

In The Beginning
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January 9, 2000

Genesis 1:1-5
Mark 1:4-11

At the beginning of a new year, we find these words of beginning from the Lectionary... the words of Genesis, the beginning of the world and of creation. The words of Mark, with John announcing Jesus followed by the baptism of Jesus and the beginning of His ministry. Last week we heard the beginning of the Gospel according to John, "In the beginning was the Word..."

And so we enter into this new year with a sense of a clean slate, a fresh start, especially this year of all years with the change from the 1900s to the year 2000. It is fitting at this time of year to remember baptism, the sacrament where we celebrate a new beginning of life.

For Jesus it was the mark of the beginning of his ministry.

And just as he [Jesus] 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."

A picturesque scene, something which seems like a good candidate for being dramatized in a painting.... Jesus coming up out of the water, the Spirit like a dove, and a voice from the clouds above. Did those around Him hear the voice and see the Spirit, or was this moment witnessed by Jesus alone? How did they react?

Unfortunately we don't know the answers to those questions. The next instant after this scene, Mark's gospel tells us:

...the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

No time to celebrate, no time to enjoy the moment, to revel in the presence of the announced Son of God. No time for any of that; instead, on to the next stop. The Gospel of Mark is characterized by that sense of urgency. In fact I found the word "immediately" mentioned 27 times in the 16 chapters from the New Revised Standard Version of the Gospel of Mark. The celebration of the beginning is quickly followed by the challenges of life here on earth.

As Dr. Battles mentioned on the Sunday after Christmas, life quickly resumed "back to normal" after the Christmas story unfolded. And so it was for Jesus after his baptism. The high point of baptism quickly followed by the low of the temptation in the wilderness. Not much time given for celebration and relaxation, much time given for the regular days of life. All of the Gospels are thought to tell us of no more than three years of Jesus' life, and the narratives tell us details of a meager number of hours of His time on earth.

There is no day-to-day account of Jesus' life, nothing of His youngest days except one story when he was 12. Then silence until his appearance at His baptism. We travel very quickly from “in the beginning” to the thick of the world. Someone once commented that it took only three chapters of the Bible humanity is cast from paradise, and has spent the rest of the Bible trying to get back in. Indeed even the words said to Adam as they are removed from Eden tell of his relentless toil to come in life, toil to be ended only by death.

Jesus, the Word made flesh, was not spared this same path. He was in the beginning with God and has been announced by heaven as the Son of God. He is the beginning, His birth and life and death will change the course of history, even the calendar will count the years from His birth. Surely this life should be spared the toil of Adam, the pain and difficulty of life on earth. If this is God's own Son, surely He will not have to walk the same course as humanity.

Of course we know that is not the case. Even from the earliest days, Jesus knows little of the comfort of this world. No comfort in birth; no comfort in life, knowing hardship and loss at the death of His friend Lazarus, betrayal and heartache... no comfort even in death as He cried out to God.

I don't need to tell you that our lives face those same challenges, loss and hardship, death of family and friends. We know this world can offer comfort as well, but the rest offered here in this world is always temporary.

Many observers have commented on “change” in the world today. Most often change is seen as unfortunate, regrettable, even something to fear. But the readings we have heard today remind us that change also occurs by the hand of God. It was God who created change out of the chaos to make the world. It was God who sent His Son and changed the course of history. It will be God who sends His Son to us again to bring us to a new heaven and a new earth, and a rest that is not temporary, but a rest that is for those who are weary, heavily burdened.

Then we will hear the words of our God that Jesus heard, “This is my beloved son, my beloved daughter, in you I am well pleased.” We believe this to be true because despite all the changes we know that none of the changes can separate us from the love of God. We know that despite all the changes of the world, our God remains steadfast and true. The God who has brought all beginnings to us has given to us another day, another week to live in His grace and peace, not just in the times of quiet and comfort, but in the times of day to day work, wherever we find ourselves, in days of great joy or days of great sadness, in times of beginning and times of ending, our God is always with us.

Each day is a new beginning, followed closely by the work of the day that follows. Each day is a new opportunity, but those opportunities are connected with the responsibilities we have to family, friends, work, and so on.

How will we face these beginnings? We can face them with the resentment of change, because change is often not for the better. We can face them with blind optimism, that change is the goal of

life and that we should be constantly doing away with the “old” in favor of the “new and improved.” But instead of either extreme we should be thankful for the gift of what was, what is, and what will be. Some changes will be for the better, some for the worse, some will be difficult and others easy. With that knowledge we can be thankful for the days that we have had, the days still yet to come, and welcome each new beginning with the faith that God is ultimately in control and is the victor over all evil in the universe.

Then, when the time has come, we will celebrate with God that new heaven and new earth which will signal the most important beginning, the fulfillment of all the promises of God that the children of God will be gathered together to sing praises eternally with all the angels and all the faithful throughout the ages. In that beginning, in that change, we will find our rest and eternal happiness.