

The Baptism of Our Lord (Observed) B 2018

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

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January 14, 2018

Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1: [1-3] 4-11 [12]

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

“In the beginning.” We last read the first page of the Bible last June, on Trinity Sunday. “In the beginning.” The first words of the Bible in English. Words that are a monument in Western culture. Like certain words of Shakespeare, or Abraham Lincoln. “In the beginning.”

Today Dove of Peace observes the Baptism of Our Lord.. The baptism of Jesus. It’s set aside with its own day in the church year. It is adjacent to the Christmas season because some early Christians thought that the baptism of Jesus was really the beginning of the Christian story. And the book in their hands is Mark. Mark – the shortest of the four gospels– begins not with the birth of Jesus but with his baptism. I’ve said that twice already during the Christmas season. But here Mark says it in his own words. And I read you the first sentence, the first verse, because it is one of the most overlooked verses in the Bible. *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* I could teach for a year on that verse. *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* Writing my sermon, I had to note that verse one of Mark is not a sentence, at least not according to my high school English teacher. It is a noun phrase, a headline, a title.

Among other things, the first verse– not sentence– of Mark uses our word of the day: *beginning*. And of course, the Fourth Gospel, John, deliberately imitates today’s reading, Genesis, when John opens his gospel with the words: *In the beginning... was... the... Word.*

Genesis. Mark. John. Three books of the Bible that use “*beginning*” in the very first sentence. (Or noun phrase). Why are beginnings so important?

I have always been a churchgoer. Before I became a pastor, whenever I would visit a new church the pastor would always ask me where I was from. Some of them would ask me about my last name. Was I by chance related to some other Springer who might be a pastor, or a farmer, or a controversial talk show host.

Then I became a pastor myself. And now *I* ask people where they are from and who they are related to. And when I meet a new *pastor* for the first time, she or he will inevitably ask me where I went to seminary. Where are you from? Who’s your family? Who trained you? These are questions we ask because we think that a person’s *beginnings* will tell us something important about them.

Beginnings interpret how things are, who we are. And that can be a limit. In human history, it frequently is a limit. In the United States of America, until the Civil War slavery was legal. That seems incredibly cruel and unjust to us now. But there were a variety of explanations that were used to justify slavery. They all had to do with origins. The origins of Africans, for example. And Christians used their Bibles to explain where black people came from, and why it was their destiny to be treated as less than human, and to be enslaved. And when someone came along and said they disagreed, people would go back to the *origins*, back to the *THE BEGINNING* to explain why.

The week has seven days. Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday. Why are there seven days in a week and not ten? The answer is Genesis chapter one. Genesis says God created the world in six days, and rested on the seventh. And because of that assertion—that description of how it was *IN THE BEGINNING* we have seven days in our week. Not ten, not five.

Why do many people believe that women are subordinate to men? It depends. But some of them will also use Genesis—chapter two and chapter three— as proof that females are weaker than males or more dependent. It's in the structure of the universe. It's the way we were made. That's a very compelling argument. And one that does not allow much room for dissent.

The gospel writers— and Mark is the gospel writer we will be dealing with the most during 2018—the gospel writers therefore want us to see the beginning in a certain way. Because how we view the beginning is going to shape how we live in the present.

Mark's gospel begins and ends with a violent tearing open. In this morning's reading, the heavens are torn open. In the original language, it's a very violent verb. It's not like a door opening. It's tearing. And when we get to Good Friday at the end of March, Mark will tell us that while Jesus was on the cross, dying, the curtain in the temple was torn open using that same violent verb.

What the beginning of Jesus' ministry tells us, according to Mark, is that the boundary between heaven and earth is being opened. A portal is being opened. Actually, is being torn open. Because of the persistent, tenacious love of God for the human race. And that's a potentially happy thought for us. Because it means it means that those other beginnings— those other stories of where we are from are themselves subject to God's review and action. And in the story according to Mark— the beginning of the good news— the beginning, rather than creating boundaries and limits, tears them down.

So on this second Sunday January, when the year is still new, the Baptism of Jesus— the Baptism of Our Lord— signals to us that a new beginning is very possible for us. Perhaps inevitable for us. And that should give anyone hope. God is not finished yet. The first page of the story is not the end of the story. May that potential and that hope be a light for you, as it is for me, in the new year ahead. Amen.