

The Baptism of Jesus
Genesis 1:1-5, Mark 1:1-11

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“Being Beloved”

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Our very first Bible story came into being at a terrible time in the history of the Jewish people. You know that story, the one that begins, “In the beginning...” Some 600 years before Jesus was born, the Jewish people were overrun by the Babylonian empire. Their holy city, Jerusalem, was crushed; and the Temple, where it was believed that the very essence of God resided, was destroyed, demolished, gone. Many of the people themselves were taken into exile, taken back with the conquering army to Babylon, far from their homes and the land of their ancestors.

Imprisoned so far away, their nation and their Temple in ruins, their children began to forget their faith. It was easy to forget the faith because with the destruction of the Temple and their removal from Jerusalem, the heart and home of the faith had been smashed. Their future looked hopeless – things were too far gone, the world was too messed up, the darkness was too overwhelming – the people of Israel were tempted to give up on God.

But then, once again they began to tell their story, to remind each other who and whose they were: “In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the waters, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters...” When chaos reigned...God began to create. And God said, ‘Let there be...light, and night, and dry land and oceans, and let there be plants and animals and stars and seasons and let there be living creatures and birds and sea monsters and let there be adam – ‘humanity’ and there was, and all these things came to be. And God said it was good, it was very good. And so the people came to know themselves again.

This story is told so often that we might forget the power of it. For the Israelites, water was a sign and a symbol of chaos, of the unknown, of great and deep terrors. That God moved upon those first waters of creation and wrenched order and goodness and light from the most profound discombobulation, disorientation and fear was in itself, life giving, faith giving, transformational.

And so, in the ruins of Jerusalem, in exile in Babylon, despite all evidence to the contrary, the Jewish people clung again to the promise that God was over all, in the midst of all, moving in their history and their present, and holding out hope for their future. They remembered that God could wrench light and beauty, safety and order, out of chaos and terror.

Six hundred years later, one of their descendants, the writer of the gospel of Mark, begins his story about God’s presence and power. And his story starts out like the first story: “The beginning,” Mark writes. “The beginning of the good news

of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark tells us nothing about Jesus’ birth, or his early years. Mark begins his version of the story with Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River. Another story of beginnings located in the chaos and threat of water. Another story in which, through the goodness and grace of God, we are promised salvation, rescue from that which keeps us up at night or drags us down in our dreams.

I wonder if it’s no accident that he chooses to begin this way. Jesus’ people, the people of Israel in the first century, had been longing for a Saviour, for release from oppression, just as the Jewish people of the exile had been. The oppressors were different, but the yearning for redemption was the same. As their ancestors had longed for some sign that God was bringing order out of chaos, creating new life in the midst of death, so the Jews of Jesus’ time were longing for a Redeemer, who would bring justice and healing to their lives.

Perhaps that’s why Mark begins his story in the desert, in the wilderness, rather than in a stable. For the image of the wilderness is another symbol for the people of Israel of lifelessness and danger, of chaos and oppression, of death itself. Remember that the wilderness is not only a geographic location but also an apt description of the state of one’s soul – dry, lifeless, yawning empty spaces. And yet, that’s exactly where the gospel, the good news, begins: “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

Into this same wilderness comes Jesus. He, like the others who come, enters into the River Jordan. Like the others, he is immersed in the river – the baptism looks like a drowning, like death, the end of life to that moment. And then Jesus, like the others, rises out of the water, alive again, born again into a new life, a life cleansed of sin, a life lifted from fear and disorder. But, unlike those before him, when Jesus rose out of the water, “he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.” The same creative force that moved across the formless void at creation, now tears open the heavens and descends like a dove, signifying that this is the one who has taken, in human form, God’s way and will for humanity. Then, just as God blessed the creation at the beginning, Jesus hears a voice from heaven, blessing him: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” God declares the Son as good, as very good. For Mark, the events of Jesus’ life are a new beginning, a second Genesis, a re-creation of humanity.

Just like at the first creation, God’s renewing power is known in and through the waters. Jesus goes into the water a carpenter and comes out a Messiah, which means, “an anointed one,” someone called by God to a particular purpose. He is the same person, but with a new direction. His being is the same, but his doing is about to take a radical turn. (Which is really what the word “repentance” means: to turn around, to go another way, to follow God’s way.) Jesus went into the waters

of baptism his own person, a private person, and came out God's person, a public figure at the centre of controversy, for the rest of his short life. He went in with one identity and came out with another. He went in without a mission or a ministry...and came out with God's mission and God's ministry. And just like God's first creation at the beginning of time, God looked at what God had made, at God's child, and God said, "It is good. It is Beloved."

The same thing happens to us in our own baptism. Because Jesus waded into the watery chaos to take his place in life with us, we too know a new creation in our baptism and throughout our life. When each one of us here is baptized, we too are made a new creation, and God looks on each one of us and proclaims, "You are my Beloved. Very, very good."

It may be that you are not baptized, and wondering where this leaves you? Well, I believe that our baptism is an affirmation of what is already true: that we are created in God's image and beloved from the beginning. It is in our baptism that we intentionally embrace that identity and that promise, and commit ourselves to live out of that identity throughout our life. Make no mistake, from the moment we were created, whether baptized or not, each one of us is 'the Beloved'.

But oh, sometimes it's hard to remember that, in our day-to-day living. When so much in our culture and society tells us we are not beloved, not lovable, not good enough, not strong enough, not smart enough, don't make enough money, don't have the right stuff, aren't good enough parents or children. Over and over again, we forget that we have been made in God's image, in the image of love and generosity and compassion. Forget that we have been born again of water and the Spirit, a new creation, named and cherished as Beloved.

No matter how soaked we might be in God's love and grace, our times in the wilderness, in the desert, have a way of "wringing us out," and we forget that God dwells in and among us. Over and over, we forget our Beloved identity, falling prey to a kind of "spiritual amnesia". Remembering the power of our baptism can help counter our forgetfulness. The touch of water upon our lives helps us recall our place in the biblical story, and reminds us that God's creative force is still birthing us, claiming us, renewing us, calling us Beloved children, with whom God really is "well pleased".

At Dunbar Heights, our baptism vows are taken from the United Church New Creed – we take the affirmation of that creed and turn the statements into questions. As a reminder of what it is we declare when we are baptized, I'll ask you rise, in body or in spirit, and turn to p. 918 in *Voices United*. Please join with me in this reminder of how and who are truly are:

We are not alone; we live in God's world.

We believe in God: who has created and is creating,

Who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh,

**To reconcile and make new,
Who works in us and others by the Spirit.
We trust in God.
We are called to be the Church: to celebrate God's presence,
To live with respect in Creation,
To love and serve others,
To seek justice and resist evil, to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
Our judge and our hope.
In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us.
We are not alone. Thanks be to God!**

And now I invite you to turn to your neighbours and speak the words of God:
You are beloved. Very, very good. Make sure no one is left out. And in the chaos
may you hear the good news. You are beloved. Very, very good. Thanks be to God!