

**Dr. Paul Tellström
Epiphany 2B**

**Irvine United Congregational Church, UCC
January 11, 2009**

“You’re Good Enough, You’re Smart Enough, and Doggone it, God Loves You”

Genesis 1:1-5

Gospel: Mark 1:4-11

word count 1,866

Water and breath meet and move chaos into order, bringing a new understanding of community and wholeness in the knowledge of belonging after being on the outside. No one wants to be outside—it is the wilderness where the demons dwell, internal, systemic or otherwise; it is where one experiences the dark night of the soul alone and without the benefit of a sense that someone or some power more mysterious, knows and understands.

Water and wind are obvious and prominent symbols in the passages that present themselves early in a New Year, and they function only in a slightly different way in the Old Testament than they do in the New Testament. In Genesis, “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.”

In this first creation story, God separated the light from the dark, bringing a sense of order from the chaos. In Hebrew, the word, “tehom” means the “deep,” the primordial waters, and in Mesopotamian mythology, “tehom” is “Tiamat,” the serpent goddess that lives and moves far below the waters—it is she who sows fear and discord, and lives to be the embodiment of chaos until she is destroyed. From this one word, “deep,” the opening words of Genesis demonstrate why it is here, above the waters that cover the surging chaos, that God brings order.

In Mark, the symbolism has changed only a little to where water is linked to baptism. It represents the utterly new beginning that comes with connection to the spirit of creation—the belief that you are accepted and loved as a part of the ground of all being called God. Part of the responsibility in return is to show yourself to the world as the authentic and unique expression of humanity that you are.

I came to the church one Saturday night not too long ago to make sure everything was ready for Sunday, and I found an envelope from a Methodist church in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, hand-addressed to me. When I opened it, a photograph fell out of a tall, skinny guy holding a football, clearly taken in the 70’s. In the letter inside, the writer stated that *I* had taken this picture, and that he was still looking for the photo he took of me that day. The letterhead made me stand frozen for several moments. “The Reverend John Landowska.”

John has reappeared in my life. He was my best friend in high school, and I always looked forward to being in his company. He lived in the tucked away part of town where first generation immigrants came to work in the industries and factories of the city—small, unassuming little houses where there was alternately a sense of pride and community, and a feeling that the neighborhood was always fighting encroaching decay. The tiny yards were well cared for, often displaying decorations such as a shiny mirror ball resting on a birdbath stand, or the occasional plaster gnome or “alert” deer.

At 31 Hazel St., his mother extended warmth and friendliness when she was not out working, and his father was employed as a custodian at a nearby school.

We hung out together in high school, equals in the theatre department and active after school in this or that, while checking in with each other throughout the day. We tried to maintain a friendship after I went away to school, but one thing led to another and we lost touch.

I took the photo and letter home with me and called him the next day at his church. It was as if no time had passed, although clearly much had happened in thirty-five years. He

married a lovely girl I knew from High school and has two grown daughters; a total of three beloved women in his life.

Finding his path proved difficult. Nineteen years working for the post-office when he had wanted to do something very different with his life caused him to retreat and disappear into himself. He called it “his years of quiet desperation.” No wonder I couldn’t find him—he hadn’t found himself, so there was no trail to follow.

He told me that his father had a history of mental illness and that he never knew what he would get when he was around him growing up. Friends had moved on or passed away, and he was in a rut. He finally found the catalyst in a Methodist church that helped him find the “John” he was meant to be.

Today, he is fully alive with a sense of purpose and serving in the world after spending time where chaos thrives; in the deep, submerged, not feeling connected to the spirit that binds us all together in a knowing place of love and acceptance.

Sometimes circumstances draw people to the wilderness, but often we go there willingly on our own, brought by a feeling that we are not worthy enough, or capable enough, or even loveable or deserving enough.

It takes hard work to come out of the wilderness, unless of course, you are inclined to take to the philosophy in the book title authored by the newest senator from Minnesota:

“I’m Good Enough, I’m Smart Enough, and Doggone It, People Like Me!”¹

But, if you require more substance, Sue Monk Kidd once commented on a story by Rabbi Liebermann:

“Rabbi Joseph Liebermann told how he fell asleep one night and had a dream. In the dream, he dies and goes to stand before the judgment seat of God. As he waits for God to speak, he fears that the Lord will ask him ‘Why weren’t you a Moses...or a David...or a Solomon?’ But God surprises him. He simply asks, ‘Why weren’t you Joseph Liebermann?’

“When my life is over, I doubt God will ask me why I wasn’t a Mother Theresa. The question I fear most is, ‘Why weren’t you Sue Monk Kidd?’ The most gracious and courageous gift we can offer the world is our authenticity, our uniqueness and the expression of our true selves.”²

The scriptures for the second Sunday of the year are about creating order out of chaos, about making things new. They aren’t about starting the year off by creating more chaos, the kind of chaos that leaves four small children standing next to their dead mother for days on end too weak to stand on their own, without allowing international humanitarian aid, here in close proximity to the place where John came in from the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance.

However, it does suggest in the story of the baptism of Jesus a call to commit to making a start that is authentic, grounded in spirit, and public. A baptism takes place in community intentionally, and marks the desire to be part of the breath of something greater than ourselves—certainly to being more capable of living out our lives than even we know ourselves to be.

Creatures of symbol and metaphor, the last calendar page is flipped and is put away in a drawer. That was the year that was. Suddenly the new calendar, unwrapped and shiny, is hanging on the wall, representing all the promises of a fresh start for a new year.

People gather to celebrate the going out of the old and the coming of new starts and fresh hopes. I suspect we most of us have gone down under the deep—the waters of chaos have swirled around our lives and sometimes we feel like we are being sucked under. The new beginning; the fresh breath of life, the connectedness of our own lives to something greater that calls us into community is needed.

Maybe something about Rabbi Liebermann's story strikes home for you, as it does for me. There are times when I think that I "should have been" any number of finished people by now. I "would have done" a whole lot of things I wanted to do, I "could have" accomplished so much more than I have. Why wasn't I as daring and prophetic as William Sloane Coffin? Why couldn't I write with the talent and humor of Garrison Keillor? Why, when I feel so much for the people around me, do I want to protect myself with a layer of formality?

I am feeling free to reveal this, because I know from being a pastor that I am not alone. What are your, "Woulda, shoulda, coulda's"? Who do you fall so short of being, that it gives you the right not to be the most real Dave or Bill, or the most authentic Susan or Mary, or the most open (fill in your name) that you were born to be?

Maybe if you started earlier, worked harder, matured faster. Maybe if you hadn't worn those dorky glasses or the button-down shirts in school, and just stayed away from the Chess Club—it is social suicide. Maybe if you made more family time, feared less and ventured more? Nevertheless, here we are standing in a new year, hearing a story of new beginnings—of order coming out of chaos and the knowledge of belonging and connectedness in the story of this baptism.

Parenthetically, it should be noted that Jesus had neither a Catholic nor an Evangelical baptism. It was neither Mainline Protestant nor Mormon. It occurred away from any religious institution and was performed by a non-ordained, ascetic Jew; a wild-man named John, who baptized without benefit of any denominational, hierarchical or recognized authority, not *even* an on-line ordination certificate from the Church of Universal Life. He felt called. He believed in his own authentic voice as a man who called people to stop, turn around, look at where they were in their lives, and make a change in a new direction.

Perhaps this is what is meant by the "baptism of repentance" that John speaks of; a desire to wash off the mud that is sticking to you. Make a clean start. To know that when you do go down into the deep, you *will* come back up again, changed, but stronger. And to stop, turn around, look where you are and make the change you need to make is a healthy thing to do. It is not a sign of deficiency, but rather an indication of strength leading to greater authenticity and self-knowledge, and more importantly, a knowledge that we are all connected in spirit to the ground of all being called, "God" that holds us together with the breath of life.

God surprised the rabbi not by asking him why he hadn't achieved the status of the heroes of old, but by simply asking him why he hadn't been Rabbi Liebermann. You possess right now the only clay you will ever have that can be fashioned into being the most gracious and courageous gift you can offer the world. That is your calling, in your baptism. "You are my daughter, Laura, Debby, Catherine...my beloved...You are my son, Dean, Larry, Ken...my beloved...You are my daughters and sons in whom I am well pleased." AMEN.

Sermon Resources

- 1) Al Franken, "I'm Good Enough, I'm Smart Enough, and Doggone It, People Like Me!: Daily Affirmations by Stuart Smalley"
- 2) Sue Monk Kidd, "Firstlight: The Early Inspirational Writings," p. 176.

Scripture for Sunday, January 11, 2009 Epiphany 2B

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.

Mark 1:4-11

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 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. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 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. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." 9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 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. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am pleased."