

The First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord
Text: Genesis 1:1-5

We heard together today the very first words of the Bible, from the first chapter of the Book of Genesis. But that's deceptive. Because we are a people conditioned and shaped by history we might think that those first words, "in the beginning..." are in fact the oldest words in the Bible. But we would be wrong to think that...

This isn't a first-person account. There are no "eye witnesses" at the dawn of creation! In fact, the text is not even close to being the oldest in the Bible; it's only about 2500 years old. It's an exilic text from the sixth century B.C.—which means it is written after the fall of Jerusalem and during the Babylonian captivity. For comparison's sake: King David ruled Israel about five hundred years before this text was written; Moses led the people out of Egypt's land about 500 years before that, and Father Abraham left the land that he knew and loved to follow a Voice's Promise some 500 years before that.

Now there's no quiz on all these dates before you are allowed to come to the Eucharist today. The point is simply to note that Genesis 1 is shaped by the experience of God's people for over 1500 years: from the call of Abraham through the Exodus and the monarchy and then into exile, and it is there—by the waters of Babylon where it was hard to sing the Lord's song in a strange land—that this creation narrative is born. It's written by the exiled priests without a temple left to work in—people who had experienced tremendous social dislocation in their lives, people who had experienced chaos and great loss and terrible darkness firsthand.

So it only makes sense that this account would draw on the creation narratives of Egypt and Mesopotamia—narratives clearly known to the Hebrew children living in Babylon at the time and being taught in the Babylonian school system. Genesis 1 is both similar to and different from those other narratives. This isn't the place to make those comparisons in detail. But we should notice two important differences. First: Israel doesn't seem interested in answering the question of how the chaos got there in the first place or where God came from. Other stories of the time spent a good bit of energy on that. This creation story is not about creation out of nothing. Rather it is about the ordering of chaos: the systematic, almost liturgical, ordering of chaos. Second, it can be distinguished from other near-eastern accounts of creation by its utter simplicity. For our purposes what matters is simply that we should notice how liturgical, poetic, and orderly the text is—all things near and dear to clergy of pretty much every generation!

So against the backdrop of a world gone mad, the priests imagine a six-day creation that is essentially about bringing order out of chaos. The first step in that process is that light shines in the darkness. Don't worry that the sun hasn't yet been created or that when it is the moon will be seen also as a kind of night light to go along with it. Theologically what is being said by people living in a scary and darkened world is that God is the lord of creation and light of their lives. Moreover, the creation is good: that is the liturgical response that comes at the end of each day. This is doxology: praise of the Creator who is stronger than the forces of chaos and darkness.

My friends: this is not science—at least it is not science in any meaningful sense of what that word means. It's not even Babylonian science from the sixth century and it would be a serious mistake to try to teach it as science in the twenty-first century. That doesn't mean it's just a myth, on par with Greek myths or other creation myths—or that we should simply dismiss it because it's cosmology doesn't fit with ours. In fact I'm arguing just the opposite. For us as Christians this is “the word of the Lord.” But what does that mean? It is a word of hope for God's faithful people, about how to live in the world as God's own beloved. It is profound theology and a bold statement of faith. It's poetic liturgy that has the power to heal and transform us. It is a text about God's trustworthiness as the One who continues to bring forth light, even when we are afraid of the dark. It's just not a text about the literal beginnings of the world.

Christians do not need to choose between the big bang and Genesis 1, nor between Darwin and Genesis 2. Science asks how; religion asks why. Genesis 1 comes from a people who have walked through great darkness, but have nevertheless still experienced God as walking through the darkness with them and illumining the way to move forward. Genesis 1 is about the awakening of faith and hope that we've been reflecting on throughout the twelve days of Christmas and now as we move into the season of Epiphany. That is very good news. Twenty-five hundred years later we need to claim this text for what it is, not try to re-shape it into something that it was never meant to be.

The theme of light sets the stage for the entire Epiphany season that will take us through the month of February. The world sometimes can feel like a very dark place. *Yet the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not (and will not) overcome it.* As we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord we remember our own baptism as well, and our calling to let our light shine forth in the darkness.

This text assumes that the world still has some amount of chaos and darkness. Those Babylonian exiles understood that all too well—just as we do in the midst of a war in that very same part of the world. In both contexts it could feel as if the world was

coming apart at the seams. Yet the good news of this text is that this is the very stuff out of which God brings new possibilities. That is the work of God not only billions of years ago or twenty-five hundred years ago but today and tomorrow as well.

It is our vocation as God's people to share in that same work of bringing order and meaning and purpose to chaos—of letting our light shine in the darkness. We live in a highly polarized and politicized environment around this text and believe me I am profoundly aware of that as I preach on it today. On the one extreme are the fundamentalists who make everything a zero-sum game: everything is either/or. They are attempting to turn Genesis 1 and 2 into something they are not, and as believers that should concern us. On the other extreme are those scientists who sometimes sound as if questions of meaning, or purpose, or design are silly and immature. *Some* scientists (although by no means all or even most) leave no room for a Creator. In their own way they are as “fundamentalistic” as the fundamentalists (although of course they don't tend to see it that way.)

Most of us, however, want to take this text seriously even if not literally. Moreover we want our doctors and our hospitals to take medicine and the biological sciences seriously—not to just to pray the tumor inside of us away. The Protestant Chaplain at Georgetown, where I was an undergraduate, also had duties at the Medical School. He used to have a saying: “Prozac AND Prayer.” It was his way of reminding others (and maybe even himself) that both medicine and faith have roles to play in making people healthy because we are holistic creatures; and one side of the equation without the other leaves us less than well. Modern medicine is built on scientific inquiry—and as Christians should honor that and thank God for minds to think and learn new ideas. The Episcopal Church and other mainline denominations have a noble and serious vocation in this time and place: to remind people that sometimes the answer to a serious question is both/and rather than either/or.

If you want to know about how the world began, read the physicists. If you want to know about the origin of species, read Darwin. But if you want to know about why life matters then read Genesis 1 with eyes that see and ears that hear. If you believe that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it—then read Genesis 1 and look to Jesus, the light that has come into the world, the light that continues to come into our faith community and into our families. Respond to that love by letting your little light shine for the whole world to see, in this holy season and beyond.

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