

God Created

Baptism of the Lord (First Sunday After the Epiphany)

Genesis 1:1-5

1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2 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. 3 Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. 4 And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

The story of creation provides a fitting text for the first Sunday after the Epiphany. During this season of celebrating the manifestation of God in Christ, the creation story can teach us about its testimony to the initial manifestation of God. The Church, on this Sunday also celebrates the baptism of the Lord. The story of creation is a narrative that shows the dependence of all that exists upon God. In addition to its identification of attributes and actions of God and God's handiwork in the created order, the passage contains the roots for the classic doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*—creation out of nothing—and it anticipates the climax of God's creative acts with the forming of humans in the divine image, thus establishing the foundation for the doctrine of the *imago dei*. It also introduces the concept of the congruity of God's voice with God's identity, specified when Moses at the burning bush hears the voice of God reveal God's name (Exod. 3). In Christian thought this dynamic idea is consummated in the proclamation of the Gospel of John that the Word itself is none other than God, creative from the beginning (John 1:1) and ultimately incarnate in the life of Jesus as the Christ (John 1:14).

The idea of creation out of nothing is implied in the references to the "formless void" and the dark deep (v. 2) into which God introduced light, shape, and order. The concept of *creatio ex nihilo* was first inscribed in Hebrew texts during the second century BCE, when the writer of 2 Maccabees implored the faithful "to look at the heaven and earth and see everything that is in them and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed" (2 Macc. 7:28). The doctrine was introduced into Christian thought in the second century when theologians sought to counter developing ideas that, in creation, God worked with already existing matter. Then as now, the primary purpose for the explication of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is not to explain how creation occurred, but to affirm that all that exists depends upon the creative and sustaining power of God.

The deep darkness in which and over which God worked in creation provides a dramatic contrast for the initial creative act of God: illumination. Called forth by God's command, light bursts into being (v. 2) and enables the possible perception of all other elements of creation. In the dark void, even chaos could not be perceived. Light is the first step for order to be established and discerned. The separation of light from darkness begins a crescendo of creative action that is crowned with the creation of humans, who are formed in the image of God and who serve as God's companions. By separating light from darkness and by naming the light "Day" and the darkness "Night" (v. 5), God establishes the origin of time and divine dominion over history as well as nature.

Light is the palate for further creation. Yet light itself renders more than the possible perception of shapes and colors. Light is the basis of life and order, and light itself is judged by God as being good (v. 4), thus exhibiting its moral quality. Because of its sublime quality and ordering character, light subsequently serves as a profound symbol for the incarnation of God in Christ and for the fullness of life itself (John 8:12; 9:5).

By speaking, God commands creation into being. Each act or element of creation is generated by God's word. Consequently, God is understood as an active God, as the source of history. God speaks, and actions occur. God's word is dynamic because it expresses God's will (Ps. 33:6, 9). God creates, not out of coercion or obligation, but out of freedom. The creation is neither accidental nor random, nor is it self-generated (Gen. 1:2). It is intentional. Creation assumes significance not merely for being, but for order, for balance, for harmony between darkness and light, for unity within creation.

Now we may be ready to rightly hear this familiar text on Baptism of the Lord Sunday. Now the story of Jesus' baptism in the waters of the Jordan becomes less a story about "sin" and the conundrum of the one without sin submitting to such a rite, and more a story about solidarity, on the part of the Messiah and, through him, on the part of God. When Jesus steps down into the waters of the Jordan, with the Spirit now descending from above, he steps down into the chaos and trusts the power of God to keep on creating order out of chaos, even through him.

Our baptism is not the same as that of Jesus. We do have sin, regardless of our age or situation. Do you remember your own baptism, its purpose, and its meaning in your life? I was baptized at the age of eleven. We did not have a baptismal pool in our small church and there was not small river or stream nearby. So, the whole congregation traveled 15 miles to a church that had a pool for the purchase and each of us received the rite of baptism. I didn't look different, but I received a peace that I had not experienced before.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) says this about baptism: *Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." – Acts 2:38 (NRSV)*

Just as the baptism represents the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, it symbolizes the death and burial of the old self of the repentant believer, and the joyous birth of a brand new being in Christ. Those who founded the Disciples movement taught baptism by immersion as the accepted form. – From Word to the Church on Baptism, Commission on Theology, 1987

Baptism is a public act by which the church proclaims God's grace, as revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, through the use of a visible sign of God's gracious initiative and the human individual's response in faith.

With other Christians we affirm that baptism is at once a divine gift and a human response. The meaning of baptism is grounded in God's redemptive action in Christ, it incorporates the believer in the community in the body of Christ, and it anticipates life in the coming age when the powers of the old world will be overcome, and the purposes of God will triumph.

"In the beginning when God began to create—the earth being a formless void with the wind of God hovering over the waters—then God said, 'Let there be light.'" God creative power changes chaos into order: at the beginning of ordered time, through the waters of the Red Sea, in the muddy waters of the river Jordan, and down to the chaotic situations of God's people today. Now we can hear these verses as a prequel to a story whose sequel is still being spoken and enacted today.

As the house lights go down, a man in a hat with a pipe in his mouth carries a bench onto a bare stage. Only the barest of props indicate a house, gardens, a street; just a table and three chairs to stand for a kitchen. A blank wall serves as the horizon of this New Hampshire town. Before the action gets underway, the Stage Manager offers several homely words of introduction for Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*.

By contrast, the Hebrew Bible does not bother with preamble or prologue. These opening verses of Genesis are not mere stage setting. They are the story proper—a story of God's activity. The main actor is here. All the scenes to come will proceed from this actor. "In the beginning, God."

From ancient times until now, around campfires and through telescopes, humans have marveled at the vastness of creation. A typical example comes at the end of act 1 in *Our Town*, as Rebecca Gibbs mentions a letter that a friend got from her minister, addressed to "Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God." [1](#) Genesis offers a radically different perspective, one that looks in the opposite direction—essentially, from the Mind of God down to Grover's Corners.

Which brings us to baptism, the genesis of Christian life. Here too God assures us that we are not too small for notice; that in fact we matter immensely.

The beginning is all water: watery deeps, dark and formless, essentially a flood. God calls for light to illuminate this waste. According to Genesis, is redemptive. The floods represent anything that threatens to upend, frustrate, and drown life. Waters have their own capricious ways of changing landscapes and can bring terror, for they are random and mindless; in other words, they represent an impersonal, naturalistic creation very different from God's. In the redemption story of Genesis, God installs a vault called the sky to keep such chaos at bay.

All the more impressive, then, that at baptism we are asked to submit to the primordial waters and a figurative death. And all the more important, the Creator calls us by our own names—in some Christian traditions, gives us new names. God's creative power is made powerfully personal in this second birth.

This first Sunday after Epiphany comes at the start of the new year, an evocative time to talk about beginnings. In some churches, the occasion is

observed by dipping their hands in the sacred waters and drawing wet crosses on their foreheads. The beginning of the year lends itself to this remembrance of baptism and the beginning of Christian life.

In Genesis God sees that the light on the face of the waters is good; and declares that humankind is good; much as God declares at Jesus' baptism, "This is my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased." For those who have been baptized, death and life have been re-created.

As we start Genesis, the house lights do not go down, but come up; struggles are all around us, and we share them as God's cocreators. It is God, however, who brings the healing of the waters. In the beginning, God.