

The First Day
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Mark 1:4-11 (and Genesis 1:1-5)

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. Then God said, "Let there be light;" and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

In the majestic opening words of Genesis, God speaks and things happen. Above a formless void enveloped in darkness, God fashions the world, beginning first with illumination and continuing in a creative crescendo to the making of humans, formed in the very image of God to be God's companions. Only the most literal-minded would consider this an explanation of *how* creation occurred; it is instead a statement of faith that all creation springs from the Word and power of God.

Today we are invited to go back to our beginning, to touch the waters of that first day, and be renewed by connecting once again to the Source of our being. By remembering Jesus' baptism, we see more evidence of how God speaks and a new creation is born. In both texts, the barrier between earth and heaven is bridged, the heavens are ripped open and God's presence is experienced as acceptance, delight and love. It is *very good*. Listen for God's Word to you in the account of Jesus' baptism according to Mark, in the first chapter at the fourth verse. [MARK 1:4-11]

[Pour water into glass and drink deeply] Water. A fundamental element of life, comprising more than 2/3 of the

earth's surface, and more than half of the human body. A necessity for living things. Water cleanses, refreshes, quenches our thirst. In the womb we are surrounded by water protecting and supporting us until birth. And in a startling demonstration of the unity of life—and perhaps of our evolutionary origins---we have come to understand that the chemical composition of sea water, blood, and amniotic fluid is largely the same.

But water also holds destructive potential, as seen in the killing fury of tsunami and hurricane. Even Spring rains produce floods that sweep away landscapes and homes, along with everything else in its path. Water nurtures life, but it can also drown it. To the ancients, water represented chaos and disorder and all that threatens life. Perhaps because of this paradox, we turn to poets rather than scientists or theologians to touch water's deep meaning. Langston Hughes describes rivers "ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins," and concludes with more than a sigh of ambiguity, "my soul has grown deep like the rivers." "I am haunted by waters," begins Norman McLean's heartbreaking tale of family loyalty and longing, *A River Runs Through It*. Wendell Berry compares love to the water of a deep stream, the abundance of which survives our thirst, yet which presents certain risk. "It does not hold us, except we keep returning to its rich waters thirsty. We enter, willing to die, into the commonwealth of its joy."

In all of it, both the risk and the righteousness of water are acknowledged and held in dynamic tension. And these dual realities animate the sacrament of baptism, even while testifying to a God who continually creates order out of chaos. Over the tumultuous sea the Spirit of God hovers and creation is brought forth. In Noah's time, the earth is cleansed by a flood that destroys everything except a remnant preserved in an ark. The people of Israel are freed from slavery and saved from Pharaoh's threatening armies by the miraculous parting of the Red Sea. They pass through it safely, while its returning waters engulf Pharaoh's chariots and soldiers. In baptism, we

are invited to touch the primordial waters and figuratively die, so that a new creation rises, and a new day dawns.

Baptism did not begin with a specifically Christian meaning. Many religions have used water a sign of ritual purification and symbol for life. John the Baptizer proclaimed a baptism of repentance as a sign of forgiveness and one's intent to live a new way. But he was also aware of the limitations of this baptism: *I have baptized you with water, but one is coming who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit* .

Jesus came to John and was baptized. For repentance? No because there was nothing for which he needed forgiveness. Yet Jesus' baptism stands as his initiation into ministry; a clarification of his purpose and a confirmation of God's presence in his life: *This is my Son, the Beloved; with whom I am well-pleased*. It is his first day. From there, Jesus will stride with confidence into a future marked by service and witness, compassion and truth, risk and sacrifice. He will taste death, and rise up victorious. And he will invite us to follow.

But I wonder sometimes if we have domesticated the sacrament of baptism to the point that its elemental nature has been lost. Jesus' baptism is a far cry from the sweet baptisms of our precious babies. The few drops of water that dampen their hair evoke little of the watery chaos of creation or the deep waters of the Jordan River. Baptism becomes a kind of church thing we choose and we control; a ritual where the baptized is the center of attention, and the only fearsome part lies in worry about their reaction—whether they'll wail their way through, or peacefully consent. Don't misunderstand: I love baptism, and its powerful affirmation that God's love is for each of us long before we are aware of it or can return it. But we miss its transforming dimension if we make the focus anyone but the living, active, powerful Creator and Ruler of the universe. We fail to grasp its saving grace if we forget about the dangers, toils, and snares that we along with our beloved ones will encounter every day.

So we go back to the first day, when the world was new. We are invited to let those waters flow upon us again. By water, we remember God's persistent love toward the people God created. . . . God's faithfulness and God action to find and claim the beloved sons and daughters. God's promise to stick with those people, come hell or high water. By water we remember who we are, and whose we are. By water we remember the love that has birthed us and made us a family. By water, we are commissioned to join God's work, pushing back the chaos so that life and goodness can make a new beginning.

A number of years ago, in a church I served in another city, one member objected to the renewal of baptismal promises. She pointed out that it was one more way the church draws a dividing line, distinguishing "us—the baptized" from "them—the unwashed." When I gently probed a little further I learned that her children had chosen not to baptize their offspring, her grandchildren. She was disappointed in their decision, but her disappointment could not diminish the boundless love for her grandchildren. "Could God love them any less than I do?" she rightfully questioned.

Friends, the church's baptismal font cannot possibly hold the never-ending supply of God's grace, and the abundant waters of life. We are stewards of it, not gatekeepers or judges. We celebrate the sacrament, but never imagine that we are its sole beneficiaries. God's mercy is from everlasting to everlasting. Once more, insight from a poet; this from Mary Oliver: *Every morning the world is created. . . . every morning, whether or not you have ever dared to be happy, whether or not you have ever dared to pray.*

So come to the water, whether baptized or not. Today is the first day, our first day. In the beginning, God created. And God is creating still. Come to the water, beloved of God, and be made new.

[GO INTO RENEWAL OF BAPTISMAL PROMISES]

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