

Baptism of Jesus - Year B

Where did you begin? Where did your story--the story of you--begin?

Is it a birth story? Did you begin the night you were pressed upon by waves of fierce contractions, forcibly evicted from the dark womb to the light of this world?

Or (God forbid we think about this on a Sunday morning!) did you begin in a lusty liaison between your parents, when your own unique mix of DNA was created?

Did your story begin farther back in history? Are you a shoot from a distinguished family tree? Perhaps the part of **you** that is most **you** came from an ancestor's participation in one of history's great migrations: the crossing of a continent, a boat from the islands, or a plane touchdown in the frigid north tundra.

Some of us are not as old as our bodies. Maybe you began the day of the great awakening in your own mind, or the day you met your soul mate and you began living for someone else. Some of you began the day of your divorce, or the day you finally went sober for good.

Beginnings--whatever they are--are important.

Scripture has a story about the beginning and some of us know it by heart. It goes like this:

In the beginning, 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.

What a scene! God sets down in the midst of a formless darkness. God draws near the empty waste -- the *tohu va vohu* – the chaos and confusion. God gazes into the water that would not or could not bear life, and from this face-to-face encounter, a sensible world begins. God orders chaos.

What a beautiful beginning! A Divine Creator who stares down at nothing until there is something beautiful!

Many scholars believe that this story of beginnings in Genesis 1 was written down during the exile of the Israelites in Babylon. What that piece of information tells us is that this is not the oldest story in the Bible, so it must be placed first for some other reason. Every society, every culture has a story of their collective beginning. I think the reason this story is placed first for us is because this kind of beginning story is the kind that we need. It's the most important kind of beginning, a story that shows us God staring down chaos and making beauty. Because when the world feels like chaos, when God seems to us to be nowhere...in that time when we are desperate for a new beginning, we have this story. We have a Creating God who reshapes the chaos into order, even into beauty.

One of the mistakes that most Christians and our culture often make when we read scripture is that we think that the Bible only has one beginning. In fact, it's a collection of books that has dozens of beginnings, maybe hundreds, and many of them echo this same theme. God creates order out of chaos.

That's not a bad way to think about the significance of John the Baptist, who appeared in the wilderness shouting, demanding that people rise up to take responsibility for their lives and for the state of the world. John didn't show up in a world where everything was going

fine. It was a world scarred and disfigured by the oppression of the many by the few, by state-sponsored violence, by greed, by the exploitation by the powerful of the powerless. John showed up there, standing in the waters of the Jordan crying out for the people to see the *tohu va-vohu*, to see the chaos around them and to make a change.

And then Jesus wades in next to him. Can you focus your mind's eye on that moment, see with me that instant there in the rippling, murky, muddy waters of the Jordan, where Jesus stood and looked down and saw his own reflection on the face of the deep? It was creation happening all over again. The wind blew down that river as John lowered Jesus into the water. A voice broke the silence, "You are my child, with you I am well pleased."

And just as before, there was light in the darkness. As it was in the beginning, here God was in the world, wresting order from chaos. This time it was by proclaiming good news to the poor and release to every captive. God was in the world to speak peace to the world's strongest army, to feed the hungry as others hoarded their excess, to restore dignity to all in a world that afforded dignity to some and stripped it from others, to forgive us our sins and free us for love.

When John and Jesus arrived, the earth had yet again become a *tohu va-vohu*; darkness covered the face of the deep. But when God's Spirit moved on the face of the waters, God was making order from chaos through Jesus.

In all the beginnings in Scripture they all contain echoes of the same theme: when the earth was a formless void, God ordered the chaos and made a good creation. When injustice reigned in human life, God gave us Jesus to reorder lives from the inside out. When the earth was dark and its Savior had been laid in a tomb, on the third day he rose again from the dead to show once and for all time that there is no disorder that the love of God cannot

remake, there is no chaos that God's love cannot turn into something beautiful.

When did you begin? When did the Spirit of God hover over the chaos of your life, call you by your name, and deliver you into a good and blessed place?

This week, as it feels we are in the midst of a world of chaos... - with basic human rights and dignities being denied in the most industrialized countries, with rampant racism, sexism, assault in the workplace; with angry hurtful people scaling Capitol Walls, and a disturbing scene of a shipping container outside a morgue in London Ontario - in a world where the sacred is being made profane, we have to renew our understanding as the people of God to help bring order to the chaos. We need to remember our own place in the *tohu-va-vohu* as the face of God in a Chaotic world.

We are invited, lovingly and gracefully, to be part of the remarkable, redeeming, creating work of God. To give our lives to something more challenging than any other kind of work--and in the end, surely more beautiful, true, and enduring than any other kind of work.

So, let us begin. Amen.