

**The Feast Day of the Baptism of the Lord  
(also called the First Sunday after Epiphany or the First Sunday in Ordinary Time)  
Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Mark 1:4-11; Acts 19:1-7**

The four scripture lessons for the First Sunday after Epiphany all deal with new beginnings, and especially with God's actions to create a new world order.

**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" (Genesis 1:1-5).

In the first creation story (Genesis 1), God creates the world in six days and rests on the seventh, thereby establishing a day of Sabbath rest and the entire concept of the sabbatical after having brought order out of chaos. The first five verses of Genesis 1 recite for us God's work on the first of these six days of creation.

When scripture deals with the creative work of God, it stresses that God created the universe *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) (cf. John 1:3; Heb. 11:3; II Peter 3:5). But in the first verses of Genesis 1, the emphasis falls on God's progressive ordering of the world, not out of nothing, but out of formlessness, chaos and emptiness.

The first verse of the Bible can be translated "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (KJV, RSV). But it can also be translated with equal legitimacy, "In the beginning *when* God created the heavens and the earth" (NRSV, NJPS). Whatever way the translator wishes to translate this verse, it is describing creation as a "soup" of chaos and darkness, with no form, purpose or order to it. The six-day work of creation undertaken by God described in Genesis 1, then, is that of God bringing order and restraint out of chaos (Psalm 104:5-9). Creation is thus understood as ordering, as imposing a design on formlessness and chaos.

This scripture then goes on to describe God as hovering or brooding over this chaos, like an immense eagle covering the chaos with its outstretched wings and, step-by-step, making this chaos into a habitation for human beings. That work of creation occurs in six steps, each step following exactly the same pattern, as follows:

- |                                     |                       |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| ? Creation occurs through the word: | "God said"            |
| ? A command is issued from God:     | "Let there be . . . " |
| ? What was commanded happens:       | "And it was so".      |
| ? An evaluation occurs:             | "It was good."        |
| ? A chronology is stated:           | "The first day".      |

This scripture lesson records only the creation that occurs on the first day. The primordial "soup" of chaos is lightless and landless. It is unordered and unfilled. God thus speaks to it, "Let there be light", light is created and that light separates itself from the brooding darkness.

“And God saw that the light was good”. “And there was evening and there was morning, the first day!”

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” St. John declares (John 1:1). The Word was God. It is the word of God that speaks the universe, the earth, and all its creatures into being. What is presented in the First Creation Story is a recital of the process of creation that bears amazing correlation with the discoveries of science of the order by which the universe, the earth and all that lives upon it were formed.<sup>1</sup> That becomes truly amazing when one realizes that this creation story was written more than 3,000 years ago.

But what is unique about the Creation Story is that it concentrates not upon the process but the Actor. God spoke the creative instruction (“Let there be light”). And then it happened. The text doesn’t tell us how it happened. It simply states that it happened. The point is that the author of the First Creation Story tells us that God spoke the word – God ordered the creation – and it was so! And because it was so, it was deemed “good”! Creation didn’t occur by happenstance, but by the acted-out Word of God. The universe, the solar system, the earth, all life upon the earth is all God-breathed. “The spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” (1:2). “And God saw that it was good!”

Essentially, what the first chapter of Genesis presents to the reader is the reality that the work of God is the work of creating order out of chaos, habitation out of formlessness. God is at work ordering a new world so that all creation will praise Him and will share in the world God created as God intended it to be – humanity living in relationship with God and each other, acting justly in public life and perceiving all wealth as a gift continuously being given by the creative God to guarantee that there are no poor. Thus, from its very origins, the biblical message is one of God always at work creating the world and shaping humanity into his image. That is the “theophany” or “manifestation” that God would bring upon this world that he chose, with his word, to create.

**Psalm 29** is also built around the metaphor of “and God said and it was so” of Genesis 1. In this case, Psalm 29 describes God in the midst of a mighty storm, using the storm’s characteristics as a way of demonstrating the very character of God.

Seven times in this psalm, its author declares “the voice of the Lord” and then an action that occurs out of that word spoken. Thus, the psalmist calls the people to worship God and then describes why they should worship God.

“Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name; worship the Lord in holy splendor” (vss. 1-2). But why should heavenly hosts and the people of God worship God and stand in awe before him? The Psalmist tells us.

---

<sup>1</sup> E.g., <http://cset10.physUtk.edu/astr162/lect/cosmology/hotbb.htm>; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BigBang>; Lee Smolin, *The Life of the Cosmos* (NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), Freeman J. Dyson, *A Many Colored Glass* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2007); particularly the research done on the evolution of the universe from radiation to matter.

“The voice of the Lord is over the waters” (vs. 3a), “the voice of the Lord is powerful” (vs. 4a), “the voice of the Lord is full of majesty” (vs. 4b), “the voice of the Lord breaks the cedars” (vs. 5a), “the voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire” (vs. 7), “the voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness” (vs. 8a), “the voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl and strips the forest bare” (vs. 9a).

The Psalmist is using a mighty storm as a vehicle for describing the creative and destructive power of Yahweh. He begins by describing the majesty and awe-inspiring nature of the storm as descriptive of the awe-inspiring nature of God. But he then goes on to examine the profound power of the storm and the God who controls and creates that storm to both create and destroy. The storm shakes and tears apart trees, it rattles the earth and even seems to cause earthquakes, its lightning sets fires, its thunder shakes the wilderness, the wind strips the leaves off the trees until they are bare. Seeing such power at work, “God’s people all say, ‘Glory’”!

The power of the storm is simply a very minor manifestation of the power of Israel’s God who, in reality, has the capacity to create an entire world and even a universe out of chaos. This is the God whom we worship, and this is the God with whom we must deal. Therefore, what can we say in the face of such power but to declare, “The Lord sits enthroned upon the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king forever. May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with shalom” (vss. 10-11)!

**Mark 1:4-11** is Mark’s report on the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus’ response to that ministry in receiving baptism at his hand. John came “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (1:4b), and “the people of Jerusalem” flocked to him, “confessing their sins” and being “baptized by him in the river Jordan” (1:5).

Mark tells us that the “people” (that is, the common folk) responded very positively and even enthusiastically to John’s message and person. But the response of Israel’s religious, political and economic establishment was quite different.

The question that the text begs us to ask is “Why did the leaders of Israel initially hold John the Baptist in such suspicion and eventually act to eliminate him? What possible threat could this preacher pose to them?” From Mark’s apparent description of John and his message, John was a strange and rather nonconformist preacher who called the people to repentance and baptized the people as a symbol of such repentance. What harm was there in that? Why should calling the people to repentance garner such violent reaction from Israel’s religious and political leaders? Could John have been preaching a repentance that in some way threatened their power?

Mark does not answer that question directly, but Matthew and Luke do. Matthew tells us that when John saw Pharisees and Sadducees coming to hear him, he called them a “brood of vipers”, criticized them for calling Abraham their spiritual progenitor and declared that the religious and political system they had built would be brought down (Mt. 3:7-10). Luke goes even further, not only criticizing Israel’s leaders the same way Matthew has John attack them (Lk. 3:7-9), but also calling on the wealthy, tax collectors and the military to practice Jubilee principles of equitably

distributing their wealth and working to eliminate poverty (3:10-14) – thus implying that they are instead practicing an economics of exploitation, a politics of oppression and a religion of control.

Mark is not as transparent as either Matthew or Luke. But in his subtle way, he does demonstrate to us the critical and threatening nature to the establishment of John's person and ministry. Mark first quotes Isaiah the prophet (Mark 1:2, quoting Isa. 40:3) but also conflating Malachi 3:1 and Exodus 23:20 in it, indicating that John is the messenger of the Lord sent ahead of the Messiah "who will prepare (the) way (for him)". He then takes pains to describe John as "clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist and he ate locusts and wild honey", a clear reference to the dress and lifestyle for which Elijah was famous (II Kings 1:8). That the leaders of Israel perceived John as Elijah returned to life is stated quite clearly in Mark 6:14-29. This insight then begs the question, "Who was Elijah and what was there about the man that would cause political and religious leaders to fear him as an enemy?"

Elijah was responsible for the toppling of both the religious (I Kings 18:20-40) and the political-economic (I Kings 22:29-46) establishments of Israel. Under his leadership in 869-843 BCE, this wild prophet discredited Israel's reigning religious power (the priests of Ba'al) and organized the people to kill all 450 of them (18:40). He constantly opposed King Ahab and thwarted his efforts to rule Israel as an oriental despot rather than under the authority of Yahweh. This he did to such an extent that when Elijah appeared before Ahab to publicly rebuke him, Ahab declared, "Have you found me, O my enemy (21:20)?" Elijah answered, "I have found you. Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of Yahweh, I will bring disaster on you" (21:20). Finally, Elijah declared to Ahab that he would be overthrown in a coup and killed, and his dynasty would soon follow. Elijah's successor, Elisha, completed Elijah's work of opposition against the crown by selecting Jehu to overthrow the last of Ahab's dynasty, anointed Jehu to this task, and the last of Ahab's descendants was killed in battle (II Kings. 9:1-26). As conservers of an Israel faithful to Yahweh, Elijah and Elisha were political revolutionaries!

This was what the religious and political leaders of Israel feared in John the Baptist. His very likening to Elijah, along with his announcing the coming of a new political and religious leader of Israel – the Messiah – was threatening the establishment with the repeating of the history of Israel in 869-843 BCE.

What, then, was the "sin" of which the people of Israel were repenting, when they were baptized by John? They were not repenting of the naughty little things they did, because the rituals of the Temple provided that cleansing. They were repenting of following the political-economic and religious establishments of their day, of allowing the systems to oppress, exploit and control them *simply by acquiescing to them*. The sin of the people was not in the great wrong that they had done (for they were more sinned-against than sinning), but it was their unthinking acceptance of the systems that scripture showed was against God's intentions for humanity. The people had been co-opted by the systems, and their sin lay in their willingness to be so co-opted!

That, in turn, brings us to Jesus and his baptism by John. That baptism was obviously a climactic moment for Jesus, not simply a ritual through which he went. It was an emotional experience so deep that Jesus could hear God speak to him and had such a powerful impact upon him that it

gave him his sense of call and drove him out into the desert to be tempted with illegitimate ways to accomplish that call (1:12-13; cf. Matt. 4:1-11, Luke 4:1-13).

I would suggest that what happened to Jesus at his baptism was that for Jesus the act of his baptism was the act that ended even the slightest hint of participation in the structure and values of a Jewish society that had become so corrupted that it had now become a politically oppressive, economically exploitive and religiously dominating system that was the exact opposite of God's intentions for humanity under the Mosaic covenant. Israel had turned its back on the liberating God of Moses and Elijah, even though it surrounded itself with the veneer of Godly worship. It was in his baptism that Jesus turned his back on participating in such a world. From now on, he was committed to the transformation of Israel into the nation God had called it to be – not by cooperating with the systems nor in revolting against them, but in offering a third way – the way of building a people of relational power transformed by God's intervention through Christ into the people God wanted them to be.<sup>2</sup> A new creation – a new world order has just been birthed at Jesus' baptism!

Mark's account then ends, "And just as (Jesus) 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" (1:10-11)." Jesus receives God's affirmation of the decision he has just made!

According to Mark, only Jesus hears these words and sees the descending dove. Those around him are oblivious to the significance of what is going on in the baptism of this Jewish peasant. But God has just confirmed to Jesus the rightness of the decision he has just made. He is no longer Jesus ben Joseph, carpenter of Nazareth. He is now "Jesus the Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1) – the Messiah or "anointed one" of Israel, the "Son of God". In Mark's generation, the term "Son of God" was a technical term, a Hellenistic title used to describe a "divine man" or a person of special "divine" power, especially used for a ruler who was so wise in his judgment and decisions that his voice could be perceived only as that of a god and not of a man (cf. Acts 12:20-23).<sup>3</sup>

Thus, God is telling Jesus in this revelation following his baptism that he is the one chosen by God to return Israel (and even the world) to society as God intended it to be – a people and its institutions living in political justice, in practicing an economy so sharing wealth that poverty is eliminated, and – most of all -- a people living in loving relationship with God and with each other. He is Messiah. He is the "divine man" whom God has called. But most of all, he is "the Beloved" – the one particularly loved by God who, in his loving of humanity and each person, will demonstrate to them how God also loves them.

---

<sup>2</sup> For a similar interpretation, see Ched Myers, *Binding The Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1988), pp. 127-130; Gilbert Bilezikian, *The Liberated Gospel: A Comparison of the Gospel of Mark and Greek Tragedy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1977), p. 122; H. Waetjen, *The Construction of the Way into a Reordering of Power: An Inquiry into the Generic Conception of the Gospel According to Mark* (San Anselmo, CA: San Francisco Theological Seminary, doctoral dissertation, 1982), pp. 6f.

<sup>3</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man* (op. cit.), pp. 122-124.

Thus, in his baptism, Jesus is both assured by God that he is on the right course, and is confirmed by God as his beloved one who will create a “nation” of people who love one another, build a society centered in love, and are therefore the beloved ones, as well. *In Jesus, God’s new world order has begun!*

**Acts 19:1-7** tells the story of Paul’s arrival in Ephesus where he finds a small Christian community that has experienced “the baptism of John”, but knows nothing about the Holy Spirit. They were likely the disciples of “a Jew named Apollos” who “taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John” (Acts 18:24, 25).

On hearing that they knew nothing about being baptized in Jesus’ name, Paul said to them, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus” (19:4). So these disciples of Apollos immediately desired this baptism, were so baptized in the name of Jesus, and immediately were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Johannes Munck helps to make sense out of this strange story by pointing out, “In Ephesus as well as in other places where no thorough missionary work had yet been performed, one found people affected by Christianity and called disciples but who revealed severe shortcomings with regard to their understanding of Christian doctrine.”<sup>4</sup> Consequently, Paul explains to them the nature of John’s vocation – that it was to proclaim repentance and that baptism was used as an act that symbolized people’s repentance. But John’s baptism had been superseded by baptism in Jesus’ name that resulted in the gift of the Holy Spirit. The receptivity and eagerness of these poorly informed believers was revealed in their immediate request to receive baptism in the name of Jesus. When they received it, they exhibited the coming of the Holy Spirit into their lives by speaking in tongues and through prophesying.

What is important in this passage is the openness and receptivity of these followers of both John and Jesus. Conceivably, they could have become defensive and resistant to Paul. Instead, they quickly realized the incompleteness of their experience of faith and responded to Paul’s invitation to be baptized in Jesus’ name. The result of such receptivity and openness on their part was the indwelling of the Holy Spirit manifested in their lives. Thus, they experienced an epiphany – a manifestation of God in a new way. Through that epiphany, those disciples received a new way to understand God’s work in the world (and thus, a new world order) because they understand that God is always at work in our lives, leading us into the new!

(Cycle B Epiphanytide 1.doc)

---

<sup>4</sup> Johannes Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), p. 188.