

Baptism of Jesus
Palisades Presbyterian Church
January 8, 2006

Scripture Reading: Genesis 1: 1 - 5

Gospel Reading: Mark 1: 4 - 11

Hymns:

220 All People that on Earth Do Dwell

524 Holy Spirit Lord of Love

263 Immortal Invisible

Without Wax
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Baptism. Whether you believe that the world was created in a garden East of Eden some 7,000 years ago -- or extend the timeline to the estimated age of the oldest rocks on the planet – some say about 5 billion years old – you might, either way, feel as I do that creation began -- at some point. And at that point, whether it was as a single cell emerging from some heated then cooling primordial ooze – or from the Divine breath and spittle on dust, you might also, as I do, believe that God is behind it all.

As I read and write more and about Scriptures and some of the ancient documents, I am increasingly aware of how cosmologically-oriented many of the writings are. At first, I thought it was just my own bias to read grand universe-scapes into everything. I think that began as a kid gazing up into the sky at night into the stars – something I still do, at times getting lost behind those with whom I may be out walking. But then, I started to realize that I wasn't the only one that got lost in the wonder and poetry of it all, captured by the mystery beyond. And, I also began to realize that many of the writers in the Bible were struggling with all this "mystery," as well, but that they were much better than I at putting down on "paper" what was indescribable into words.

Through centuries of editing and translations; interpretations and scientific processes – more of the writers and their times have been revealed to us, providing a backdrop to better understand what the conditions of their environments were. However, it seems the further back you go, the more dicey it becomes to approximate anything close to the reality of the times. And, as you travel back even further, the poetry and metaphors dominate, at times producing contradictions that are difficult to resolve,

Genesis embodies all these things that I have referred to, and I think it would be wonderful to just be able to sit down beside the first writers as they recorded such words that have traveled time and space to be here this morning.

Have you ever wondered where it was written? What kind of a room or hut or hovel it was? Did the writer create by day, by night and candle, or both? Was it done in secret or as part of a faith community? Even the greater question, from where did the information come? When it first heard? What was it that stirred the person to pen and papyrus? Where was God and Spirit in the process, as if God or Spirit could ever be removed?

I can get wonderfully lost here. I am not sure why I love the unknown as much as I do. I am aware of one reason, however, and that is that in the Unknown with a capital "U" – in God – is the promise that this life and our history / as a not always kind race and sometimes exceptionally gracious family / somehow it all comes together in a way that does resolve the irresolvable. In short, there are answers in the mystery, and my curiosity along with its promise are powerful invitations to me for entering that space. I know that my faith and my heart is in that belief. As was, we are told, the faith and the heart of the writers of Scripture and the stories they tell.

Genesis writer... somewhere in Genesis there is a verse that talks about the "light brooding on the water" as part of the creation process. That interaction of nature and creation within the Divine could only have been seen by the poet, but is known as true in our own lives once we hear or read the words.

How often have I felt the light brooding upon the turbulent, sometimes dark waters of my own soul? Even if I didn't use those words.

How often have I told myself, whatever it was, "This too shall pass," and how different is that from: "Let the light shine. Let it shine."

Sooner or later, it does pass, the light does get through. The glimmering sheet of light that breaks through the clouds is the same glimmering sheet of light that has often broken through my own clouds. It is. I can't explain that to you well enough to have it make sense, but I understand that parting of the darkness and the rising spirit like the warm currents of air moved by the energy of the sun.

So, let's play with form for a moment and put ourselves in the writer of Genesis' physical presence and rising spirit. Does it make sense that the writer must have had trouble keeping the pen on the paper as they wrote about the magnificence of God's process for creating a world they barely understood?

Macedonians, Egyptians, Babylonians and other civilizations had the magic words to describe and explain such things and they had the powers from Marduk

to Tiamat and more to do it. It was the way in those times to attribute one's surroundings to magic and gods. However the author of Genesis, this author, had no magic words in mind. No, for this author God simply spoke and it was so.

Still, it wasn't easy to write about. In the beginning...

God created heaven and earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.

Chaos. We know there is and was order in chaos, as hard as it might have been to see. And God's Spirit was moving over it, watching, nurturing, stirring and calming – could not the writer have been writing about his or her own soul? Some of us more romantic types who have fallen head over heels in love in their lives know how our entire being can be turned upside-down when a certain someone – somehow enters our life.

Well, here is this author out of the depths of themselves bringing these words to paper and life – and as a sometimes writer – I know, at least for me, that no thoughts get to paper that aren't already somewhere inside of me.

This is not all to say that there aren't some problems with the texts. We have spoken about that before and Genesis is no different. In the first two chapters of Genesis there are not one but two – contradictory - creation stories – the first in which God creates woman and man simultaneously in God's own image; the second when woman is created from one of man's ribs. Two very different stories – maybe from two different pens – but the times were different and the emphasis was not so much on male or female dominance, but on God-dominance – creation by God, however it happens, and continues to happen today – is what it was about. And more...

It was the first baptism – an immersion in the Spirit of God in the form we today know. Would it be any wonder that writing about such things could produce some confusion, proselytizing, and hyperbole?

Yet, there are days when the readings from the lectionary really do connect. Linking the Genesis reading to Mark and the Baptism of Jesus, we get an idea of just how integrated the Old or First Testament writings were in the lives of those described in the New or Second Testament. The technology of the times, to a large degree, was the gathering of folks and retelling of stories. The Old Testament was well-known through the written texts and the narratives being listened to and studied over and over again. Phrases were repeated from the Scriptures, expressions contained references to the Scriptures, events were interpreted as fulfillment of the prophecies. The Scriptures – they were alive and anticipated in the life of the Hebrews and faithful.

So, a reference to Jesus as God's beloved or only begotten son – both had the same meaning in the times. To be beloved was to be the only son. Son of God and Son of Man were interchangeable, and Mark, the first of the gospels to be written (as far as we can tell) was very much in the mindset of Genesis and Isaiah in his seeing Jesus in a supernatural way, communicating through the light that brooded on the waters of the earth, now breaking through the skies onto this one who came from Nazareth and was himself baptized, the one who was greater than John, the one for whom the way was prepared and the good news. He was the good news to all those who suffered in the squalor and slums of first century Rome, and continued to be the good news in the squalor and slums that were to follow – and all else.

Jesus, to Mark, was a cosmic event. The invitation to repentance, that is the metanoia or complete psychic change that was being offered in this Jesus – the savior – was nothing less than supernatural.

And, again, Mark was not recording history but explaining, heralding to his listeners and readers that this was the one upon whom the prophecy was laid; this was the one upon whom the light had fallen from the broken clouds on the day of his baptism; and this was the one who heard in his heart the Words “Thou art my beloved son in whom I am well-pleased...”

We could never really know, but some say that the day Jesus came down to the River Jordan was the day he made the decision to follow the call he had heard in his heart for so long. It was the day that he left the comfort of his home and small village, as comfortable as it was compared to what lay ahead, and made a commitment to follow his faith in the ministry that publicly began with his baptism by John.

On this day that we publicly ordain and install the new officers of the Palisades Presbyterian Church, it seems appropriate that our readings are about the beginnings of universal and spiritual change as seen through the hearts of those called to serve, whether in the writings of the First Testament and creation, the ministry of Jesus, or our work today, following Jesus' teachings and example.

The light and the call survive the eons together and the creation of the world continues through the interaction of the Spirit in our lives and those – all those – around us. It is authentic and sincere, this presence and light... or without wax as the early vendors promised in selling their pottery as not having been previously broken and cosmetically repaired with wax that would melt once it was hung over the fire.

It is a sincere and authentic call we have received as Christians; a call that has survived the fire of the ages and is emblazoned with the light inside, through, and around all of us – brighter than any sun in all the universe.

It may be, and probably is, that our Scriptures do not describe exactly what happened in terms of events, but they are real and authentic in terms of lives people have led on faith journeys, into the unknown Mystery that calls us ever further into the light and its origin.

It's the real deal, without wax. And, for sure, we have work to do and stories to write for those who follow.

Amen.