

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

Word count: 1,549

How do you describe a new beginning? The book of Genesis tries...in the form of a hymn, a poetical explanation, a written recording of myth into metaphor. The stories fed the imaginations of people for centuries along the shorelines and fertile plains, and were finally written down as songs of creation.

Lectionary expert John Shearman says that, “this majestic hymn also describes the divine victory over chaos, but with a significant difference. Under the influence of its great prophets of the 8th to the 6th centuries, Israel had developed a transcendent and monotheistic concept of Yahweh. [They] developed a spiritual concept of the divine nature. This creation hymn, while drawing on earlier mythology, presents a spiritual view of how the world came into being through the direct command and action of this spiritual being, Yahweh.”

It happens with a wind across the water, the rippling of a tide, the rising of light and the descent of darkness. That is how the ancients recorded a song of the new beginning.

John the baptizer arrived from the hot wilderness to the cool banks of the River Jordan, and created another metaphor for the new beginning that the people of Israel wished to see—the cleansing and preparation for a new day for themselves, their country and the world they knew—a day free of oppression, a time of liberation.

You can imagine the excitement of the people who came down to the river to listen to his words and to make their declarations that they would stop living in the old ways and prepare themselves for something new and better. You can see where John plunged them down into the cool, cleansing waters to emerge pure, refreshed and even ecstatic with the anticipation of a new beginning.

In fact, you can see this place, or a place within a stone’s throw from it. Today, pilgrims arrive at this one point of the Jordan River by the busload and make their way down to where they can assemble in groups to wade into the waters and be baptized, renew their baptisms, or stand along the riverbank and take pictures.

If anyone had told me that by coming to this, one of the more progressive congregations in the United Church of Christ, I would one day find myself in a white robe doing full-immersion baptisms in the Jordan River, I would have been indeed surprised.

A dozen or so of us from IUCC were given an area of the river in which to gather. Four in our group wanted to celebrate their baptisms in the Jordan, and I went in with them to do my first baptisms by immersion. (In fact, I cozied up to a Southern Baptist preacher in the locker room just to get words of wisdom so that I wouldn’t accidentally drown anyone.) There is a place where you can rent a white robe, and changing rooms where you can get ready.

Along the river, one hears the sound of singing as different groups lift up hymns, each in their own language. I heard German, Spanish, Italian and a language I couldn’t identify from an African group gathered nearby. The music is accompanied by the constant beat of rhythmic prayer and punctuated by the sounds of joyful people coming back up after their pastor has plunged them into the waters.

It was very hot in the places we had visited that day, and so it was remarkable to feel how cool it is along the Jordan River, with its gentle, rolling waters and tree-lined banks. You quickly understand how exhilarated the people must have felt that day, long ago, when they

came down to the Jordan to be baptized by John, in the place where Jesus makes his first appearance in the gospels of Mark and John.

I walked into the waters and felt cool and calm almost instantly. A lightweight fenced enclosure gives you a defined space and protection, while small minnows nip gently at your ankles, and the music from the neighboring groups fills you with anticipation. Linda, Suzie, Conrado and Dave...all came down to the waters to celebrate their baptisms in the place where Jesus walked out towards John. Each went down into the waters, rising up again beaming. In fact, our whole group was beaming that day.

Here is the place of new beginnings—in the waters of creation—where Jesus came to be baptized by John and began a prophetic ministry that changed everything.

It is a wonderful coincidence that fresh into the year we hear stories of cleansing and beginning anew. The New Year offers the same—this is a time when we can look at our lives and decide to stop, look around, and make changes so that we can have the sense of beginning with a fresh slate.

John the baptizer talked about a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. The Greek word for repentance is “metanoia,” and as it is used here, it means, “a change of mind.” The word, “remission” has been used in place of the word, “forgiveness,” and is tied to the word, “repentance.” The word translated as, “remission” was used by Greeks as a term for unfastening a boat that was tied to a post in order to launch it into the water.

Mark does not tell us why Jesus was baptized by John, but what follows is significant. The opening of the heavens is a symbol of the start of a new idea about communication between Creator and creation.

We are not tied to our pasts. We are not defined by all that has defined us thus far. We have this opportunity to stop. To re-think. To re-examine and change our course and move out towards fresh waters. The Gospels begin to define a new way of looking at our relationship to the Divine. They say that we are forgiven if we ask for forgiveness. In the act of asking for forgiveness, we get to examine what it is that we think we need to let go of.

In this cleansing act of starting anew we can ask, “Just how much baggage can I carry with me on my journey? Do I really need to carry this stuff around? If I embrace a theology where I am forgiven, just who do I think I am by not forgiving myself as well as those I come in contact with?”

We can gather at the River Jordan, just as those folks did with Jesus and John so long ago, and be liberated. It is the perfect time to step into that boat where a remission can occur—the ropes that tie you to whatever holds you down from being a fully realized child of God can be lifted from the chaining post. The ballast that weighs you down can be thrown overboard and you can move out onto fresh waters with a new purpose.

Someone once said that “the tragedy of life is not that it ends so soon, but that we wait so long to begin it.” Get on with it. Repair that relationship, let go of the grudge, reach out to that person you have been meaning to know better. Take that class, make that change, start that program, get to the gym, write that book...or at least read one.

But as you do sail out into this New Year, set a course with a sense of justice; see what ties the world back and work to set it free. If one could say that there is one theme in the Bible that stands out above all others, it would be about God’s concern for the disenfranchised and the poor. It is the second most important theme of the Old Testament, just behind idolatry. One out of ten verses in the New Testament addresses injustices to the poor and those without power. One out of seven verses in the gospels and one out of five in the Book of James is on this theme.

For Jesus, the emergence of John at the Jordan River calling for a baptism for the remission of sins, and his decision to be in close connection to the suffering of humanity, was God's call to action. It was the beginning of a ministry spent in teaching, healing, breaking down barriers and widening the welcome.

For us, our baptism is the same thing. A call to come up changed and willing to change, not only ourselves, but the world around us—to empathize with the disenfranchised by taking on their burden and being a voice for the voiceless is what plunges us in and raises us up from that living water.

William James said, "Believe that life is worth living and your belief will help create the fact."

The writers of Genesis recorded the story of what happened in the various legends where God's breath, or spirit, blew across the waters in a majestic hymn that describes the divine victory over chaos. That victory over chaos is our continuing work—whether it is a discord we feel in our personal lives, or the chaos we see at work in the world and the community around us. And this is just the new beginning we need to start afresh this year. AMEN.

Scripture for Sunday, January 8, 2012

Genesis 1:1-5

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

Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."