

Gen 1.1-5

Acts 19

Mark 1:1-11

Baptism of the Lord

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and the earth was* *לִבְדָּהּ וְרֵקָה* , *formless and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep...and* *the wind of God moved over the face of the waters.* רוח אלֵהים , πνεῦμα θεοῦ: *the wind, breath, Spirit of the living God moved over the face of the waters.*

Why are we suddenly back at creation, Genesis 1, on this Sunday 3 weeks after the birth of Christ? Three weeks ago on Christmas Eve it was the reign of Augustus Caesar and we were walking to Bethlehem with Joseph and Mary and the donkey. Just last week we were with the magi in Jerusalem, facing down King Herod. Luke and Matthew both set us very clearly at Christmas in Palestine in the time of the Roman Empire—probably, we now think, ca. 4-6 BC.

But the Gospel of Mark does something different. Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου, the beginning the good news!, Mark says, in the first line of his gospel. This first line is a trumpet-call, and it places us boldly (at the coming of Jesus) at the beginning of all things. Ἀρχή, “beginning”; ἐν ἀρχῇ, “in the beginning”: this is the same word with which Genesis begins.

In fact, Matthew’s gospel does the same thing. βίβλος γενέσεως, the gospel begins: the book of the genesis! You can hear the word “genesis” in it, γενέσις, and also, in *biblos* our word Bible, which means “book,” *the* book. This is, Matthew says, the Book of the Genesis of Jesus Christ: the birth of Jesus Christ touches the ancient birth of all things. This birth is biblical, and it is cosmic. If it happens in the reign of Caesar Augustus—and it does; if it involves a first-century woman named Mary and a man named Joseph and an unnamed donkey; if some local shepherds see it—and they do—it is so much bigger than Caesar Augustus that it will make his great reign look like a drop in the bucket of the universe / God’s purpose. We know the power of the Caesars. But this birth, this little child,

speaks with a greater power. It is the breath of God moving over the waters, moving again as in the first days of the world, moving where the darkness seeks still to be upon the face of the deep, still the darkness battling the wind of God; the Spirit of God moves over the roiling darkness saying, “Let there be light.” “I baptize you with water,” John the Baptist says, “but there is one coming who is stronger than I; I am not worthy even to untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” Where the darkness stirs and coils and the ancient chaos threatens, here, in the places of our need, the Spirit moves again and God says, “Let there be light.”

Mark’s gospel starts *en archē*, in the beginning, because this is a birth to remake the world.

For it is a world that needs remaking. This, too, Mark says clearly. What is the first thing that happens in Mark’s gospel? John the Baptist! John the Baptist appears in a hairshirt, crying out in the wilderness, his whole life a fast; John the Baptist the last great prophet of Israel, and for God’s people he has only one word. Repent! Repent, because there is a problem, because there is a power of sin in your lives. A little girl was raped and murdered this week in India and at first, the wheels of justice did not turn, at all. And here in our enlightened west, what about the flood of revelations that have emerged in the past months. So many victims of abuse, so many people in power abusing. How can this be, we ask? How does this happen? There is a power of sin. And if we think that we are innocent—as, increasingly, the finger-pointers seem to think; if we think wrong is something only other people do, think again. Weep, John the Baptist says, weep for all that is wrong in this world and in our own souls too; cry our failure sometimes even to see it, our failure for so many years to care. Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of our sins. Pray for a fresh wind moving over the heart of the world, pray for forgiveness, God’s re-creation.

The birth of the Christ is beautiful—green trees and lights and feasting and above all the child, the precious child; the birth of Jesus Christ is beautiful, but it is also

fraught. Because there is a darkness that moves over the face of the earth and it is into this darkness, into our sin and our need, that the child comes.

Why are the Christmas lights so lovely? Because it is in the darkness that they shine. Such hope there is in our Christmas trees, in the star that crowns them! The child comes into the darkness, into the place where we are, and he comes to be for us a light. Here, now, in the winter of our hearts, in the dark things of the world, wherever there is weeping, wherever there is wrong, wherever there is need of light: here, to us, with us, for us, he comes.

All the people went out to John from the whole region of Judaea and all the people of Jerusalem and they confessed their sins and went down into the water, into the muddy waters of the river Jordan, to be washed clean. And in their midst, right there with them, up to his knees in the muck of the Jordan, up to his neck in the muck of the world, Jesus comes. With the people he comes, this child who is light, in whom there is no darkness at all, he comes with the people who are weeping for the wrong they have done and the wrong that is bigger than they are, all the sin of the world. He comes with them to be baptized.

Light *in our* darkness. This is the love of God.

When we are lost and broken-hearted, when the darkness moves again in our own lives over the face of the world, he does not leave us there alone. He is with us. In his innocence, this one man who does no harm, he is with us. And the Spirit who moved in the beginning of the world...and God said, "Let there be light", moves again in the child who is born, in the man who walks into the roiling waters with us. And he says, "Let there be light." There and here, then and now, at our waking and at our sleeping and in the moments of our ordinary lives, let there be light.

For I am with you. I am God with you always, and there will be light. I have seen it, God with us in the moments of our lives. I have seen it in my own life and in the lives of others. He is with us, in good times and in bad, especially in bad, when the

way is deep and the path uncertain and there seems no assurance of the light. He is with us. That is the choice he makes.

He makes it for love. He told us that long ago, before the child and the Christmas lights; Isaiah it was who said it.

*When you pass through the waters I will be with you,  
And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you...  
For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, Your Saviour.*

I give my Son as your ransom, my Son for you.

*Because you are precious in my sight, and honoured,  
And I love you. (Isaiah 43).*

Jesus, Son of God, walks with us. It is the choice he makes, for love.

And like all acts of love, it is a costly choice.

*Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. And coming up out of the water he saw the heavens torn open and the Spirit like a dove coming down upon him.*

The Spirit moves again over the world in Jesus, and the heavens are torn open. Torn open: *schizō*. The word appears here, and only one other time in Matk's gospel.

*Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.*

*Schizō*: torn in two. He is with us. In Jesus God tears open the heavens and comes down, even to the place where we are, even to the place of our dying. Even to the cost of our sin. He is with us for better and for worse, in the beginning and at the end. This is the choice he makes for love.

And it is our hope. Because if he is with us, we may again be with him. We may again walk with him, even in the places of the world's sin. The Christmas trees in our homes all aglow with light speak truth: this light that is lit at the birth of the Christ may indeed shine in our hearts, and in our homes, and in our lives. We may come to love him, to give our lives to him, as he has loved us and given himself for us.

Let me tell you a story I heard just this week. It is about a man who lived in Pakistan, where business is not done with bribes. But this man was a Christian, and so he would not give or receive a bribe. Bribery runs counter to the word of God, and this man loved God. So he lost his job, and his family grew up in poverty. He lost his job, but he kept his love for Jesus, and he taught it to his son. And his son grew up and built a church—without bribes. He faced down hostile government officials and won for his people—without bribes—the right to build a church, in a place where there were no churches, where there never had been a church. That church is still thriving today.

This man and his son are ordinary people. They are just like us. The love of Christ is a powerful thing. Walk with him as he has walked with us. Let him change your life.

Amen.