

Sunday, January 7, 2024
First Sunday after the Epiphany – Baptism of Our Lord (Year B)

Genesis 1.1-5; Mark 1.4-11

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1531378007620811>

(Sermon begins at about 19:35)

“Origin Stories”

All of the Gospels begin with an origin story about Jesus. Three of the four place this origin story more in the context of Jesus’ birth. The most famous of these, of course, is the Gospel according to Luke, which contains the birth narrative that we hear on Christmas Eve. The Gospel according to Matthew starts off with the story of the birth of Jesus, although does not convey the actual event of the birth, but rather on the lead up to it, and then, perhaps more importantly, what immediately follows. Particularly with the coming of the Wise Men from the east—an important image for Epiphany, which we celebrated yesterday; an image that sends the message that Jesus was born to save all people, not just the Jews. And the Gospel according to John, which we heard on Christmas Day and again last Sunday places the coming of Jesus in the broader, more cosmic context as being the Word made flesh; as God come among us in the flesh.

But what does the Gospel according to Mark have to offer by way of an origin story about Jesus? The oldest of the Gospels completely skips Jesus’ birth or the events that immediately surround it. Rather, Mark’s Gospel begins with John the Baptist and how he is the fulfillment of ancient prophecies of one who prepares the way of the Lord. The first we even hear of Jesus is with him as an adult, coming to be baptized by John. The passage we heard today. So, for all intents and purposes, this is Mark’s version of Jesus’ origin story. The story of his baptism.

While it may seem odd that Mark chooses to jump right to Jesus’ baptism as the point of entry into the story of his life, as his origin story, it actually does make sense from a theological perspective. The early Church was not remotely concerned with Jesus’ early life, with the years before he started ministry. It was really only concerned with his resurrection, and what that meant for his followers—for us. That it was and is the means by which we obtain forgiveness of our sins and are assured a new, eternal life with him. Beyond that, there was the recognition that until we enter into that eternal life, there is an expectation of how we should live out our faith. Of how we should prepare ourselves. That came through what Jesus did during the last three years of his life leading up to his death and resurrection. What he did during his public ministry, with his teachings and healings. All of which provide insight into the Kingdom of God of which we are all a part. So beginning the Gospel and placing Jesus’ origin story at his baptism, which was effectively the launching of his public ministry, would have made complete sense to the early Church.

Beyond that, the story of Jesus’ baptism, with the revelation and confirmation that Jesus is the Son of God, also contains images from another origin story. The ultimate origin story. The creation story in Genesis, the beginning of which we heard as our first reading for today. We

hear about how God began the process of creation. Of course, in hindsight, knowing now what we do about Jesus, who as the Son of God is a co-equal part of the Trinity along with the Holy Spirit, he would have been part of the whole creation process. The second verse of the creation story describes how when God began the creation process, “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.” The waters being an ancient image for chaos. In this case, representing the chaos that existed before God brought order through the creation that followed. And how at the beginning of the creation process, “a wind from God swept over the . . . waters”—over the chaos. The Hebrew word for wind being *ruach*. The same word used for spirit. The *ruach* from God sweeping over the chaos, the wind sweeping over the chaos, the Spirit sweeping over the chaos. *Ruach*, wind, Spirit bringing about creation, bring order out of chaos, bringing light out of darkness, and eventually bringing about life itself. *Ruach* also being the Hebrew word for breath. The same breath that God would breathe into the first humans. *Ruach*, the Spirit of God, giving life to humankind in the creation story. When “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed it was very good” (Gen 1.31a).

These same images of water being present in the baptisms John was performing in the wilderness. The waters of the Jordan River representing on one hand the chaos of sin, and on the other, the cleansing of sin. Calling to mind the way God, in creation, turned the waters of chaos into the life-giving waters of the world. Although the Spirit was yet to be introduced into the baptismal process.

As John proclaimed to those whom he had baptized, regarding the one who is to come after him: “I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” John’s baptism was one “of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,” but what Jesus offers by way of baptism will be different. It will be more than just about repentance and forgiveness. Baptism with water and the Holy Spirit will be the beginning of a new creation. Of a new life. One in which sins are forgiven, yes. But that is only the beginning. Through the Holy Spirit, that new life would be about inclusion; about becoming beloved of God. Just as when Jesus was baptized the Spirit descended upon him “and a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’” Here again, reminiscent of the creation story, where God saw that creation was very good.

Of course, Jesus did not particularly need the Holy Spirit to descend upon him at his baptism. The Holy Spirit was already with Jesus—had been from the beginning of creation. And Jesus did not need to hear God proclaim, “You are my Son the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” He was already the beloved Son of God. He would have known that. The Holy Spirit descending on him did not change anything between Jesus and God. The proclamation from God was more for the benefit of those witnessing Jesus’ baptism. It was more for our benefit. One way of letting us know just who Jesus is. But even more so, when viewed in light of John’s own proclamation that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit, sends the message that it is not just Jesus who is God’s beloved Son. The event of Jesus’ baptism sends the unmistakable message that we are all beloved children of God, with whom he is well pleased.

John initially performed a baptism for the repentance and forgiveness of sins. But Jesus coming to be baptized took that sacramental act to new heights with the incorporation of the Holy

Spirit into the process. Harkening back to the very beginning of creation, in which the waters of chaos were transformed through *ruach*, through the wind, through the breath of God, through the Spirit, bringing new life out of chaos. Bringing light out of darkness. In this, the baptism of Jesus, and the baptism performed in his name, is the culmination of the creation story. Every time someone is baptized they represent a fulfillment of God's original plan for creation. Baptism represents the fulfillment of our life and relationship with God, whereby the darkness and chaos of sin are vanquished, bringing light and new life. Whereby each of us is made new, given a new origin story as we are incorporated into the family of God as his beloved children with whom he is well pleased.

In a few moments, we will have the opportunity to participate in a new origin story. We will have the pleasure and honor of baptizing Archer McDuffie as the newest member of the Body of Christ, as the newest member of God's ever-growing family. In this sacred act, Archer's life will be forever changed as he emerges from the waters of baptism, forever cleansed, forever forgiven; as the Holy Spirit descends upon him; as God gently whispers in the depths of his heart and soul, "you are my son, who is beloved; with you I am well pleased." As he is made a new creation; as he begins a new life as beloved of God. As he is assured of eternal life through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As we witness this glorious, life-changing event, we are not merely bystanders. We are not merely witnesses. Through the renewal of vows that is a part of the baptismal rite, through the asperges that follow, we are reminded of our own baptisms. Not just reminded, but actually given the opportunity, in a mystical way, to relive, to experience anew, our own baptism. To relive and experience anew our own origin story. A reminder that the Holy Spirit has descended upon each of us, continually making us new creations in Christ, giving us new life through him. As God gently whispers in words that only you can hear, "You are my child, who is beloved; with you I am well pleased."