

Genesis 1:1-5

Baptism of Christ Sunday

January 7, 2024

When God created the heavens and the earth, She also created a garden and filled with cultivated plants of every kind. To till and keep this garden she created humanity, later dividing them into male and female. It was an idyllic life; the garden provided everything they needed. The only rule was that they stay away from the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge, for eternal life and the knowledge of good and evil separated God from God's creatures.

Scholars believe that this origin story was popular in the time of the United Monarchy under David and Solomon. The underlying message is one of humility before God: an important one when Israel is at the height of its power, everything is in order, and the land provides richly. Kings might be inclined to think that all this prosperity comes from their own power and skill. They might tend to forget that they serve at God's pleasure, and for the sake of God's children.¹

But today we look forward several centuries to the baptism of Christ. As Jesus approaches John, he finds him baptizing a steady stream of people from Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside. John proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness

¹ Richard Boyce, "Genesis 1:1-5, Exegetical Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 221.

of sins. Why is this message of repentance so successful? Maybe because their world seems so unlike the stories of the glorious past. Their homeland does not produce for their benefit, but for that of their Roman overlords. The Temple, the house of God, functions as part of the Roman apparatus. Justice is hard to find, and the country is not ruled for the sake of God's children. So they come to John for baptism, wondering if their problems are the result of their sin. Maybe they know the ways in which they *are* complicit; aware of the ways in which they go along to get along, and wishing things could be different.

Looking at the state of the world today, it feels like something has gone wrong again. I was saying to Jennifer last night that I feel very lucky to live in Canada, in which nobody is raining rockets and bombs down on my home. We live in a democracy; the rulers being elected *by* the people, are most likely to fulfill that Biblical ideal of ruling *for* the people. Yet across the globe, it feels as if democracy is in retreat.

Half the world's population will be voting in elections this year, and Nobel Peace Prize winner Maria Ressa fears that we are about to fall off a cliff: that we may elect enough *illiberal* leaders – not just conservative leaders but leaders opposed the basic principles and mechanisms of democracy – that the balance of power will shift, and democracy will die.²

2 “Half of the world's population will be going to the polls this year. Will democracy survive?” *Day 6*, CBC Radio, January 6, 2024, <https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-14-day-6/clip/16033490-half-worlds-population-going-polls-year.-will-democracy>

The elections begin with Bangladesh, where the Bangladesh Nationalist Party is boycotting the vote because they say it will be neither free nor fair. In Russia of course Vladimir Putin will give himself another term, having murdered or imprisoned any effective opposition. In the United States, the Republican candidate will almost certainly be Donald Trump, a man who has expressed admiration for dictators and disdain for democratic institutions such as an independent media and justice system.

We live in a world where brokenness and sin often threaten to gain the upper hand, where mutual suspicion can crowd out mercy, curiosity, and cooperation. A baptism of repentance from sin can be a powerful gesture in the face of such a system, but how do we understand Jesus, the son of God, submitting to and even seeking such a baptism? Some have suggested that it is a gesture of solidarity with sinners, but there may also be another, more hopeful meaning.

You probably noticed that the Creation story I began by describing is *not* the one we just read in worship. The Garden of Eden story describes a Creation that is orderly from the beginning, in which humans are reminded that they are formed from the dust and so should remain humble. It is a story for the days in which we feel strong and confident.

But the Bible has *two* Creation stories, and the one we read today begins in chaos and darkness. “When God began to create,” it says, “the earth being a formless void with

the wind of God hovering over the waters,” then God said, “let there be light.” Out of darkness, God brings light. From the midst of watery chaos, God brings the orderly division of land and sea. God does not simply snap her fingers and accomplish everything all at once; it takes her six days, and after six days, she needs a rest. This is hard work.

This story took shape not during the United Monarchy when Israel was strong, but along the banks of a foreign river, under a foreign sky: that of Babylon, during the Exile, when Israel was weak. Yet, even there, even in a prison cell, the orderly progression of night and day reminded them that God was still bringing order and light in the midst of darkness and chaos.³

The best translation of this passage is not “When God created,” but rather, “When God began to create.” “God has created and is creating,” says our New Creed: God has never stopped creating. God has never stopped creating, bringing order into our chaos and light into our darkness. And God does this in and from the midst of our chaos. Our chaos, our darkness, is the raw material from which she does this work.

When Jesus of Nazareth, God Incarnate, steps down into the water of the Jordan River, water which recalls that of the Red Sea and of the primordial watery chaos, a “wind from God” blows yet again. Jesus is affirmed as the Messiah, the Son of God, at that moment. At that moment, we are born again from the water into new life and new

³ Boyce, “Genesis,” 221.

hope. As Jesus enters into the water of baptism, God enters into the chaos of our lives. Jesus may take away our sin, but the point of this story is that God is always in the midst of the confusion of life. God is always creating, and this is the source of our hope.

There may be cause for anxiety at the state of the world, but there is also cause for hope. In 2022, despite the rolling back of freedoms in Poland and the apparent continued success of the far-right government, a democratic coalition came together and won the election. At times in the past, such as the 1970s, when it also appeared that the world was heading in an autocratic direction, the tide suddenly reversed in the direction of democracy.

There is always cause for hope, in my life, in your life, in Canada and around the world, for change, for new life, for mercy and goodness and civility, for a society in which all can pursue their dreams and be whom God dreams them to be.

We have this hope, most of all, because of the Epiphany: the revelation that God is incarnate in Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God With Us: Good news, which is for all the people.