

GOD DOES IT AGAIN

GENESIS 1:1-5

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My friends we are at the beginning of our new year and what more logical place for us to begin than with the first book of the Bible and the first verse:

“When God began to create the heavens and the earth— the earth was without shape or form, it was dark over the deep sea, and God’s wind swept over the waters— God said, ‘Let there be light.’ And so light appeared. God saw how good the light was. God separated the light from the darkness. God named the light Day and the darkness Night. There was evening and there was morning: the first day.”
(Genesis 1:1-5)

When God began.... That’s what God does—begin. There are religions, scientists and philosophers who believe that the world has always been here. Through the ages, what was always here gradually evolved, by various natural, chemical, physical processes, to what we have now.

But, Israel knew another story about the world, the story that is this Sunday’s poetic scripture. The world has a beginning. It would not be here without a divine creative act. You heard the words *When God began....*

The world as we have it has not always been here. It’s a gift, a creative act of God. The world is not just here, it’s a gift of love. If God were not full of overflowing love, we, the world, wouldn’t be here.

And did you note how God created? By saying the word. All God had to do was to say, *“Light,”* and there was light. *“Birds,”* and there were birds. This peaceful, powerful God just has to speak creation into being and it is.

Our story with God begins only because God begins. If God had not begun, we wouldn’t have had a story. We would not BE.

And did you note? Our scripture from Genesis (“Genesis” is Greek word for “begin”) used to be translated as, *“In the beginning (genesis), God created heaven and earth....”* But translators knew that passage written in Hebrew wasn’t in the past tense. Not, *“God created....”* But *“When God began to create the heavens and the earth....”* Hear the difference?

I remember when Sam Goldman met with me to talk about the possibility of Congregation Beth Jacob giving First United Methodist a gift when we added the addition on to the west side of the building we talked about several possibilities and agreed that it should be something that both congregations found meaning in. We settled on a an art piece made of blown glass. It would be the Burning Bush where Moses was encountered by God and told he was wanted him to go tell the Pharoah to let his people go. In Exodus we find this conversation: ¹³*“But Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?’”* ¹⁴*God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”* ¹⁵*God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’: This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.”*

Sam Goldman reminded me that the words, *“I am who I am”* in the original Hebrew were *“I will be who I will be.”* Do you notice the future leaning of the Hebrew translation?

Genesis opens with the claim that God didn't create the world in some dim, very distant past. God began creating the world in the past and God continues to create today.

Sadly, I think lots of folks believe that God may have created the world, but then, after a Sabbath rest on the seventh day, retired. God created but no longer creates.

No, says Genesis 1 God continues to create.

The pastor and Bible translator, Eugene Peterson, famously said that everything in the church begins with, *"And God said..."* Every insight you receive from a sermon, every fresh beginning in a congregation, each truly new step in your own life begins with the creative words, *"And God said..."*

You may remember just a few weeks ago we read from the Gospel of Mark for our text about the baptism of Christ or, as your Bible probably says, the beginning of Jesus's ministry. Unlike Luke's Gospel, Mark gives us absolutely no background or contextualization of Jesus. Nothing about his parents, family, or hometown. Mark's Gospel just begins with Jesus showing up on the banks of the Jordan to be baptized by John.

And maybe Mark was hoping that we would remember Genesis 1. *"When God began to create the heavens and the earth...."* In Jesus's baptism, God is making a new beginning with humanity. This baptism is the beginning of the good news, gospel. In Jesus Christ, humanity is being given a new beginning we could not give ourselves, a fresh start in our journey with God. God didn't intend our journey to deviate away from God's way, but we did, how often we did. So, God does it again. He begins. The Jordan River, and Jesus's baptism becomes Genesis 1 all over again. Day One.

And *your* baptism? Your baptism, whenever it occurred, began your journey with Christ. I hope the church didn't imply, in your baptism, that this was the end of your journey, its destination, your ticket to eternity. No, when you were baptized it was like Genesis 1 all over again. God was busy making somebody (you, a Disciple, out of nobody.)

And it wasn't like, in your baptism that you were *"one and done,"* fixed and finished. God didn't just create you as a Christian, a disciple of Jesus, in one instant. God made a promise to you. *"I'll continue to create. This is just the beginning. I'll continue working with you and enable you to work with me. I will continue to walk with you and give you the ability to walk with me. The journey, and my creativity, has just begun."* Genesis 1 all over again.

Thank God that God didn't just set the world in motion and then withdraw. Praise be to God for refusing just to set you on the first steps of faith and then lose interest in you. Creation continues. Who knows what God will be able to create in you? The best disciple you can be is still yet to emerge.

The world rejected and crucified Jesus and we thought that was the end. *"There, we're done with that. "No more critical comments and disturbing sermons,"* they must have said.

But the world forgot that God loves to begin things. The stone is rolled away. Crucified Jesus raised from the dead. And the despondent disciples who thought that the story was over ran all the way back to Jerusalem to announce the good news, *"The story between us and God isn't over. It's just beginning!"*

What is forgiveness if not the ability to begin, to start over? When you are forgiven, it's like God says to you, *"I so much enjoyed creating a new world, new life. Now, you try it."*

For many of us the word *"grace"* can best be described as, *"The gift of a new beginning."* Genesis 1 all over again.

Because you know the truth of Genesis 1, I want you to remember that truth whenever in your life you think you have arrived at a dead end, whenever you think the story about you and God is over, when you think your too old, or too lost, or too tired to begin again.

God, the one who began everything that is, loves to begin. Therein is our hope.

In the beginning, the Spirit of God hovered over the waters and brought forth life. In baptism, the Spirit of God hovers over humanity and brings forth the church. Creation, newness, life is a gift of God who loves to bring something out of nothing.

The great heresy of American popular religion is the assertion that *“religion is a private affair.”*

Jesus not only preached, taught, healed, and acted, he formed a community, gathered disciples, brought together the most unlikely of people, made them a family. As Paul said to the faction-ridden church at Corinth, the church is Christ's body, his visible presence here on earth, for better or worse, it is the only form he has chosen to take in this world.

What does that mean? It means that one cannot claim to be *“in Christ”* without being in the *“body of Christ.”* There is no solitary Christian, no way of doing the faith by a home correspondence course in salvation. Nor can you do the faith in the cozy comfort of your living room watching an evangelist do the faith on television. He who does not know the church does not know its Lord and does not know God. And from the very beginning, baptism has been the door that brings us into that community.

Therefore, to understand the Church we must know that it is not the club of the like-minded and the similarly disposed. The church is not the chummy togetherness of people who are socioeconomically alike or persons who gather to nurture one another's self-interest. The church of holy scripture is held together by something more substantial than theological *“pluralism”* or innocuous assertions that *“it doesn't really matter what we believe as long as we're sincere.”* The church is not what we bring to it or what we make out of it, BUT RATHER WHAT GOD, IN BAPTISM AND THROUGH THE CHURCH BRINGS AND MAKES OUT OF US—or more correctly what God is making out of us. If you ever thought that the process of making you a member of any church was that you were converted, baptized made a member of the church and there you sat a perfect person you have not carefully read the scripture. Notice in our scripture readings for this morning that God is continually creating and he is not done with me yet. He is not done with you yet. We have not yet become all that God created us to be.

That leads me to a second thing I would like to call to our attention this morning.

Paul told the bickering Corinthians, *“For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body”* (1 Cor 12:13) and he proclaimed to the Ephesians: *“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all”* (Eph 4:4-6a).

The church's unity is a GIFT - not an achievement. For who could explain how diverse a people as we could come together, except that our togetherness is grace?

To be in the church is to be together in God's family, that strange clan begotten by *“water and the Word.”* Like any family, one cannot really join the family of God. One must be adopted. Joining the church is not simply a matter of joining a voluntary society of religiously inclined people. We do not join the church so much as we are joined into it

In baptism, once God has adopted us as his own, God does not kick us out, even when we disobey. God reaches out. God searches until he finds. God heals our brokenness. Once God has called us in our baptism, once we are adopted, God does not let us go easily.

An illustration of this can be found in the story told by a prison chaplain. He said he has watched as fathers would come, day after day, and call on their jailed sons, only to be sent away because the sons refused to see them. But the fathers kept returning each day, in spite of their refusals, hoping that someday they would receive them.

God is like that - even more so.

That brings us to something else we need to know about the church. And that is that individuals do not bear the responsibility to go out and find Jesus. The church bears the burden and the command to baptize. We are the ones who are to go *“make disciples.”* The baptizers (the church) bear the burden of proclaiming God's love for the world - a blessed burden that calls forth the best we have. What great confidence God has shown in us to give us the mandate to *“make disciples.”* We in the church are simply the ones who have accepted the gift of grace, who in turn, tell of God's gift to others. Baptism not only incorporates us into the church but also reminds the church, again and again, of who we are and what we are supposed to be doing.

All of our Christian education, family devotions, involvement of children in worship, youth ministry, sermons, family night suppers, weddings, funerals, and Lord's Suppers are part of the church's continuing baptismal work. These are all part of the church's gift. That is why children as well as adults must be fully included, fully present, full participants in all of the church's life - especially the church's worship life. After all, how did you learn what it meant to be a part of your human family and to bear its name? How did you learn what it meant to support and to be supported by the family? You learned by being given responsibility in the family, by eating at the family's table, by loving and being loved. So too, in the family of God, we grow by participation and experience. Children learn by doing.

In conversations with other pastors about baptism one shared his experience of being in a congregation where two people were being baptized. One was a man about 30 years old. He had been converted to the faith a short time before and was now being baptized. The other was a young girl who was the child of parents who were active in the church.

First the minister baptized the young girl. After he baptized her, he said to her, *“Mary, we have baptized you and have received you into the church. God loves you and has great plans for your life. But you will need the rest of us to tell you the story, and, from time to time, to remind you who you are, and to keep you in God's family. We are going to specially appoint some of our members to guide you and watch over you as you grow in faith. And all of us promise to adopt you as a sister in Christ.”*

Then the minister baptized the man. After he baptized him, he had him stand before the church and said to him, *“Tom, we have baptized you and have received you into the church. God loves you and has great plans for your life. But you will need the rest of us to tell you the story, and, from time to time, to remind you who you are, and to keep you in God's family. We are going to specially appoint some of our members to guide you and watch over you as you grow in faith. And all of us promise to adopt you as a brother in Christ.”*

The promises of baptism, the burdens placed upon them, the evangelistic word of grace, the loving action of God, the demand for lifelong response are the same for all - no matter what the age. So, at whatever age we enter those graceful waters, we emerge rising from darkness to light, from loneliness to community--FROM CHAOS TO COMMUNITY--as fragile and dependent as a newborn baby, needing the love and warmth of God's human family.

That is what we were talking about in the first part of the sermon. God began creating at the beginning of time and continues to create today. In the beginning God began creating and still does and invites us into the process. God goes with us into this new year creating in our world and still working on us creating a new us—moving us closer to God's image.