

1 Epiphany, Year B, RCL
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Genesis 1: 1-5 Psalm 29 Acts 19:1-7 Mark 1:4-11

“When God began to create heaven and earth, and the earth then was welter and waste and darkness over the deep and God’s breath hovering over the waters,

There was water and darkness and God. Water and darkness and God’s breath. Water, we understand, was a place of danger, the unknown, the “deep.” We notice that it is a given that God is there: no formula, no scientific theories, just God, beginning to create.

There is hope in the phrase “when God began to create heaven and earth;” it sounds like God was in the middle of something, and – oh! Decided to create heaven and earth.

There was God, who creates and who brings order (heaven and earth) out of chaos.

I wonder if God knew what was in store when God created humanity? Off course God knew! We battled with God, still battle with one another, when in reality we are still looking for that which Adam and Eve sought, and that the serpent pointed out as a prize: the knowledge of everything, power over everything, especially over one another. That plan did not work for Adam and Eve. It did not work for Cain and Abel. It has not worked for humankind, ever.

God, who gives us every gift, sent us Jesus. The gospel writer Mark wants us to know “immediately” (Mark’s most-used word in his gospel) who Jesus is for us, and so he writes:

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God.”

Right there it is again – a beginning. God is there, and now, God’s son. Genesis 1 shows us the beginning of everything. Mark 1 shows us a new beginning, of everything, in baptism. Jesus is baptized from the context of a beginning – the beginning of Jesus’ new life, and through our own baptisms, our new beginning of everything in our lives.

We notice what happens. Jesus goes down into the deep, the living waters of the Jordan river. What we do not see but know in that immersion – in all of our baptismal beginnings, is that when we drown in the waters of baptism we give up our old life. Jesus gave up his individuality in order to become his new life. When we drown in the waters of baptism, we give up our individuality to become the body of Christ. Baptism fundamentally changes everything. We become Christ's own, forever!

Mark more about Jesus' baptism. God was there, not in some quiet way, but in the tearing apart of the heavens, of the barrier between heaven and earth. It is the same sound as the Temple curtain tearing in two, as Jesus' distraught cry from the cross. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Heaven and earth are open to each other.

Immediately after his new life, Jesus is thrown into the desert – another place of chaos and fear – and overpowers evil. God calms the waters and the desert, turns chaos into living water through the power of the spirit, tramples the chaos of evil with the power of God and the Holy Spirit. In every chaos, God is there, conquering it.

Where is the chaos in your heart today? Ask God, ever-present, to calm it. Breathe in the breath of God, breath out chaos. Breathe in the Holy Spirit, breathe out the chaos in your soul. Breathe in wellness and peace.

In that very beginning in Genesis, God separated the darkness from the light, not by the sun and the moon – those come on day 4 – but on day 1, the dividing of darkness and light. God speaks light onto the earth by God's being. God said, "Let there be light." And there was light. God speaks light into every darkness. Darkness will not overcome the light.

Settle in now, take a deep breath, and hear about your baptism.

Dear child of God,

We are gathered today for baptism. Our prayer book tells us that baptism is, by water and the Holy Spirit, full entrance into the life of the church. Those words sound much neater than the reality behind them. The life of a Christian is not always easy. "Church" can be very messy, and the world is a very scary place. We will need the light of the Christ candle every day of our lives. We need it now.

We may one day struggle to remember that darkness will never overcome the light of Christ. The world does not support our knowledge of this powerful truth.

Somewhere along the way we will forget what we have promised. We will forget the power of being claimed by God and by Jesus Christ. We will think that we can “do church” and “do Jesus” on our own. It is at such time that it would be good to ask ourselves a very tough question. We heard the question today, in Acts: “Into what, then, were you baptized?” Into what were we baptized? John the baptizer’s baptism? No. John says that he is not worthy to tie the straps on Jesus’ sandals. Into whose baptism? The world’s? No.

It can be really hard to be claimed and held by Jesus. We do weird things like give thanks for being made in God’s image. We show up at church to worship and honor and praise God, and to receive the body and blood of Christ. So fortified, we are sent into a cold, hard world. Christ has never let go of us and never will. It can still be really, really hard to be part of Christ’s body, the church. We get upset about things that don’t matter too much, like the temperature in the building and the location of flowers in the yard. We harbor resentments about things like candles and coffee hour and those things that we’d rather not do. We do worry about how to keep people safe and how to keep our building open. The waters of baptism, of new life, churn to take hold of us again and again and again.

God means for us to work out our faith with one another, with God at the very center. God is. Jesus called us to form together in community, with the Holy Spirit reminding us of her breath of life. Being the body of Christ is who we are. It is what we have promised to God and to one another.

There are many “weird” things that we Christians do other than worship. We show up and visit each other when we go to the hospital. We show up with soup and conversation when we come back home. We pray for one another, which, by the way, changes everything. We even pray for people we don’t know, and for needs we know nothing about; that’s okay, because God knows. We build churches in out of the way places, and then God fills them with disciples. We fill them with ourselves and with one another and with people who don’t know God. We bring people to the opportunity for new life. We might laugh together. Cry. Pull weeds. Just sit with one another when that is what we need. We do none of these things on our own. The waters of baptism are deep within us: death, new life, and the seal of being Christ’s child forever.

And now, we pray.

Open us to your healing power, O God. We entrust ourselves to your care, knowing that you are doing for us and for all the world far better things than we can ask or imagine. With you as our companion and guide, strengthen us to hope for all that is good, and to fear no evil. For your love is stronger than death, and your faithfulness reaches to the heavens; and to you we give glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and to the end of ages. *Amen.*