

“Well Pleased”

Baptism of the Lord – 8 January 2011

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

West Walworth: Zion United Methodist Church

Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Prayer.

Beginnings are a beautiful thing; aren’t they?

What makes a grown adult turn into a babbling, teen-like groupie

At the presence of a new born baby?

People coo, and goo, and goo, goo, goo.

They squeeze in close, lean in, and say things like

“Isn’t she adorable?”

Or, “What a handsome little boy!”

Why do we do such things?

Is it because babies have nothing other than potential before them.

They have no past.

They have no regrets, bad habits, or ill-suited acquaintances.

Babies are a blank canvas;

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Parents, families, and friends,
 Together with God –
 We are the palette of future life experience
 loaded with an infinite
 Spectral display of paint.
 God works through us
 To provide life experience
 That will create each new child
 Into a perfect, unique masterpiece.

Beginnings are a beautiful thing; aren't they?
 We heard proclaimed from the earliest Hebrew scripture
 The infamous words
 "In the beginning
 when God created the heavens and the earth."
 God didn't just snap his celestial fingers
 And call into order a perfect finished product.
 God started at the beginning
 And took His time.
 Day by day
 God took deliberate attention to
 Every detail
 As he created and built out the heavens and the earth.
 On the strategic, macro-scale,
 The beauty of creation can be easily charted;
 And it's beautiful symmetry
 Is displayed on Sunday school bulletin boards everywhere.
 Day 1: Creation, light and darkness.
 Day 2: Separation of Sky and Water.
 Day 3: Separation of Water and Land, and the growth of plants.
 Day 4: Day, night, stars.
 Day 5: Living creatures.
 Day 6: Man and woman in Gods image.
 Day 7: Rest.
 At the end of each day,
 God is pleased.
 Elegant, isn't it?
 Sheer elegance.
 But if one looks at creation from a tactical, micro-scale:
 It is sloppy and soupy and messy:
 "A wind from God swept over the face of the waters."
 Imagine the wind

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On the sea
 In the dark
 Pitching and blowing.
 Seeds scattering,
 Fruit trees,
 And all kinds of vegetation.
 It is as if God is mixing all kinds of combinations on
 His celestial palette
 Tossed it on the canvas
 And waited to see what sticks.
 No pre-existing reference,
 No object,
 Nonfigurative:
 Abstract creation at its purist.
 And at the end of the day,
 God is pleased.

Beginnings are a beautiful thing; aren't they?
 Today is Baptism of the Lord.
 What better beginning is the
 Mark of the Christian
 - the Christ follower –
 Than the opening sign and symbol of
 Water cleansing us
 And the Spirit claiming us?
 In a way similar to the narrative of creation
 Baptismal beginnings are beautiful and wondrous
 When viewed from afar;
 When read quickly,
 When celebrated liturgically,
 When tallied denominationally.
 But if we take a closer look at the details
 Baptism is more like the sticky goo of wild, free range seed scattering
 Than it is a beautiful baby dressed in white
 Getting the sprinkle
 Saying the magic words
 And being held aloft
 For an adoring audience of family and friends.

John the Baptist was a freak show
 Even by today's standards.
 He was living in the wilderness

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Dressed in camel's hair and leather belt.
 Eating bugs and honey,
 Making messianic proclamations.
 Crowds were attracted from both the countryside and the cities,
 To see the spectacle that was taking place,
 Including the audacity to baptize beyond his religious authority
 For the repentance of sins.
 It is into this environment
 That Jesus,
 Complete with his blank canvas of future potential,
 Presents himself to be baptized by John.
 How the Spirit, as John had proclaimed, would come was anyone's guess.
 Perhaps Christ's submission to repentance
 Was the invitation the Father needed
 To descent as the Spirit
 And begin to paint a new beginning
 In the life of Jesus.
 Just as in the first creation,
 God takes pleasure in the result of his new creation.
 "You are my Son, the Beloved;
 With you I am well pleased."

Beginnings are a beautiful thing; aren't they?
 Last Sunday we started off the New Year
 With an affirmation of our covenant with God.
 We made bold statements from our Wesleyan tradition
 And those statements of faith
 Were fervently prayed
 Then proclaimed with a wonderful sermon.
 We said it,
 Pastor Lida proclaimed it,
 And God has confirmed it:
 How fitting it was to sing ...

*This is a day of new beginnings,
 time to remember and move on,
 time to believe what love is bringing,
 laying to rest the pain that's gone.*

*For by the life and death of Jesus,
 love's mighty Spirit, now as then,*

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*can make for us a world of difference,
as faith and hope are born again.*

*Then let us, with the Spirit's daring,
step from the past and leave behind
our disappointment, guilt, and grieving,
seeking new paths, and sure to find.*

*Christ is alive, and goes before us
to show and share what love can do.
This is a day of new beginnings;
our God is making all things new^j.*

Dearly beloved,
Today is our day of new beginnings.
God has given to you and me
A brand new
Blank canvas.
There is nothing but potential before us.
We are surrounded by a community
Of family, friends, and loved ones
Who serve as paint on God's palette
Who will be the formative pieces of our new life.
The question that begs to be asked
Is how willing are we to submit to God's creative efforts?
Is our will so strong and inflexible
That we insist upon doing all the painting?
Sometimes that works out;
Sometimes not.
Or
Is it possible to submit
Our will
To the creative will of God?
Knowing full well that,
Though sloppy and messy on one scale,
God is paying every attention to the details of your personal canvas?
With the Spirit's daring,
Can we leave behind the past
And allow ourselves to be God's canvas?
When we,
Like Jesus at the Jordan,
Submit ourselves to God's creative possibilities,

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Yes,
The Spirit does descend.
Yes,
We hear the whisper of God in our ear:
You are my beloved child,
With you
I am well pleased.

Amen.

ⁱ "This Is a Day of New Beginnings" Composed by Carlton Young, text by Brian Wren, copyright by Hope Publishing, No. 383 in the United Methodist Hymnal.