

Genesis 1:1-5 ~ Mark 1:4-11

Glorious Beginnings

January 7, 2018 ~ Baptism of the Lord/Reaffirmation of Baptism

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Introduction to Gospel Lesson:

Have you ever been told your “birth story”? Maybe you were a baby who arrived early and surprised everyone a few weeks before your due date. Or perhaps you arrived late, making everyone wait... and wait. That is my story: I arrived three days late. But in my case, so the story goes, this was a good thing because I was due on Christmas Eve. Being the fourth child, my mom was very grateful that I waited to be born until two days after Christmas, so that my siblings and dad could have mom home on Christmas and not in the hospital. That’s about the whole story that is ever told. These days, if you ask new parents about the birth of their child, you may hear *more* than you really wanted to know. They may tell you when the water broke, how many hours of hard labor there were, how much pushing was required, and other overly graphic details, shifting the conversation into the realm of “overshare” before you know it.

Mark chooses to begin Jesus’ birth story at the river Jordan, as we heard about back on the Second Sunday of Advent. He begins at the moment when the heavens were torn apart and the Voice from heaven spoke—the instant when the barrier between heaven and earth came down like a dove. Mark identifies this moment as the beginning of the Incarnation: The moment when the Word became flesh in a way that we could recognize. It is Mark’s birth story and epiphany story all wrapped into one, signaling this amazing truth: God was now on the loose in this world in the man name named Jesus. This was the day the Good News of Jesus Christ began in Mark’s gospel. Now, as I read Mark 1:4-11, let’s listen to what we can learn about the Good News of Christ’s glorious beginning.

SERMON

Can you picture Jesus standing in line by the river’s edge, waiting to be baptized by the wild and crazy prophet John? Perhaps you wonder why the Son of God would need to do that. After all, if he was without sin, what was he doing standing in the sinner’s line? Very strange indeed. This King of Kings and Lord of Lords, standing by the water’s edge, waiting his turn, like the rest of us.

From early on, the Christian tradition has never been very comfortable with the baptism of Jesus. Matthew, Luke and John spend way more narrative time than Mark trying to make sense of it. Matthew

builds on Mark's original story, adding conversation where we hear John trying to talk him out of it. If you look at Luke carefully, he doesn't say that it was John who baptized him. And in the Gospel of John, even though he describes the dove descending, he doesn't actually mention Jesus' baptism with water at all.

Lucky for us, good old Mark—first gospel writer out the box, did not try to explain away the strangeness of John, or the odd reversal of John baptizing, “The One who is more powerful than I.” For Mark, Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan was the first moment of truth, of revelation, of epiphany: a truth for Jesus to hear with his own two human ears, and for the rest of the world to hear as well, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Life-giving, life-sustaining words still reverberating in Jesus' heart and mind, as the Spirit immediately drove him into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. Far from the river Jordan, far from food or water, Satan would try to mess with his mind—his sense of self, the glorious power of the Holy Spirit within. But Jesus had already been sealed by the Holy Spirit in his baptism. Jesus knew water. The human side of Jesus could lean on the truth of that voice that had seeped into his ears, and the sensation of the water running down and all over his body. This core truth locked deep into his heart and soul and mind, from the beginning.

That's good for Jesus, but what does Jesus' baptism have to do with our baptism and us? We who definitely belong in the sinners' line. Well, *like Jesus*, our baptism also marks and seals us as officially and eternally God's own. Our baptism tells us with water and word that we are also God's own child, “sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own, forever.”

But *unlike Jesus*, we forget. We let the words run off us, just like water off our backs. We don't drink in the Living Water of Christ who came to show us how beloved by God we really are, no matter what we do or don't do. This water never runs dry. It's a good thing that God doesn't run the Kingdom of God, the way the Green Bay Packers' President, Mark Murphy runs his Packer realm. After missing the playoffs for the first time since 2008, Murphy fired 5 coaches and coordinators: Dom Capers, Scott McCurley, Mike Trgovac, Edgar Bennet and Alex VanPelt, defensive coordinator, inside linebacker coach, defensive line coach, offensive coordinator, and quarterback coach. [How many coaches and coordinators does a football team have anyway?] I have no opinion, nor am I weighing in on Packers management decisions here.

What I am saying and what I do believe with all my heart is this: God will never fire you, no matter how many losing seasons you may bring upon yourself, or have brought upon you. Why? Because God delights in the making and the being of YOU, God's beloved child. Trust the voice from heaven who says, "In you, I am well-pleased." Not because of what you have done or not done. We witness this unconditional love in the story of Jesus' baptism. The dove descends, the water cascades, the voice proclaims this truth to Jesus *before* he has said or done anything.

This is one of the reasons we practice infant baptism in the Presbyterian Church. It is a way that we try to mediate, with word and water, this truth that God loves us as we are before we do anything right or wrong, before we are even consciously aware of who God is. This is our birth story, too. God births each of us with a glorious beginning—no matter what the story of our physical labor and delivery into this world.

The message here is clear. Even if we let other voices drown it out. Like a tattoo or a watermark, it's still there—we are still God's beloved child. But so is the person sitting next to you. And so are the people living in lands far away from you, or practicing a faith different than ours, or no faith at all. So also are the people we don't like or understand. You are named and claimed as God's own—and so is every person all over God's creation: The children whose pictures are in our wallet; and the children who are not. Children who are suffering and children who have died in Syria, the Democratic Republic Congo, Yemen, Myanmar, Iraq, Nigeria, and Puerto Rico. They are in God's wallet. Whether we count them or not, God does. And so should we, if we dare to call ourselves Christians.

Our baptism is an entry point into the "counter script" as Walter Brueggemann calls it in his book, *Mandate to Difference*. "The entry point into the dominant script is perhaps the first lavish baby shower with more accoutrements than any baby ever needed, or the first cell phone, or the registration for the draft, or whatever. But baptism, a bold counter-act, is entry point into a stream of promise that is free, but not cheap."ⁱ This counter script—counter to the script of our dominant culture—is one where all people are equally beloved in the eyes of God, This is an alternative way of seeing the world—assigned by sacrament, where everyone is the neighbor we are called to love. Especially "the other," the "not us." *If we know water*, we know, at least in our heads that this is our script: God's unconditional love for all her creation.

This is the part of our birth story that we "undershare" rather than "overshare." This is the part of our birth story that maybe no one ever told us in a way that we could hear or understand. This is the part of our birth

story that God wants us to remember—not only for our own sake, but for the Kingdom of heaven's sake. For Christ's sake. When we are able to get in touch with our own chosenness, then we are freed to love others as we are loved. When we are able to get in touch with our own chosenness—we begin to be able to see the chosenness in all God's children.

I will end this sermon about birth stories, both Jesus' and ours, with a true story about the power of the waters of baptism. In Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s last speech, the night before he was assassinated he was responding to the fire hoses that Bull Connor turned on peaceful civil rights demonstrators in Birmingham, Alabama. He said, "There was a certain kind of fire that no water could put out... We had known water. If we were Baptists or some other denomination, we had been immersed. If we were Methodists, and some others (like Presbyterians) we had been sprinkled, but we knew water."ⁱⁱ With these words King converted an attack on the reign of God into a sacrament. How could he do that? Because, as he said, "We knew water."

Do you and I know water? Do we, FPC, know water? There are so many people in Marshfield and beyond who don't know water. Some of them we know, many more we don't. People whose souls are parched for the Living Water of God's Good News. People who never heard this part of their birth story: that God our Creator, made them, birthed them, and chooses them as God's own. This is a birth story that cannot be overshared. This is the birth story that can change the way we live every day.

It started in Genesis 1: the poetic birth story of our universe. "In the beginning, God. And God saw that it was good." Our God is the one who stands waiting, always ready for us to make new beginnings, glorious new beginnings. Remember the most important thing about your birth story—it's not whether you came early or late; or how many hours your mother was in labor; whether your father was there or not; or even whether you know whom your birth parents are. The most important thing about your birth story is this: You are God's beloved child—and in the creation of you, God is well pleased. Let this first Sunday of 2018 be a "glorious beginning" for you. Amen.

ⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2007), p. 199.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.redstate.com/mickeywhite2/2017/01/16/martin-luther-king-jr-mountaintop/>