seen in this context, Mark's intent is clear. In Jesus Christ, God is now at work, continuing to do what God does, bringing good out of bad situations, meaning out of emptiness, and hope out of hopelessness.

And this is only the beginning of the Good News. Mark will need us to get through his entire Gospel to appreciate how that Good News plays itself out through Jesus crucifixion and resurrection. And when we finish the story we suddenly become part of it. That will be my Easter sermon this year, so stay tuned.

What I want us to grasp this morning is that the book of Genesis and the Gospel according to Mark are not only, or even primarily, about things that happened in the past, things that we can analyze and say, "isn't that interesting?" – or not. They are in-your-face messages intended to remind us that God is at work, in the world and in our individual and communal lives, right now, for us and for our salvation, in the person of Jesus Christ, who continues to be present with us and for us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Because we too need to know where God is and what is the point. Our answer, and the answer of the church throughout the ages when we have been on our "A game," is that God is with us here and now in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who has been raised from the dead, the one in whom we have been baptized and whose resurrection life we now share. And because we share his life, the words of God the Father to the newly-baptized Jesus now apply also to us: "You are my beloved! With you I am well pleased." Our lives have meaning because God says so and because God has claimed us as God's own children in our own baptisms. Our lives have hope, even when tragedy strikes. Our lives have purpose even when our life plans are undone. Our lives are not empty even when we feel alone and abandoned. The same God who spoke light into being at the creation of the world continues to speak light into our darkness and love into our hearts, and invites us to be a part of God's saving mission to the world God continues to love, beacons of light in the darkness and sacraments of God's presence in the midst of alienation and despair. May that message touch our hearts and animate our wills in this new year. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.