

*In the Beginning God*

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

January 8, 2012

Whitefish UMC

- † How did you begin? It's a funny question, isn't it? We want more clarification before we answer. Are we talking about literal beginnings? Conception? Birth? The beginning of the most important relationship that defines you? The day you discovered who you truly are? The day you became sober for good?
- † When Tom and I put our young son Carey to bed at night, sometimes he would ask us to tell him about the day he was born, and it was good to remember. One pastor and his co-pastor wife, though, tell the story of putting their four-year-old son to bed and asking him if he wanted to hear again the story of his birth. "No," he said, "I'd rather you tell me about the time I got to go to Target to look at the expensive toys."
- † However we understand it, beginnings are important. They tell us who we are, and often they point to where we are headed in this life.
- † This morning we heard two beginning stories from the Bible. The first one, from Genesis, starts: "In the beginning God." One writer says "That is the whole story in a nutshell. Then comes the verb 'created.' Then comes the object of the verb: 'the heavens and the earth.'"
- † The first thing that happened to the formless earth, which was void and darkness, but which had a 'deep' face is this: The Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

- † When Jesus is later baptized, he has a significant connection back to the deep waters of creation. He goes from being without form to being someone *with* form. He goes back to the original. He has a heaven-opening event. He does what God did in the beginning: He reopens the world.”
- † Remember the scripture we heard on Christmas Eve night from John’s gospel? “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.”
- † Christmas and the time after, especially this day of another beginning for Jesus, is all about how God acts to become real, in-carnate we say. Or as Barbara Brown Taylor says, “God con carne.” Literally God with meat.
- † God creates beauty, wonder, majesty, possibility—out of chaos. Again and again and again. And we marvel at the glory and hopefulness of God’s continuing creation. About its smallness, and about its vastness as well.
- † One of my favorite plays is “Our Town,” by Thornton Wilder. Whitefish Theater Company offered a lovely production just a couple of years ago. Wilder’s play covers the beauty and poignancy of all aspects of creation—from the most mundane to the most cosmic.
- † At the end of Act 1 of “Our Town,” Rebecca Gibbs mentions a letter that a friend got from her minister, addressed to “Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover’s Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God.”
- † How marvelous that against the backdrop of the limitless universe, we are called to a particular moment of beginning—the baptism of Jesus, and thus

to our baptisms as well. Not the only beginning, but a turning or hinge point to be sure.

- † As Lawrence Wood writes in Feasting on the Word, “The beginning is all water: watery deeps, dark and formless, essentially a flood. God calls for light to illuminate this waste. According to Genesis, then, creation is not exactly *ex nihilo* [out of nothing], but it is redemptive.
- † The floods represent anything that threatens to upend, frustrate, and drown life. Waters have their own capricious ways of changing landscapes and can bring terror, for they are random and mindless; in other words, they represent an impersonal, naturalistic creation very different from God’s. In the redemption story of Genesis, God installs a vault called the sky to keep such chaos at bay.”
- † All the more impressive, then, that at baptism we are asked to submit to water hovered over with Spirit. And God calls us by our own names. God’s vastness is made particularly personal in this beginning called baptism.
- † But this isn’t the first time. The Hebrew scriptures tell us that God has had us in mind from the very start of time. In Jeremiah, God tells the young prophet, who doubts his ability to fulfill God’s call on his life: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.” Psalm 139 speaks of God’s foreknowledge of each of us:
  - † For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.  
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Wonderful are your works;  
that I know very well.  
My frame was not hidden from you,

when I was being made in secret,  
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.

In your book were written  
all the days that were formed for me  
when none of them as yet existed.

† All right, you say, but what difference does this make? You may have noticed that this is a particularly hard time of year for some of us.

Christmas comes and goes, and mostly our dreams of a perfect holiday remain unfulfilled. That was certainly the case in our family this year.

† The new year begins, and we wonder what lies ahead. Our feelings mix a cocktail of fear and hope. For those of us in the know—among them pastors, funeral directors, and counselors—this is a time of especially high suicide rates. Tom writes to a man he met on the train a couple of years ago whose new wife left after less than a week of marriage. He wonders how he can go on.

† This week I read an especially poignant essay in the *Christian Century* by Lillian Daniel, an accomplished writer and preacher from Chicago. It is called “Little Boots,” and is the story of a rescue cat who turns out to be blind and who truly walks by faith and not by sight.

† It’s a cute story until the author takes it to a dark place. She and her husband are in their last year of divinity school. She is hugely pregnant with their first child when she learns that the cat has a critical medical condition. They have no money for medical treatments, which may or may not work anyway.

† Lillian Daniel, now this amazingly accomplished woman, became so despondent she couldn’t eat. She stopped bathing and changing her

- clothes. How could she bring a new human being into the world if she couldn't take care of a cat? How could she be a good minister if she couldn't let go of her self-pitying and self-indulgent depression?
- † One day she dragged herself to class and went to chapel services, where a fellow student she didn't really know handed her an envelope full of cash. "Now you can take Little Boots to the vet," she whispered. Her fellow students, none of whom had any money, had taken a collection. I wish I could tell you that Little Boots was saved by that wad of cash, but she wasn't.
  - † Lillian Daniel, however, was saved by God's Spirit breaking through the chaos of her life and reminding her of her baptism and her belovedness. She started eating and bathing as she prepared for motherhood and ministry. Her first child left for college this year.
  - † God's Spirit moved through the community of those students so that Lillian could remember how God was preparing something new and good for her. It probably helped the other students, too. You know how that works—you're given hope when you can be a part of something that is a new beginning for others.
  - † That happened for us—Tom and me, too, this year. God gave us unexpected healing in beloved ones who became as family for us to give us hope.
  - † Remember Thornton Wilder and *Our Town*? Wilder and his brother Amos were raised by devout parents; their grandfather had been a pastor. Baptized in such a family atmosphere, Amos Wilder became a theologian. During WWII, he brought out a volume of poetry called *The Healing of the Waters*, taking the title from 2 Kings 2:21, in which Elisha

heals waters in a bowl. Here is Amos Wilder's "Homage" to those fighting the chaos of his day, fascism:

*These on the crumbling levees match themselves with the infuriate flood.*

*These beneath the waves toil at the primeval sea-walls*

*Whose courses were laid against chaos.*

*These repair the moles erected of old against the ravening deep.*

*These descend where the nethermost piers of history are building.*

*And place their lives if need be at the foundation of all the ages of glory to come.*

- † Here we are, at the start of a new year, a beginning. The struggles and the joy of life surround us like a whirlpool. It is God who brings the healing of the waters. Can you remember it?
- † "In the beginning God." So we remember this beginning that God calls into being. (Remember our baptisms with water and Spirit)

Sources:

Lillian Daniel, "Little Boots," *Christian Century*, Dec. 27, 2011

Lawrence Wood, [Feasting on the Word](#). 2011.

David Lewicki, "As it Was in the Beginning," <http://day1.org>

