

## Epiphany II – January 11, 2015

Genesis 1:1-5

Psalms 29

Acts 19:1-8

Mark 1:4-11

### God's Favorite

*A sermon preached by The Rev. Dianne Andrews at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Port Townsend, WA.*



*"Rivers of living water are to be poured out over the whole world, to ensure that people, like fishes caught in a net, can be restored to wholeness." - Hildegard of Bingen*

In the ancient world it was understood that something was not real until it was spoken into being. In today's lessons from Genesis God speaks creation into being as we hear "darkness covered the face of the deep... and wind from God swept over the face of the waters... Then God said, "Let there be light." ... God spoke light... and light came into being and was separated from the darkness... That is how our ancient story begins... and notice that water was present before the first act of creation...

Once upon a time... there were no books, there was no writing, there were no pens or paper. The earliest forms of writing were on clay tablets into which ancient letters were made by pressing sharpened sticks into wet mud that was then baked. The clay tablets recorded trade and business transactions. Before the time of writing there were stories told around a crackling campfire at night. Little children learned how they fit into the world by hearing these stories told by elders... elders who themselves first heard the stories of their people as little children... and who grew up knowing that they were part of a grand story that connected them with the twinkling lights in the sky and the great waters that flowed around them... waters that teemed with life... and that quenched their thirst... and in which they splashed and played... The story of each child, each adult, and each elder was interwoven into the larger tapestry of the ancient community... a tapestry with a wide variety colors and textures... a tapestry of story containing shimmering threads slipping under and over... and in and around... other threads, even the coarsest and prickly of fibers... and in the tapestry there was contrast, variety, and rich texture... a tapestry of community that grew and changed with the birth of each new baby.

Once upon a time there were no telescopes, no artificial lights, no way to examine and explore as we do in our time. In those days the people learned about their world through the information they gleaned from their senses. They enjoyed fragrant scent of flowers and recoiled from the stench of rotting meat. They tasted both the sweet and the bitter. They touched soft fur and bled from the prick of a

thorn. They heard, with their ears, the sounds of babbling brooks and bird songs. The people learned about their world from what they could see, smell, touch, taste and hear with their own senses... no amplification... no electronic filtering... And in those days the experience of being human, was understood by listening to and re-telling colorful stories from the heart of the community.... stories that could not be proven or disproven... stories passed down from generation to generation. In the hearing of these stories the people could feel, deep down, that they were part a grand story. It was good to know that each and every person belonged to God, had a place in the natural world, and are members of a family, a tribe, a community that lived into its story.

God gave the people imaginations that helped them make sense of their place in creation. The ancient people's concept of the great creation was different from ours. In those days they understood the earth on which they stood to be a flat disk containing soil and rocks and waterways, plants, and animals and forests. Above the disk that was the earth was a dome that was called "the firmament." The dome, the firmament, separated the disk of the earth from the great body of water that surrounded the earth above. Like a ceiling, the firmament made room, for the sky between the earth and the waters in the heavens. Beyond the waters above was the heaven of heavens.

Because the ancient people knew that water fell from the sky and that lights twinkled in the heavens at night, they surmised that the firmament, the dome, was sprinkled with little openings that allowed rain to fall into the sky from the waters above and down to earth. So, too, those little openings in the dome allowed the light of the highest heavens to shine through to earth lighting up the darkest night sky. The ancient people... our ancestors felt at home in this understanding of the creation of which they were a part. Down through the centuries the stories were told and retold... and through the generations new stories were added to the great tapestry of the people's heritage.

Today, in our Gospel from Mark, we have another story of water. We have four Gospels in our New Testament. And remember that the word "gospel" literally means Good News! The story of Jesus' birth was told in the Gospel according to Luke. The story of the wise men coming to bring gifts to the child was told in the gospel according to Matthew. The great cosmic introduction, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" is given to us in the Gospel according to John. In John's gospel God utters the "Word" which is "Logos" in Greek... and the WORD was spoken into being. God uttered the divine WORD in Jesus who was born flesh and bone and blood like us... to know every experience and challenge of being human... like us. Being fully human and fully God Jesus knew joy, delight, frustration and hurt. He knew what it was like to be a kid, and a teenager, and an adult who saw and felt the injustice and pain of the world. And though each of the four gospels begins differently, only two telling of the birth of Jesus, all four of the them contain the story of Jesus' baptism... the moment of new beginnings when Jesus then moves out into the world to begin the ministry of healing and teaching and reconciliation to which he was born. The story that has been handed down to us of Jesus, walking among us and standing firm in his "yes" to life and "no" to earthly powers that seek to tear down and destroy... eventually leading him to death on the cross... this story allows us to know more fully who God is and what God wants for us... and most especially that we are beloved and we belong.

In today's Gospel from Mark there are no birth stories, or great cosmic statements... we are introduced to John the Baptist and then we are taken immediately at the Jordan River where the great new chapter of the grand story begins as Jesus rises up out of the waters. In Mark's account we are told that Jesus saw the very heavens torn apart... and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. Doves to not

move lightly... they swoop! Then came the words from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Hear the words. God utters them to us yet today. We belong to this story.

Today as we gather in community of God’s own, we are going to welcome Deidrei to new life through the waters of baptism. She is being initiated into our Christian faith, to an ancient story through which God has spoken words of LIFE and wholeness and well-being. Through these waters we are remade with love. It is important to remember that, as one author put it, the baptized life, or any religious faith for that matter, is... “not a storm cellar, or a place to which we can flee from the storms of life. It is a place of calm and strength and support”... in the midst of life’s challenges. It is not an escape. It is the invitation and entrée to live largely.

A leading edge thinker about faith in our times, Brian McClaren, has described “six marks of a true religion,”<sup>1</sup> of religion in the largest sense. He says that a true religion:

- helps us get in touch with ourselves
- helps families – of all kinds – to support the nurture and growth of each member - Even when the family is broken, the community of faith becomes one’s extended family – helping one another to grow from generation to generation
- true religion helps build a sense of community, meaning and identity.. The ancient stories help us to grow in understanding of those connections
- true religion helps us to connect to our future and to relate to people who are not part of our religion
- it helps us to connect with creation – to appreciate what we have been given and to locate ourselves in the scheme of the great cosmos
- true religion helps us to connect with God... a God that we know in our Christian faith in the person of Jesus anointed one, Jesus the Christ

Religion, in its truest sense, is about deep belonging. The word “religion” as we have heard before, coming from the root re-ligare, meaning to retie, and rebind, like ligaments that hold us together as a community that lives into the story of life.

And so we gather to participate in one of the great sacraments of our Christian faith. And so we gather around the font of new life in Christ.

---

<sup>1</sup> YouTube video of Brian McClaren’s “Six Marks of True Religion”:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGHRFwnnmnE>

*Through these waters Deidrei will be baptized into our living faith,  
 the faith of our ancestors  
 passed down to us by apostles, and shepherds, and children, and wise ones,  
 farmers and bakers, ditch diggers and astronauts  
 humans both imperfect and perfectly loved  
 called to journey into wholeness in the light of grace  
 a glistening thread of belonging  
 woven into a tapestry that is the Body of Christ  
 ...now and forever....*

...And if I had thought of it earlier I would have bought the tee-shirt for Deidrei... the one that was spotted in a nursing home draped on the boney frame of a gentlemen shuffling merrily down a hallway. On the front the tee shirt reads: "Jesus loves you!" On the back it announces "But I am his favorite!" Deidre... yes! You are God's favorite, God's beloved... and, yes, we are God's favorite, each one... and together in community, beloved and favored by God each and every day of our lives...

Amen...