

CREATION STARTS ALL OVER

Genesis 1:1-5

Mark 1:4-11

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Baptism of the Lord

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In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, God spoke, and the universe came into order. In the beginning, God spoke, and that Word established the Lord's authority over all reality. From Genesis to Revelation, from start to finish, the Bible announces that claim. Now, the Bible is not a science book. It does not explain how natural events happen, or contradict the methods or conclusions of modern science. The Bible also is not a history book, at least not the way we understand history. It records some historical events, and we can verify some of them from archeology and other ancient writings, but it is not history in our usual sense. The narratives in the Bible are more like a theological reflection on history; we might even call them theological reconstruction of history for holy purposes. For example, historians and theologians have long known that the reign of King Herod did not overlap with Caesar Augustus, but the Gospel of Luke re-arranges that part of history so that the birth of Jesus can trump the authority of both those rulers. Instead of offering history or science, the Bible announces in many different forms that God is the Reality Who puts all other things in order. Walter Brueggemann has written that "The word of God which shapes creation is an action which alters reality." [1] Careful readers notice that the first verses of Genesis are ambiguous about whether God created from absolute nothingness or unformed chaos, but the answer doesn't matter much, because the effect is the same: God's Word invites a new order into being. Because of this gracious word, all that exists in orderly relation to everything else, including being in relation to God. God's Word reaches over everything.

Every day, the Word of God claims us. Every day, the Lord's creating voice announces its claim again, brand new. So, once upon a time, in the middle of human time, at just the right time, the Lord God announced this claim in a new way, and renewed the invitation. A strange man appeared at the intersection of worlds, where the road from Rome meets roads that actually lead elsewhere: to Babylon and India, and to Ethiopia and Libya. [2] Standing thus between the nations, this John who baptized also stands between times. He raises the image of Elijah: the wilderness prophet who raised the dead, [3] called down holy fire, [4] and condemned both king and queen for their sins. [5] John also announces the advent of One even more powerful, who will baptize with the very Spirit of the Lord. Day after day, people from the whole countryside and even from Jerusalem streamed out to him, to hear the Lord's claim made new again. In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth to be baptized by John in the Jordan. At the intersection of nations, standing between the ages, the prophet who brings back history baptizes the Savior who brings the future. As Jesus walks out of the water, the heavens are torn apart—*schizomenous* (scizomenous))) is the Greek word, with a violent sound that amplifies its meaning. The same word was used to translate the Hebrew description of how the Lord parted the Red Sea during the Exodus, [6] and it comes again at the end of Mark, after the Crucifixion, when the veil of the Temple is suddenly torn apart. [7] The coming of Jesus Christ opens reality in an utterly unique way, to invite us one more time to live within the gracious order of God's irrefutable claim. Whether we recognize it or not, it is true. The Lord claims us and covers us every day.

Here is an offer we should not refuse. This invitation is what we need, and we should not ignore it. For most of us here, our response actually started before we know anything about it, when our parents presented us for baptism. One of the most emotional times in worship for me is when we baptize children, because in that sacrament, we say in effect that we will do everything in our power to keep this child in our midst connected with God—AND that evil and Satan shall have no rightful claim. We are very much like Tolkien's wizard Gandalf, standing on a collapsing stone bridge to announce to the foulest appearance of evil we can imagine, "You shall not pass." In the end, evil is indeed defeated. Our response to the Lord's claim continues in a somewhat less dramatic way right here, in worship, week after week. Some of us are here every week we are in town, and at other churches when we travel; others could do a little better, but at least today, all of us are here. Beyond this hour, some respond by taking the Bible's teaching about loving our neighbors very seriously, by serving with the Deacons, or at Food pantry or Community Suppers. Beyond these walls, some volunteer with Good News, Habitat, or on our mission trips. Some are very intentional about living Christ's teachings quietly and persistently in their jobs. All of that is very good. There is more to do, though.

There is more to do, and it starts with recovering some very basic parts of our Christian life. In our church newsletter for this month, I wrote about two traditional elements of Christian discipline that are fundamental to our continuing growth as people who acknowledge the Lord's claim over our reality. One of those disciplines is to study the Bible regularly, because we cannot really know God unless learn to live in this story, and we cannot find our place in the story unless we know how it goes. So, I have challenged all our officers and staff to read the entire Bible this year and every year, and I am challenging and inviting all of you to do the same. By the way, I grew up reading the Bible, then I studied it academically in college and seminary for seven years, and I have been using it professionally for very close to twenty-three years, but on Wednesday this week, I still learned something from my reading in Genesis that I had never noticed before. So join me and your leaders in this discipline. If you threw away the schedule, we'll get you another one. It's also on the church's website.

The other practice that we neglect too easily is to speak well of this fellowship called the church, and particularly *this* church where we most often worship and work together. It is so easy to forget about the love we feel here, and all the emotions and memories and even visions people have had in this room, and lapse over into complaining and worrying. Be positive! Lean into the community of love God wants us all to share, and use every word and every thought you can muster to promote it. In his recent book called *Our Endangered Values*,^[8] former President Carter argues that too many Christians have been pulled away from what unites us as Christians by controversies over social issues. Our own Presbyterian constitution states clearly that there are truths about which people of good character may differ—I find that language very interesting, by the way, especially because it is over two hundred years old—there are truths about which people of good character may differ, and individuals and churches have a duty to be tolerant of each other about these things.^[9] What really matters, at the core of our faith, is that in Jesus Christ, God became one of us in order to be able to transform and renew every aspect of our existence, from the way we treat neighbors to how we use our money. We need a lot of details to fill in the picture, but the key to remember is that the love of God drives our choices about those details, and not the other way around. As people claimed and called by God, we have so much to

celebrate, so let's celebrate, and invite our neighbors to join the celebration, too. Share the love. Speak well of your church. It really is what God wants, and we don't want to ignore God.

Every day, the Lord's claim over all creation is renewed. God is in charge, every day, and in every moment of our lives, we are invited to share more fully in that reality. It is never too late to answer God. It's never too early, either. Answer the invitation. Step into God's new reality.

Let us pray.

Mighty Creator and Gentle Companion: call us ever again to Your way, and open our eyes to Your truth, so that we may enjoy the reality You intend for us, and share it with all people; through Jesus Christ, Who makes all things new. Amen.

1. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, (1982) p. 26, in *Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press).
2. India is named in Esther 1:1, and Libya in Ezekiel 30:5. Along with Spain which is named in I Maccabees 8:3, these places seem to be the farthest limits of named geography in the Bible.
3. I Kings 17:17-24.
4. I Kings 18:20-38.
5. I Kings 21:20-24.
6. Exodus 14:21.
7. Mark 15:38.
8. Jimmy Carter, *Our Endangered Values* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005).
9. Book of Order G-1.0305.