

Ron Gilmer
Baptism of the Lord
Year B
University Presbyterian Church
Tuscaloosa, AL

IN THE BEGINNING, PART ONE

GENESIS 1:1-5; ACTS 19:1-7

This is it: *the* beginning, the prequel to the prologue of John, which begins with the extravagant claim: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. This Word was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Before Jesus was blood, bile or bone, there was God, as Genesis proclaims, “In the beginning when God created the heavens and 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.” Oh, the heavens and earth were created simultaneously? But I thought that God lived in the heavens (or at least one of them) before the earth was created? Yes, I taught children’s Sunday school this morning and was prepared for anything!

God exists before the heavens and earth. God resides in the deep. This deep has a face, and so do the waters. I do not know if I have ever thought much about this before now, but it seems to me that whatever face this deep or the waters has is the face of God, as the church affirms in both the Heidelberg Catechism and A Brief Statement of Faith, in life and in death, we belong to God; and if we belong to God, then suffice it to say that all that sustains us also belongs to God (regardless of how much we abuse the earth entrusted to our care). God’s face is reflected in all creation, yea, even in deep darkness or deep waters, a point that is fleshed out later in Genesis, in the story of Noah, a bunch of animals and a flood.

Darkness covers. Wind sweeps. Then God says, “Let there be light’; and there was light,” more light than ever before. Then God passes judgment, setting a precedent that would have us welcome judgment, by seeing that the light was good. Notice that God *sees* that the light is good (as opposed to merely *saying* that it is good), suggesting that God is predisposed to accept us and to have us accept each other and our neighbors on the basis of being created (like the birds of the air and the fish of the sea).

Scripture does not say anything about accepting only those who are white, straight or rich, and this particular Scripture does not say anything about accepting only those who are Jewish, Christian or Presbyterian (which reminds me of the story of the boy who once asked his mother, “Momma, are we Republicans, Democrats or Presbyterians?”) The language that we use to describe ourselves and the world around us is only as good as its transparency, to the extent that it helps us to understand one another, to the extent that it helps us to see and be seen.

God calls the light Day and the darkness Night, and both are good. There is evening and morning, the first day. Not a bad day’s work...and the next five are almost as impressive. I say “almost,” because this first day sets the stage for what is to come. This is the design that God will color by numbers until the seventh day, the Sabbath, when at last God rests, and Sabbath rest is a gift, not an achievement; in fact, it is the opposite of an achievement. Those who try to rest never do, because resting becomes another item on the “to do” list; and when one is working on the “to do” list, he or she is not resting.

Part of the beauty of carving this reading the way that the lectionary does in Year B is that the subject of the first paragraph is God. God creates. God sweeps. God says, and God sees. The world, at this stage in the first creation story, lacks human beings. In Year A, the emphasis is on the grand narrative from “In the beginning” to “God rested.” I know, I know. God is in the details, and so is the serpent. Sometimes the abstract seems safer; sometimes it is, because as the story unfolds, the plot

twists in ways that nobody expects. Sometimes twists are welcomed; sometimes they are feared, and by God's grace, life equips us to cope with and/or to celebrate whatever the next day brings.

The story of God's covenant with Israel is ever-expanding by the time that the New Testament is written. The serpent has already set up a produce stand in the Garden of Eden, and human beings are already in the habit of sabotaging their relationships with God and neighbor. Nibbling the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil has produced ignorance; so much ignorance that the disciples in Ephesus do not know that there is a Holy Spirit.

Paul asks, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" "No," they reply, "We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." Paul follows up with a question about baptism, "Into what then were you baptized?" They say something about John, the same John who baptizes Jesus. If it is good enough for Jesus, then it is good enough for us, right?

Not exactly, as Paul explains, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." Jesus' baptism is a torch-passing ceremony; it is the institution of a Sacrament. John has taken his followers to the edge of the Promised Land, and with Jesus, they enter in. On hearing this, the disciples, whom God brings into Paul's life, are baptized in the name of Jesus. Paul lays hands on them. The Holy Spirit comes upon them. They speak in tongues and prophesy.

The Holy Spirit calls, confirms and points to the waters of baptism, of baptism in the name of Jesus, who, according to John, was with God in the beginning when God's face swept over the waters and was reflected in them. Since then, human beings have been brought into being. The story has become more complicated. The world has evolved and, by God's grace, continues to do so. In Jesus Christ, the abstract has become flesh and bone; and when his body betrays him (as our bodies will betray us, as Arlee's body has betrayed her) the Holy Spirit abides reminding us of God's love.

Here in the church, God calls women and men to all ministries by virtue of our baptism and sets us apart for particular forms of service. The Spirit leads us to the font where God waits patiently. God's grace precedes us inasmuch as the creation of the world comes before any act of the apostles. The Spirit descends from the heavens that God brought into being back when the earth was formed, and this same Spirit marks us as God's own through the Sacrament of baptism.

A Sacrament is a sign and a seal of God's movement toward us in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Or as Augustine says, a Sacrament is "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." Because it is "outward and visible," others notice. Because it is "inward and spiritual," it engrafts us to Christ's body forever. Every time that God gathers us to worship, we are called to remember our baptism, our common calling to worship and service, and to celebrate our particular callings in the church and the world.

Remember your baptism and be thankful. This is a statement that you will hear throughout today's Service of Ordination and Installation. This is a belief that is fundamental to the process of ordaining and installing elders and deacons. The same Spirit that led Torry and Rob to the baptismal font is calling them to be ordained, Torry to the office of deacon and Rob to the office of elder. The same Spirit that led Steve, Paige and Garry to be ordained previously, to kneel in obedience to God, is calling them to be installed for active service.

Steve, Paige, Torry, Rob and Garry, on this Sunday, your heads will be anointed with oil, and I pray that your cups will runneth over. God has a vision for UPC, and this vision will become flesh and dwell among us through your openness and obedience to the Spirit, the same Spirit that has spoken through the voice of this congregation that has led you to this place at this time.

I do not know what the next three years at UPC will look like (though I do have an idea about the next year after this weekend's retreat). Do you the future holds? I do know this: God is faithful, and in my experience, God is more merciful than just. Thanks be to God!

The prayer for *The Book of Common Worship* that we prayed yesterday morning at the officers' retreat is a prayer that I find myself praying for all of us, but especially for those you beginning a term as a leader in this church: "Eternal God, you call us to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord." No, we cannot see the ending, but we know who was in the beginning, who was and ever shall be. World without end! Amen. Amen.