

1st Sunday of Epiphany
Sermon 1.10.21

Genesis 1:1-5

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

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 well pleased.” (275)

The question of who we are has come up a lot this week. In speaking of the riot at the Capitol on Tuesday, Joe Biden said this isn’t who we are as a nation. The next day I heard a lot of people saying that this is indeed who we are as a nation. Radio-hosts of the program *The Breakfast Club* out of Chicago said as much. Two Black men and one Afro-Asian woman, they thought the resentment, rage, and relative safety of the mostly White rioters were testament to who we’ve been from the beginning. Video journalists for the *New York Times* claimed the same, under the headline “Stop Pretending ‘This Is Not Who We Are.’” As for me, I found this one more example of something shocking but not surprising, a response I heard more than any else.

I remember early on our having to pay attention to Donald Trump, him saying that the electorate was so angry. I remember it because I didn’t think we were all that angry an electorate. Frustrated, yes. Disappointed, often. And angry from time to time. But as a state of being...?

Soon enough, though, we started to seem really angry. And it always had me wondering, were we angry and he had recognized something I for one had not, or did he tell us we were angry and so we became, gave us permission to feel and act out something that’s always there but sublimated because it’s ultimately not that useful.

Bald rage is really not that useful, and it's incredibly exhausting, consuming.

See, words don't simply describe reality. They can also create reality, even for those of us who aren't God.

American carnage: that was Trump's line, spoken, as it happens, from the very doorway where the woman was shot for her trying to break in. It was his line, and now is his legacy, a thing he created as much as named.

Mark's version of the baptism of Jesus is a speech-act, perhaps more so than the baptism of Jesus in any of the other gospels.

The baptism itself is something remembered in all four. By this, Jesus' public ministry began, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and even John (though here there are some important differences). With this event, Jesus is prepared and sent, first to the desert where he would be tempted, and then to the sea where he would gather disciples from among the fishermen at work there, and finally to all over the region of Galilee.

For this reason, the season of Epiphany begins every year with our remembering Jesus' baptism. By this, the church is prepared and sent, with a new understanding of what we're to be in the world, with an ever brighter and more enlightened sense of what God is about and what we're to be about—repentance and forgiveness, making disciples to follow in the way for the sake of an ever-widening and embracing circle of the beloved.

Repentance, it's always worth saying, is not just what we tend to think it means. We tend to think repentance means a recognition of our own wrongdoing, an admission even of guilt. We tend to hear the call to repentance as something unnerving, if not menacing. People on street corners wearing sandwich boards exhorting you, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand" aren't there to make you feel good about yourself. So, we assume this is how John the baptizer meant it as well.

And there is that. Repentance is a recognition, an admission, which is an allowing in, which implies an allowing in even of that which we'd prefer not to have in—an awareness of the aspects of ourselves that we regret or find shameful. These are many for all of us, let the hearer understand. We all have aspects of ourselves we regret or find shameful. That's not just you.

But repentance is also, and more so, a recognition of something far grander than our own guilty moments, an admission of things far more awesome than where we fall short, even woefully short. It is an allowance in of the disruptive fact that the kingdom of heaven has come near.

Mark doesn't remember John to have said as much explicitly at his call to baptism—that the kingdom of heaven has come near, that in *Jesus* the kingdom of heaven has come near. Matthew and Luke do, though, and as for Mark, this assertion is central to why Mark pays any attention to Jesus at all—that in him the kingdom of heaven has come near. This is why he matters and is worthy of our attention. This is why he has the effect in the world that he does, that Mark remembers him to have had. Such immediate effect for healing and wholeness, such utter presence of holy power: the Markan understanding of Jesus is very much that in him God's presence is really present, God's realm is urgently manifest.

And it is for this disruptive, upsetting, embracing, urgent truth that we are to repent.

It is as regards this disruptive, upsetting, embracing, urgent truth: we are to allow it in, into our lives, into our hearts and minds and awareness.

The Greek word that gets rendered in English as repentance is *metanoia*, which is all about a sort of knowing, a sort of mindfulness. *-noia* is knowledge, and *meta-* is beyond and before or utterly embracing of. This means that the knowledge which John urges on those whom he would baptize is a sort of grand knowledge, deep knowledge, an approaching and adopting of the mind of God, which is to know God and to know what God knows.

Among the things that God knows are what you have done and what you have left undone, and not just because you've confessed it. No, your confession made you aware of it. God's awareness, though, presupposed that.

Among the things also that God knows are what you've been up against, what you're aiming for, and what hope you have, each of us ourselves and all of us together. There is so much tragedy built into the created order, so much sin with which we'll engage or become entangled, or to which we will become enthralled.

Our acknowledging this allows in at least as much grace.

Repentance is a sort of Pandora's box, but one of blessing, abounding blessing, abounding wisdom and kindness and saving grace and love. The first stuff to come out, once that box is open, is the stuff the sandwich board guy would have you dwell on. That's what makes opening it hard.

The blessing that arrives on Jesus at his baptism can be imagined as the birth of the Christ among us. With this word of God in the spirit, “You are my Son, the Beloved,” we can imagine the enactment of the Word now incarnate. This which Luke imagines as taking place with the annunciation of conception by the Holy Spirit, the angel Gabriel visiting Mary with such a word; this which Matthew imagines as something already occurred when word of it arrived to Joseph in a dream; this which John imagines at the beginning when the word was with God and the word was God, and which manifest in Jesus as the glory of a parent’s beloved child, Mark imagines with this spirited word: “You are my Son, the Beloved.” The spoken word creates something new. The spoken word generates a new reality—in Jesus, now the Christ. This is a speech-act of radical proportion—but it is akin to something that happens every day.

We speak-act our way through life, which is why we must be careful with our words, and some simply must be more careful than others. It is their *duty*. Preachers must be careful. Presidents must be careful, especially if the country over which they preside is itself a speech-act, as ours is. Our country is because the constitution says so—and that’s it. That’s all we’ve got. This is our strength. This is our vulnerability.

There has gathered around Donald Trump a group dynamic that has stripped its members of their individuality, of their sense of reason, of their humanity. Mike Pence is a devout Christian. Apparently, he might have had more in common with Christ by the end of last Wednesday than any of the even most devout would ever actually hope for. That noose was prepared for him—and it was done so because of a tweet, the words of a tweet, 140 characters.

Bad as Wednesday was, it could have been *so much worse*. And might yet be.

A favorite work of art of mine has several creators. James Agee wrote it as a prologue to his magnificent book *A Death in the Family*. Entitled, “Knoxville: Summer 1915,” it begins, “We are talking now of summer evenings in Knoxville, Tennessee in the time that I lived there so successfully disguised to myself as a child.” A prose poem before there was such a thing, this Agee unfurls as elegy to the person he was in his becoming and to the people who held his so becoming, members of his family sketched, rocking in chairs on their porches or lying on blankets on lawns. It would attract the attention of composer Samuel Barber who set it to music for his muse to perform, soprano Leontyne Price whose voice is studied perfection though soaked in soulful expression.

The finale of the over 16-minute piece has as text this: “After a while I’m taken in and put to bed. Sleep, soft smiling, draws me unto her: and those receive me who quietly treat me, as one familiar and well-beloved in that home: but will not, oh, will not, not now, not ever; but will not ever tell me who I am.”

I love this piece—though I don’t wholly agree with this piece. I don’t believe that the people who love us don’t also tell us who we are. I actually think this is a chief function of love—that it forms people and informs people, that it does indeed tell us who we are.

This is a favorite notion of the modern era—that we decide for ourselves who we are, that our being is discovered within us or created of us, rather than conferred unto us or called forth. This favorite notion of the modern era is, I’m learning, a legacy of John Locke among us. The book Tobias gave me for Christmas is teaching me this. Locke of the 17th century felt himself as autonomous and utterly buffered in the world. He was self-made, as all true men are and ought to be.

As for how he knew this, his own reason told him—reason, the sense that is chief of all modes of thinking.

To be honest, I’ve always felt bruised by **this mode of being**. I just didn’t know who to hold responsible for it, or even how to articulate it. I’ve always felt a little resentful that I was not to feel others so closely. In high school, I kept being told I was too sensitive, hypersensitive. My thought response was always, no, you’re mean. That I was affected by others: that didn’t feel weak for me to be, it felt true for us all.

This book from Tobes, such a gift to me, points out the obvious, that there is no such thing as an autonomous human being—autonomous, a word which, please notice, means self-governed or self-claimed. Of course, we have a say in who we are and who we become, but so do others in our lives, and so does life itself. We were conceived in others, sharing and growing in the body of another, born of another, named by another, and claimed over and over again by many, many others. Parents, siblings, spouses, friends, church members, our generation and our place in history: we are none of us self-made, not entirely, maybe not even mostly. So much of who we are is conferred upon us.

We’re blessed if that conferring comes of a loving countenance, each of us a deep and true soul loving looked upon into being, loving called and named into being.

We're in trouble if that conferring comes of cynical tweet

The lullaby I used to sing to Tobias was founded on this belief: "You are Tobias and how we love you. You are Tobias and we love you." Jack had a similar one, though with a borrowed tune: "Jack is lovely, Jack's a joy. He's my beauty baby boy..." I'm no Samuel Barber, and I'm no James Agee. As far as my ever being Leontyne Price, a girl can dream. On this question, though, I think *I'm* right. We *are* told by others who we are. Listen, then, in such naming for the voice of God; listen for the voice of love. As you hear yourself named and claimed, listen for the voice of God who is love, your true name and God's loving claim. It will speak-act you into loving being and gracious becoming. So, listen.

There will other voices, and many of them will lie to you or violate you. There is that. Remember, following Jesus' baptism, the devil awaited him in the desert. He had in mind other names for Jesus: tyrant, overlord, demi-god. Listen, then. Listen for the voice of love, the voice of truth.

There are many these days who have not. There are many, many these days listening only to a voice of a man whose chief aim is to protect his own power, to save his own skin and thus who will allow anything and everything to fall to destruction if it means his power remains intact. And it's a lot of power, allowing his protection of it to be frightening indeed.

I don't know what can be done about that; I don't know what the likes of us can do about it. And I don't know how to remedy that deadly thrall under which many of our countrymen and woman have fallen—except to pray, to pray for the arrival of the Holy Spirit amidst so much that is unholy in spirit.

We will see in Mark, this gospel narrative which we'll follow this year, what it looks like when the Holy Spirit arrives—Jesus, so full of the Holy Spirit, then entering a place, thus bringing healing and wholeness and restoration, thus setting unholiness to fight. It's not a battle. It's an arrival, and it wakes all from their thrall, wakes them to clarity, commissioning, and good purpose.

So, let us pray.

Thanks be to God.