

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – In the Beginning – January 10, 2021
Genesis 1:1-5 and Mark 1:4-11

Humans are highly intelligent beings in a lifelong quest for knowledge. We naturally wonder how the earth was formed, how life came to inhabit it, and where meaning and purpose can be found. Today’s first lesson introduces the entirety of Hebrew scripture with the theological conviction that “In the beginning...God.” This is the dawn of God’s story as we know it.

But ours is not the only story, not even in ancient Mesopotamia. The Babylonians, for example, attributed creation to a multiplicity of gods acting in tandem, violently forcing their will on the planet and upon one another.¹ In contrast, the Hebrew version is incredibly tame.

Genesis describes the movement of the wind or breath of God, which sweeps across the face of the deep, unleashing creative power.² This account is peaceable and orderly. Here, God-as-poet speaks life into being through the power of the divine word.³ There is no violence, just a rhythmic pattern in which God speaks and it is

¹ Paul K. Hooker, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 168.

² Hooker, 169.

³ Hooker, 168.

so. God names and it is a day.⁴ This creation is not cursed, but affirmed. God is pleased. It is all very good.

Our second lesson this morning is a continuation of this story. For just as the wind or breath of God sweeps across the waters at the start of creation, so again in Mark's Gospel, the wind or breath of God descends upon the waters of baptism at the start of the new creation. And just as before, God speaks.

“The speech of God clarifies, claims, and confirms the significance of this scene for Jesus: ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’. Jesus is anointed by God, marked for ministry, and sealed in God's life.”⁵ Yet, beloved does not mean safe. He is “destined for a life of love and faithfulness that places him in peril among humankind.”⁶ As in Genesis, here God articulates a new reality and reveals something of the divine character and will.⁷

Even so, Jesus is a curious messenger to present the good news of the in-breaking reign of God. While Matthew and Luke focus on his miraculous birth,

⁴ Hooker, 169.

⁵ John W. Wurster, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 173.

⁶ Sarah S. Henrich, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 180.

⁷ Hooker, 170.

Mark's story begins decades later. The first time that we encounter him is here, as an adult on the move. The text tells us that Jesus was raised in Galilee, on the northern border of Palestine. His home village of Nazareth was apparently so unremarkable that it isn't even documented in ancient sources.⁸ And yet, we still know a great deal about the region where Jesus was born and came of age.

Jesus' homeland was situated among Hellenistic cities with large gentile populations.⁹ The people of Galilee were predominantly poor, geographically cut off from Judea in the south, and generally "regarded with contempt and suspicion" by the Jews living in Judea.¹⁰ How odd to suggest that "this unknown Nazarene villager" might "be the fulfillment of Isaiah's ancient longing."¹¹

Yet, God's priorities often diverge from our own. And repeatedly in scripture, prophetic voices emerge at the margins. Here, that prophetic voice "cries out in the wilderness, from which John comes and into which Jesus is thrown."¹² In the wilderness, Jesus is tested, but not broken. In the wilderness, he is tempted, but not abandoned. Here, in the wilderness, "God's own messengers serve him."¹³

⁸ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Obris, 1991), 128.

⁹ Myers, 128.

¹⁰ Myers, 128.

¹¹ Myers, 128.

¹² Henrich, 179-180.

¹³ Henrich, 180.

This narrative is part of a long history of wilderness experiences. We recall Moses, Elijah, David, the people, John, and Jesus. Soon, we begin to recognize that out there, beyond the bounds of acceptable society, lies a productive place for deep, spiritual reflection. And we ponder the possibility that wilderness wandering might actually be a necessary component of true faithfulness.¹⁴ How strong is the measure of our faith, I wonder, if it has never been tested?

Here, in the wilderness, God speaks. It is curious that only Jesus hears the heavenly voice at the time of his baptism.¹⁵ Yet, it also begins a familiar pattern. Later, following his death, “only a few women hear the voice promising that Jesus has gone ahead of them to Galilee.”¹⁶ In time, we discover that no humans meet the risen Lord within Mark’s Gospel.¹⁷ Instead, we are asked to “trust a knowing narrator and invisible, powerful spirits” who recognize him.¹⁸

Our glimpse of heaven is the beloved, in whom God is well pleased. “Our glimpse of heaven is Jesus, his healings, his besting what would harm us, his life reclaimed from the erstwhile powers of Herod, Rome, and death itself.”¹⁹ Our

¹⁴ Henrich, 180.

¹⁵ Henrich, 180.

¹⁶ Henrich, 180.

¹⁷ Henrich, 180.

¹⁸ Henrich, 180.

¹⁹ Henrich, 180.

glimpse of heaven emerges in the beginning of Jesus ministry, yet also at the end, and at every moment in between.

And in this moment, we encounter baptism as an enduring expression of God's profound love. As Mary Pugh writes, "No matter who we are, we may be baptized. No matter what we do after we are baptized, we are still baptized. God's love does not rub off when we are badly behaved. We may grieve God and disappoint God, but we cannot estrange ourselves from God."²⁰ "Baptism is about love! It is given to the church as a way to express God's love to all people who seek it."²¹

²⁰ Mary N. Pugh, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 182.

²¹ Pugh, 182.