



“Tamed by the Spirit”

Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:4-11

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Baptism of the Lord

Monday morning, as is my custom, I took a first look at the Scripture Lessons assigned to this Sunday. With thousands of other Ministers, I suspect, I inwardly groaned. Perhaps as you heard the lessons, you groaned too. The creation story and Jesus’ baptism are not material that cause spiritual goose bumps – not material I would choose for a sermon for times like these.

My dilemma requires a brief word of explanation and review. Recently, many Protestant churches have rediscovered ancient resources of the church long ignored. One such resource is the church calendar which organizes the church year around the life of Christ. We just finished the celebrating the seasons of Advent and Christmas.

More often than not, observing the church year includes an ancient organized system of Scripture Lessons called the Common Lectionary. Organized around the Life of Christ as told in the four gospels, the Lectionary works through one gospel each year in a three-year cycle. This year it is Mark’s turn to tell the story of Jesus. Hence today’s Gospel Lesson, early in the church year, is from the first chapter of Mark.

Each Sunday the Gospel Lesson is accompanied by complementary lessons, an Old Testament Lesson, an Epistle Lesson and one of the Psalms. Often preachers and listeners are left scratching their heads wondering what possible connection exists between the readings.

The good news for the church is the rediscovery of the Bible in the churches. Like it or not, we hear large hunks of the Bible every Sunday. If repetition is the mother of learning, and we are formed by the texts to which we attend, and the Bible bears the weight of eternity, then good things are bound to happen – at least over time.

The bad news is that preachers and laypeople are forced to deal with texts that don’t interest us, that resist explanation, or that seem without relevance to our lives here and now. Often I grit my teeth in resistance to the assigned lessons.

Monday morning was such an experience! The creation story from Genesis is filled with peril and controversy. All of us bring a load of preconceived notions or prior experiences to the creation story. We naturally impose modern categories on the

ancient text and, in the process, miss the original intent and the primal power of the text.

Too easily, many modern Christians consign the creation story to the category of meaningless myth. On the other hand there is a vigorous group of conservative Christians who insist that the creation story is literally true and modern science must submit to the biblical story.

And the rest of us, often embarrassed by the pre-scientific character of the old story, just wish it would go away. But it won't go away. The Lectionary, to say nothing of modern Fundamentalism, won't let the creation story disappear. Hence, we need to deal with it.

To begin with, our modern expectations limit the creation story's purpose and power. If we start with our understanding of the world, we immediately misinterpret the text.

We must say at the start, the creation story is not, nor could it be, a scientific account of the origin of the world. When God communicates with the human family, God always speaks in the language and concepts of the people to whom God is speaking. The biblical account of creation, like much of the Bible, borrows generously from the language and concepts of the pre-scientific world in which it was first told.

The point of the story is not to render a literal account of the creation but rather to tell its first hearers – and us – something important about God, about God's world, and about us as part of the creation. Ancient forms available are the vessel in which this theological account is rendered.

And, it needs to be added, it doesn't appear the story was meant to be taken literally back when it was formed. Genesis One has deep poetic character. For example, days one, two and three of creation (ABC) are matched by parallel days four, five and six (ABC). On day one God spoke light into being. Day four, the poetic parallel, is the creation of the sun, moon, and stars to light the world. Obviously something non-literal is going on, and ancient people weren't so stupid that they'd miss it. It's the modern age that demanded literal truth from the Bible.

The creation story bears the marks of liturgical use. Likely it was used in the worship of the people of God. It is a profound confession of faith, the witness of the people of God to the power and beauty of God. Or, to put it another way, the creation story is a profound theological reflection about God, the world, and our place in God's world.

The story begins dramatically. The Hebrew phrase can scarcely be translated. The Hebrew *tohu vobohu* means something like "without form and void." The world was a surging, watery chaos. Wild and destructive, it was a place of relentless disorder.

But the Spirit of God hovered over the deep chaos. God spoke, and the destructive wild was tamed and ordered. The world became a place for life. God's life force, full of beauty, peace and love, prevailed over the destructive powers of the world.

God took the material at hand, the watery, disordered chaos, and made something good and beautiful of it. And in the midst of the safe, life-giving world, God placed the most beloved creation of all – the humans stamped with God's image and ready to live and love God – and the life-giving created order.

But, as we all know, the story continues. The humans in God's good world tend to prefer the disorder and destructive powers still at hand, and we unleashed chaos back into God's good earth.

The first story in the Bible after Eden is a terrible story of violence and murder. In fratricidal rage, Cain killed his brother Abel at the altar of God. The next big story in the Bible is Noah and the great flood, another story usually terribly misinterpreted.

The point of the flood story is repeated twice in case we might miss it – and we do. God looked down at the world and saw how its beauty and order were reverting to chaos. God saw the “violence,” the story says, and regretted creating this good earth for us. Toward the end of the story, the point is repeated: the earth was a violent place standing under the judgment of God.

Humankind laid waste to God's beautiful shalom-filled world. By our own destructive powers, we've made the world into a theatre of war and a vale of sorrows. We even destroy ourselves willingly. We spoil the finest human achievement with our tendency to hatred, violence and greed. Our finest, noblest scientific achievements are, in the same generation, matched by diabolical weapons of mass destruction and a century unmatched in violence in all history.

And so, in God's providence, we Christians believe, laws, governments, family and community structures, and religious institutions are formed to tame the chaos in us and around us. We attempt by these human and spiritual means to slow our instinct to revenge, to temper the hatred that swells within us, to regulate the passions that easily destroy us and those we love.

In it all, we believe, God is at work in the world. God's spirit continues to hover over the chaotic, destructive world taming the wild creation and also creating people and places of beauty, peace and goodness. God does tame those who turn in faith to God asking to be tamed.

The first time I heard the creation story told this way was during orientation week at a large seminary. Everything seemed chaotic and without order. No one knew anyone, we were given mysterious tests without explanation, the faculty seemed a frightening specter, and the administration appeared to be an impenetrable fortress without concern for any of us.

We had chapel in the midst of it all. A professor preached from the creation story. He noted that for us, the world seemed out of control and chaotic. “But,” he continued, “note that God comes out of the chaos and creates order. Fear not,” he told us, “have faith, God will order this confusion and make something beautiful of it – and you!” And God did!

The Christian story begins in that place of chaos and disorder. Jesus' world was oppressive and violent. They lived in territory occupied by a cruel master, Rome. Violence haunted the land. Roman soldiers kept order by violent means. Jews responded with violent subversive rebellion. The rich preyed on the poor, and religion was too often a repressive force, not the liberating, creative power of God.

In that world an eccentric prophet appeared off in the desert imploring God's people – God's people, mind you – to turn from the destructive chaos and be a people and a community regulated by the life force not their own.

His name was John, and he asked people to be baptized as a sign of their turning from themselves to God. He was specific about that turning. He told soldiers to renounce violence and the wealthy to turn from their greed. Be baptized as a sign of your new commitment to God's way with humankind.

Jesus came from Nazareth to be baptized. Not that he needed it. He came to identify with this new creation. He came to begin his mission from God to set the world right, to tame the wild hearts of humans everywhere, to introduce God's life force into the lives of men, women, and children of faith.

At his baptism a strange and wonderful thing happened. As he came up from the water, Jesus saw the heavens tear open and God's Spirit descending on the water and on him. Do you see the parallel to the creation? Then God spoke the creative word as in the beginning: "You are my dearly loved child. Now go in the power of the Spirit and do God's work on earth." And he did – and here we are.

Jesus launched a ministry and created a covenant community of people empowered by the Spirit of God, and with moral capacity to renounce revenge and end the cycle of violence. God's new people are learning to tame the hatred that destroys us, our neighbors, and the world. God calls us to renounce violence and greed for the sake, not just of ourselves, but for the sake of our neighbors and the world. And, of course, for God's sake.

Monday's *New York Times* told a wonderful Christian story. It's about a Rabbi, but it's also a Christian story straight from the lips of Jesus. In 1991 Rabbi Michael Weisser moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, to minister to the small Jewish population in that city.

No sooner did he arrive than he began to receive hate calls on the phone. "Go away, Jew boy," the voice said, "or you'll be sorry you ever moved here. The Ku Klux Klan is watching you, you scum." The first week a packet of hate literature arrived, sent by the KKK.

Rabbi Weisser quickly figured out that the phone threats and the hate mail came from the Grand Dragon of the Klan in Nebraska, Larry Trapp. Trapp was an elderly and disabled man whose home was filled with weapons, Nazi insignia, and hate literature. Trapp later said he was trying to make Nebraska the most hateful place in America.

The Rabbi began calling the Grand Dragon and leaving messages for him. "Larry, there's a lot of love out there. You're missing it. Do you want some?" You talk about turning the other cheek and loving your enemies, this is a prime example.

One day the Grand Dragon answered the phone, and the Rabbi did what his wife suggested he do if Trapp ever answered the phone. He said, "Larry, I know you are disabled and it's difficult for you to get around. Would you like a ride to the grocery store?"

Some months later, Trapp called the Rabbi in the night and said, "I want to get out of what I'm doing, but I don't know how. Can you help me?"

The Rabbi went to the Grand Dragon's house that night, and an odd and wonderful friendship was formed. Trapp renounced the Klan, apologized publically to his victims, and converted to Judaism! Toward the end of his life,

Trapp moved in with the Rabbi and his wife, who became his primary caregivers until he died.

As at the beginning of time God tamed the destructive chaos and something beautiful was formed.

These ancient stories about the creation and Jesus' baptism are stories about us. We live in a dangerous and destructive world, and we live with destructive forces around us and in us. Jesus' baptism and our own reminds us that by baptism God claims us, makes us his own, and declares, "You are my dearly loved child in whom my Spirit lives." God reaches into our world, to us, imparts his Spirit, and declares with creative power, "Peace, be still."

The demons that haunt us can be tamed. The chaotic disorder in and around us can, by faith, be formed into something beautiful. We can, in short, become less of what we are and more of what we should be.

Amen.

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