

January 11, 2015 -- Baptism of Christ

“Light from Darkness: Creation and Formation” -- Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 19; Mark 1:1-8

I have always found it a strange and profound thought that the Spirit who moves over the waters in the beginning of Creation is the same Spirit which came upon Jesus at his baptism, and therefore is the same Spirit my baptism acknowledges. By our baptism, which we share with Jesus Christ, we are woven into the entire story of God, from start to finish.

Our readings today tell us there is a direct relationship between the creation of the world and our creation as children of God. And it is our relationship with God that is acknowledged when the waters fall upon our own head at our baptism, whether as an infant or as an adult.

There are two streams moving through our readings today: creation and formation. We can tell the story, and thus our story, from these two perspectives. When we look at our lives from the perspective of Creation we get an expansive, universal sense of things. The very first words in Scripture, in Hebrew, are *beresheet bara Elohim...* “In the beginning, God created...” And then we get the fantastic, beautiful description of God’s artistic majesty through the next days, until God rests on the seventh day.

We live in a beautiful part of the world here, so we get to walk outside and see the vast beauty of God’s creation. How many of you, though, when you see God’s creation also remember, as Psalm 119 says, “*Thy hands have made me and fashioned me*” (Psalms 119:73)? The vastness of God’s creation also includes you and me. This should not be a statement which makes God feel distant from us. Rather, like the writer of Genesis, we should see the personal care God has for each of his created beings. Even in the midst of the very first crisis between humans and God, God cares for his Created beings. Just before Adam and Eve are tossed out of the garden for disobedience and the threat of becoming like God, we read: “*And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them*” (Genesis 3:21).

Jesus tells us as well how personal God’s care is for us, those whom the Lord has created: *Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?*<sup>27</sup>*And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?*<sup>28</sup>*And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin,*<sup>29</sup>*yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.*<sup>30</sup>*But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?* (Matthew 6:26-30).

This is why baptism is so much more than just a ritualized, symbolic act. It is a personal and direct act of creation *in us*. God cares so much for us, personally, that he asks us to represent our welcome into the family of the adopted children of God in the same way Jesus did, so we might have a direct experience of God’s creation, of the Spirit moving over *our* waters, and a direct experience of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. And so we bear witness in Mark’s Gospel to Jesus’ baptism and receive a model for what happens with us in our own baptism. And lest anyone think baptism is merely symbolic and not necessary, I would simply ask then why such a thing might be good enough for Jesus, but not for those who believe in him. In other words, while in our tradition baptism is an external act acknowledging an interior spiritual truth, I



want to express to you that Scripture is making it very clear *something is happening* in the act of baptism. This is why Jesus tells us to *make disciples AND baptize those disciples*.

Paul tells us in 2nd Corinthians: “*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come*” (2 Corinthians 5:17). For us, baptism is where we acknowledge this new life. Everything has changed within us because of Christ, just as everything changes because of God’s act of creation. It is God’s creative act within us, mirroring God’s creative act in Creation itself. This is why Paul is so concerned when he comes upon the Corinthians today. How can it be that a baptism has occurred and yet the baptized have not heard of the Holy Spirit? Paul remedies the situation and notice how they know the Holy Spirit is present - the newly baptized speak in tongues and prophesy.

Before you all panic and think I am going to call us to all speak in tongues and roll on the floor, let me give you another way to think of speaking in tongues. If we have a new life, a new way of being in the world and in the spirit, what we say to one another and to those around us will sound different. Think about where we are in this story. We are in Corinth. Corinth is an isthmus in Greece and back in the day, for centuries, they controlled the overland hauling routes from the north to the south. Also, because of its position in the Gulf, it was a powerful naval center. Controlling both land and water created tremendous power and wealth for the people there. It was a treasure to the Greeks and Romans alike and was therefore the location for the Temple of Apollo.

This is the center of military power, vast wealth and worldly power. Now imagine a group of people talking “Jesus-talk” in this place. Speaking in tongues, it seems to me, is any speech which deconstructs and takes apart the status quo, any speech which speaks for the undeserving, the oppressed, the enslaved. They are those who speak ‘the minority report’, as we mentioned last week. To those in power, any talk against it will sound like tongues, a foreign language. And it is how, at least back in the early church, you knew you were speaking to someone whose life had been made new in Christ.

What does speaking in tongues look like for a Christian today? What does a new creation look like now?

You may have forgotten, but at the beginning I said there were two streams in our readings about Jesus’ baptism today: creation and formation. Our baptism is not just a singular, one time act; it is an act which has an effect throughout time. It changes and forms us throughout our lives. This, also, is in accordance to the way of Creation. The first two verses of Scripture read: “*In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.2And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters*” (Genesis 1:1-2). Did you hear it? It is not just that there was ‘nothing’; it was that what was present was *formless*. God *forms* creation. Like a potter, as Jeremiah says, God forms the world and the universe from the indiscernible and unrecognizable.

The idea of being formed by God is the language of spiritual growth throughout Scripture. The prophets speak of God *forming* Israel and God’s prophets themselves. Just as ‘new creation’ is a part of our baptism, our new life in Christ, so also is our formation. Paul says to the Galatians, at the end of his letter to them, *my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!* (Galatians 4:19). It is a strange way to put it, but Jeremiah’s image of God as a potter fits here. Not only must the individual be formed by God into a “little Christ”, which is Luther’s phrase for the



formation process of the Christian, so also must the community of faith as well. This can take time. Like throwing clay, the process is not always gentle. We are formed in the crucible of this world, this 'veil of tears', as John Calvin calls it, and all of it, if we are willing to accept it, is part of Christ being formed in us.

If we spoke of Jesus' baptism and ours as an individual creation, then we can speak of our formation as a community event. Baptism always happens in the presence of the community of faith, and our formation as followers of Christ can only happen in community. Just as Jesus' baptism is the beginning of his ministry, so also is our baptism the beginning of our life in the community of faith. This community, right here, the one to whom you have covenanted, is where our ministry begins. We are formed as Christians *right here, together*. I asked at the beginning if you think of yourself as created also by God with the same care that God has created the beauty which surrounds us. I ask you now if you believe the community into which Christ has called you is also the community which forms your spiritual life and faith?

Paul puts it this way in 2nd Corinthians: *7But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. 8We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. 11For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh* (2 Corinthians 4:7-11).

This is the formation and effect of hearing the words Jesus hears when he rises up out of the water after his baptism, *You are my beloved son, in whom I am well-pleased*. It is the language of love. If you remember our beloved Corinthians from Acts earlier, not only did they speak in tongues, they also prophesied. Let me give you another way to understand prophecy. If speaking in tongues - deconstructing the language of power and speaking for the oppressed - is a reflection of our new creation in Christ, then prophecy is the reflection of our formation in Christ. Being formed in Christ means being molded in the ethics of God's love. It means we allow the words of baptism - *you are my beloved child, in whom I am well-pleased* - to expand out and encompass every aspect of our lives. It means the Christ ethic of love - love of neighbor, love of enemy, love of creation - incorporate all beings into its scope and concern. (see 1 Corinthians 13)

Prophecy, then, is not only the language of God's love for God's people; it is also the actions toward others. Prophecy calls others into an ethic of love and also demands we enact that ethic in our daily lives. We are thus formed by Christ in community and individually by love. A loving community is a Christian community. Or, to put it more accurately, a prophetic community of Christ-followers is a community which expresses God's love in word and action without boundary or discrimination.

I am a bit of a science junkie and love to read about all sorts of new scientific advancements. The latest involves quantum physics. I pretend to understand a lot of it, and take some solace in the fact that even great minds have little understanding of the strange world of particles. But the most recent discovery is one of the strangest. Very quickly, if you shoot a particle of light at a screen with two slits cut into it, depending on where you are looking the particle will either be a particle or a wave. This is called "particle-wave duality". Another great particle physics idea is called the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. This principle says that if you know a particle's speed, you cannot know its location; and if you



know its location, you cannot know the particle's speed. This is why all of particle physics, and therefore all of reality, is defined by probabilities, not certainty. But I digress. The newest discovery in particle physics is that the wave-particle duality and the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle are actually the same thing. It is the same effect presenting itself in different ways.

I tell you this because it is the same way with God's creation and God's formation of us. It is the same action presented in different ways - God's creative love enacting itself in our lives and in creation. What God creates, God forms; what God is forming, God has created. In the creation of the world is our formation as God's people. In the baptism of Jesus is our baptism. God's creation is where God's love expresses itself and in our lives is where Christ is formed, as Paul says. We know these things are present wherever the oppressed are spoken for and the ethic of God's love is expressing itself, wherever tongues are being spoken and prophecy is happening. This is how the new life of our baptism moves into the world. We share this with Jesus Christ, just as we shared the waters that fell on his head at his baptism. We share it with Corinthians who are being formed in their faith life by the Holy Spirit. And we share it with God in God's creation of all that we see.

So remember well your baptism. If it happened when you were a baby, then remember baptisms you have seen and know you share the same promises, the same new life, the same formation as those whom you have observed. If you remember your baptism, then hold it closely, just as Mother Mary held all the things she was shown close to her heart. For it is right there, at the moment the waters of Christ fell on your head, that God reminded you that God created you and is even now forming you in a prophetic ministry for all, in love and in hope. Amen.