

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

B: The Baptism of Our Lord Sunday  
Genesis 1:1-5, Psalm 29, Acts 19:1-7, Mark 1:4-11

14 January 2023  
Salem, Bridgeport

“The Way God Sees Us”

Whenever we read scripture, we must be aware that we are reading it from our own cultural context which is very different from the cultural context in which it was written.

For example, I'd heard Bible stories about the desert or wilderness and about water all my life, but it wasn't until I actually visited Israel and found myself in a desert country where it seemed I was continually craving a drink of water that I began to see why water was such an important part of scripture.

Today, when we read these opening lines of Genesis, we may hear a lyrical, poetic account of creation that is full of order and symmetry, without stopping to consider that our cosmology is very different than the cosmology of ancient Israel.

In the beginning there was just a watery darkness – like that of a womb – and then the Spirit began to sweep through. God spoke light into the darkness and then the next thing God does is to create a dome which carves out empty space between the water above the dome, and the water under it.

Obviously there was water above the dome of the sky because water would leak through in the form of rain; and obviously there was water underneath the earth, because if you dug a deep enough hole, you'd get to the water below.

As for that part in between the waters above and the waters below, God gathered the waters together into seas so that there could be land for plants and animals and humans. Water was a gift but water was also scary, especially in times of storm.

We pick up some of that fear in today's psalm and it's important that we have those images in our minds as we listen to today's gospel.

*The voice of the LORD is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders; the LORD is upon the mighty waters.*

*The voice of the LORD is a powerful voice...a voice of splendor.*

*The voice of the LORD breaks the great cedars of Lebanon, throwing them around so it looks as if they are skipping like a calf or a wild ox.*

*The voice of the LORD bursts forth in lightning flashes ... [and] shakes the wilderness; making oak trees writhe and stripping the forests bare...*

*The Lord sits enthroned above the flood....*

And so when Jesus was coming out of the water and saw the dome of heaven torn apart it would have been a scary scene, and when he heard a voice coming from heaven, it was likely not some kindly calm voice,

but a thundering, mighty, powerful, voice of splendor, bursting forth like lightning, and shaking the wilderness.

These are almost the very first words of Mark's gospel.

They are so familiar to us that they seem tame, but they were anything but.

While Genesis describes creation in one way, the big bang theory describes it in another, a tremendous explosion of space within itself,

that filled all of space with all of the particles of the embryonic universe rushing away from each other.

So it may be helpful to keep that imagery in mind, because what happened at Jesus' baptism was just as monumental. In essence it's the beginning of an entirely new creation.

As in the creation story, the story of Jesus' baptism takes place in water the dome of the Sky created in the beginning is temporarily ripped apart as and the Holy Spirit descends again as at the dawn of creation and God's voice thunders forth speaking a new creation into being.

No matter what happened or didn't happen regarding Jesus' birth,

all 4 gospels agree that it was at his baptism that Jesus was empowered by the Holy Spirit to begin his ministry, empowered in a way that allowed him to teach & preach & heal & perform signs & wonders.

Jesus comes up out of the water, sees the dome of heaven ripped apart, the Spirit enters him, and he hears these words, “*You are my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased*”.

But this story is not merely about what happened to Jesus; THAT was just the beginning. Because as Mark records it, John the Baptist's words immediately prior to Jesus' baptism were these:  
*"I have baptized you with water. But One who is unbelievably more powerful than I is coming.... and he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

This promise was not one of a quiet proper ritual, as the Ephesians found out when Paul visited. When he asked them if they had received the Holy Spirit, they replied that they hadn't even heard of the Holy Spirit, which prompted Paul to ask what kind of baptism had they experienced. When they replied, "*John's baptism*", Paul explained that John's baptism was one of repentance and that John himself had told people that they were to receive the baptism of Jesus. So they got baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus and when Paul laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit entered them and they all started speaking in tongues and prophesying! This allowed them to experience a power that was beyond their control and caused them to act in ways they could not have acted on their own.

So baptism is about receiving the Holy Spirit which empowers us to do things we could not otherwise do. But baptism is also about receiving our Creator's word of approval.

Just this week in Bible study we were looking at Romans 8:29-30 where it says,  
*"For those whom God foreknew God also predestined to be conformed to the image of God's beloved Son, in order that the Son might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom God predestined God also called; and those whom God called God also justified; and those whom God justified God also glorified."*

That means that when we are baptized we are baptized into Christ's family, and so as God said to Jesus, "*You are my beloved Son. With you I am well pleased*", so God says the same thing to us: "*You are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased.*"

And that's where a big question arises.

Of course God was pleased with Jesus.

And whether you believe Jesus was without sin or not,

I think you'd have to agree with me that there is a huge difference between Jesus and us.

Sure, sometimes when I'm feeling particularly good and righteous,

I might be tempted to think that there is not that big a difference between Jesus and me;

and sometimes when you are feeling particularly good and righteous,

you might be tempted to think there's not such a big difference between Jesus and you.

But then think about someone you don't like in the church, someone you don't think acts very Christian, and all of the sudden the difference between that person and Jesus seems huge, right?

But here's the thing:

In baptism, God has said to that person the same thing God said to you and the same thing God said to Jesus,  
*"You are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased."*

But how can that be true?

How can God be pleased with someone who has so obviously sinned and fallen short?

Because in the words of Paul, "*those whom God predestines, God calls, and those whom God calls, God justifies.*" God justifies.

That doesn't mean that God takes our sin lightly.

After, it was our human sin that betrayed and abandoned and tortured and killed Jesus

and it is our human sin that causes us to kill others through war and genocide

and intentional injustice and benign neglect,

and it is our human sin that allows us to exploit the earth, poisoning air and water and soil,

which if unchecked will lead to complete climate collapse.

We sin as individuals and as faith communities and as societies and that is not okay.

And yet God justifies.

It's a difficult thing to explain, but I think that one thing it means

is that God can see us as we are and also as God means for us to be.

So let me close by sharing with you some words that God gave me last April....

*What I See in You, Says God* (© Marjo Anderson, 24 April 2023)  
(for permission to share, email marjoanderson@aol.com)

*God spoke and said to me,*

*“I have a magic ability - the ability of being able to see you in two places at once.*

*All humans exist in two places – well, at least two.*

*Actually you exist in an infinite number of places.*

*But I’m only talking about the two –*

*the place in this physical world where you are as you seem -*

*and the place in the spiritual world where you are as you were designed to be.*

*Mostly you can only see yourself and others as you are in this world,*

*and so you see yourself as others see you – a mixed bag, like you all are.*

*You see other’s strengths & weaknesses, their successes & failures, their hopes & their despairs,*

*just as you see your own.*

*But I have this magical ability*

*that allows me to see YOU in the spiritual - as I designed you, as I created you.*

*And what I see and hear is stunning strength, blinding beauty, & exquisite elegance & eloquence.*

*You move with the calm confidence of a king or queen.*

*You do not age in this world but are forever twenty-seven.*

*In this world you have every gift you need to fulfill every desire in your heart.*

*You are pure promise & potential, and there is no doubt you will be all that you were meant to be.*

*I know that you used to spend a lot of time looking into that other place, dreaming and desiring,*

*but lately you find yourself afraid to look,*

*for your focus is on the differences between worlds,*

*and you fear that the discrepancies between the two*

*have grown so vast that they can never be bridged.*

*You feel time has slipped through your fingers and it may be too late,*

*and so you find yourself scaling back your dreams and expectations.*

*But when I look at you with my divine eyes I see the two of you superimposed on each other*

*and instead of seeing the discrepancies, I see the similarities.*

*And I can see that what looks like a light year away can be traversed in the blink of an eye.*

*There is a shining you waiting for the dim you to step into yourself.*

*There is a young and vibrant you waiting to energize an older, tired you.*

*There is a heart filled with hope and faith and love and excitement and exuberant joy*

*waiting to fill a heart that has been hurt & hardened and that feels lost & alone way too often.*

*I can see both of you and I love both of you, both the you you are and the you you are meant to be.*

*And I am at work reconciling the two of you to each other.*

*Don’t be afraid to look at that incredible, amazing, awesome you that is my stunning masterpiece.*

*And never stop believing that that is the you you are,*

*the you you are becoming, and the you you will one day be.*

*And if you ever can’t see it or believe it, then just ask and I’ll tell you*

*about the most precious and cherished child of mine that you are.”*

*As you live into the light of your baptism,*

*may you grow in the knowledge that you are indeed God’s beloved*

*and may the Spirit continue to reconcile the you you are, with the you you are yet to be. Amen*