

“Beginnings”

“In the beginning,” so the Book of Genesis . . . begins. ***“In the beginning,”*** is a good place to begin. Today’s lessons are all about beginnings. The beginning of life, the universe, time, us; the beginning of the Church, and the nature of its mission; the beginning of our Lord’s earthly ministry; and, of course, it all gets tied into our beginnings and, in the process, our outcomes.

“In the beginning,” there was nothing. As Eugene Peterson so cleverly translates: ***“First this: God created the Heaven and the Earth — all you see, all you don’t see. Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness. God’s Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss.”*** [The Message]

We cannot really comprehend nothingness. We’ve never experienced “nothingness.” We know something of emptiness. We have encountered inky blackness; but our brains just cannot get around the idea of nothingness, because the very thought of nothingness is itself “something-ness.”

Which is simply another way of saying that we cannot comprehend what it means for God to be eternal — to exist with restraints of time and space. Oh, we can use the language and understand that the words refer to something — but we cannot really comprehend the idea because we cannot experience what that means. We are bound by the restraints of time and space — we have beginnings.

In THE beginning, God spoke things into being. I would have loved to have had access to the old Disney team of cartoonists — the ones who made Snow White, Lady and the Tramp, Fantasia — and to have used them to illustrate God creating: a mountain jumps up here; a deer pops into being; a whole continent divides the waters. And it all happens with just the slightest flick of God’s finger. But that’s not how God created — He did not puppeteer the creation into existence; He spoke. ***“Let there be***

light,” FUM! Light! Once again, we have trouble with this. Any power that we have with words tends to be destructive, not creative.

President Trump told his listeners on Wednesday: “. . . *you have to show strength, and you have to be strong. We have come to demand that Congress do the right thing . . .*” and thousands of them marched to the Capitol building and proceeded to “show strength” and “demand” by breaking windows, vandalizing offices, and depositing pipe bombs.

We often feel like Eliza Doolittle and want to scream: “*Words! Words! Words! I'm so sick of words! I get words all day through; first from him, now from you! Is that all you blighters can do? Don't talk of stars burning above; if you're in love, show me! Tell me no dreams filled with desire. If you're on fire, show me!*”

We tend to think of words as lacking power. “*Talk's cheap,*” we say. “*Actions speak louder than words.*” In God’s economy words are not cheap — they are His means of power. He speaks into being what did not previously exist. He opens His mouth, and thought becomes word, word becomes rhinoceros, ginkgo tree, and stalagmite. Where God speaks, creative power is at work.

God spoke at the Baptism of Our Lord: “***You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.***” Was this creative speech? Arius, a priest in the second century, thought so. He taught that Jesus was the Son of God by adoption; just a man like every other man until God spoke into Him the power to be Son of God. Arianism was condemned almost instantly as a heresy.

Mark’s Gospel goes on to tell us that Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted, and having then been ministered to by angels, Jesus “***came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.***” The power of the identification was not that it created (or adopted) Jesus as Son of God. The power was that by these words Jesus was confirmed in His mission — a mission that would demonstrate without question that this was God’s Son in human form.

This ***“Word become flesh”*** lived among us “full of grace and truth” (to cite St. John). Thus the Word spoken into fleshly existence begins to enact the mission for which He was sent. The baptism of Jesus is not mere symbol; the word from above attests to that fact. God’s power of words was once again on display.

When St. Paul arrived in the city of Ephesus, we heard in today’s Second Lesson, he discovered a group of people (twelve in all, an interesting number) that knew of John’s baptism but not the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

First of all, this tell us that John’s the Baptist’s influence went far beyond the Jordan River. Obviously, disciples of John had journeyed into Asia Minor and practiced his ***“baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”*** Paul recognized that this baptism was insufficient, and baptized them into the name of Jesus. What’s the difference? John himself indicated the difference: ***“I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”*** *“In other words,”* writes John Jewell, *“John asked for a promise to change while Jesus would give the power to change.”*

As soon as these twelve disciples from Ephesus were baptized into the name of Jesus, transformation began. ***“. . . the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied . . .”*** Where have we heard this before . . . ? Ah, yes, back in Acts chapter two, the Twelve ***“were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”*** Could this be another Pentecost? A new beginning? You bet! William Willimon points out: *“In all three lessons, the Holy Spirit is the agent of creation: form and light, new life, and new capacities for ministry.”*

Which is where you and I come into the picture. In our baptisms, some naming went on. It used to be the tradition that a child would not be named until the child was baptized (which is why to this day some people confuse baptism with christening). As people waited longer periods of

time between birth and baptism, that connection became severed.

Yet, within the liturgy we employ the Lutheran Book of Worship, the name of the baptized is emphasized no less than four times: 1) *“I present (name) to receive the Sacrament of Holy Baptism.”* 2) *“(Name), I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”* 3) Then, *“Pour Your Holy Spirit on (name): the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in Your presence.”* 4) Finally, *“(Name), child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.”*

It was once an established custom in the Roman Catholic tradition to add a name at baptism (and in some settings, yet another name upon Confirmation) — there’s a lot to commend that practice. Of course, that can be carried to extremes. When I was a child, and people would ask me my full name, I would reply, *“My name is Christian Aloysius Q. Bingabah Callywattiputzywhatsis Frederic George Just.”*

What is key to our baptisms, as the disciples in Ephesus learned, is not *by* which name we are named, but *into* which name we are baptized. Equally key is that we recognize that, having been baptized into the name of Jesus, or the Trinity, we are endowed with the Holy Spirit.

We Lutherans have a hard time with the work of the Holy Spirit. Because so much of what the Holy Spirit does is experiential, not propositional, we aren’t quite sure that we should be thrilled by the experience. We are more comfortable with propositional faith, for example, *“God created the world in six days.”* Okay. We can assent to that. That tends to make faith almost exclusively cerebral. We’ve been taught (or at least I was taught) to be suspicious of experience, especially if it involves emotions.

Now, it is true that emotions can deceive; they can even run amok. It is equally true that emotions are God-given marks of our humanity, and therefore not to be denigrated.

Twice in the Book of Acts — on the Day of Pentecost and in today’s reading — the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was made evident in power. Did that simply disappear? Did the Spirit decide that He would not use power anymore? I don’t think so — I think the Church usurped the power, turned to structures and control, and stifled the work of the Holy Spirit. We need to reclaim that power for the work of ministry today.

“God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power,” Peter proclaims in one of his sermons in the Book of Acts, and **“he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.”** [10:38] In our baptisms that same anointing has been granted to us. God is with us. Let there be no doubt of that — God is with us.

So what should we do with that piece of information?

First of all, let’s not treat it as informational; let it become transformational. Luther suggested that, every time we confess our sins, we return to the waters of our baptisms. He was not saying that we ought to go back there; he was saying that every time we confess that’s where we wind up. Every confession of past sin is a new beginning for the baptized child of God.

That means that today, as we stood together and acknowledged — before God and in the hearing of every other person in this room — that sin has had its way in our lives, as we said that the Holy Spirit was moving. He hovered over us, and where the darkness of sin was exposed, there the radiant light of grace shone in. We heard a voice (it happened to be my vocal chords, but it was God’s voice) declare to us that forgiveness was ours.

We entered into this time of worship as sinners. Maybe you felt the burden of those sins; maybe you were blissfully unaware of where sin was misshaping your life — but you admitted that it was there. And God said, *“Not any more it isn’t.”*

So now the Holy Spirit is working afresh in you. What will He do with you? That's the question. Not what will you do? What will the Holy Spirit do? That can be a scary question . . . because we have no idea what the Spirit will do. It is made even scarier by the realization of what we have seen the Holy Spirit do to others, for example twelve people in Ephesus who were content with knowing just the baptism of John, and whose lives were set topsy-turvy because they were led to desire the baptism that offered something more.

Today we commemorate the Baptism of Our Lord. But it needs to be more than commemoration, a nod of the head that, good for Him, Jesus got baptized. It needs to be the day of beginnings for us, as well — beginning afresh under the power of the Holy Spirit.

As Lawrence Moore has encapsulated it: Baptism is *“a re-enactment of the drama of creation, death and re-creation — our own participation, in other words, in Jesus’ death and resurrection. Through the Spirit, we die. The waters do their deadly work. Through the Spirit, we are raised, so that we have died to the old life, not only repented of it. And through the Spirit we are, says Paul, ‘new creations in Christ’ because it is Jesus who came and lived among us, died, and was raised as a beloved Child of God.”*

So we rise today new creatures, with new lives, new hope, new dreams, new vitality, new opportunities, new directions. As this sound echoes in our ears: ***“You are my . . . Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”***

Amen.