

**Baptism of the Lord, January 10, 2021, St. Anne's
Genesis 1:1–5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1–7; Mark 1:4–11**

Today's OT reading is one of my favourite passages from the bible – that great poem at the start of the bible that celebrates the mystery of creation, the wonder of the heavens, and the beauty and goodness of the earth. This poem evokes for me an image of the brooding, hovering Spirit moving in our midst, sweeping over the dark waters of our *hearts*. Hearts ready and waiting to be made a new creation - brought just a little bit closer to the image of God we were created in. And finding anew God's creative and nourishing love for us.

Of course, today's reading is just the first 5 *verses* of this poem - just the first day - when God *starts* to bring order out of chaos. In this poem God doesn't create something out of *nothing*, but rather God imposes *order* on the chaos of the deeps. For ancient Hebrews the deep sea was a potent symbol of chaos, evil and danger. Israel doesn't have any real ocean ports, so while they had lots of small fishing boats, they *didn't* have any reliable sea-going ships. This meant they couldn't safely go out on the sea or get to know what lay below its ever-changing surface. So, for *them* the deep sea was full of untamed peril. It was the preserve of *evil*, of monsters – they thought of the deep sea as a kind of *hell* where all humanity was vulnerable. In today's reading the priestly poet asserts **God's** control, not *only* of heaven and earth, but of the *deep* – in other words of *evil* itself. Through this story of creation, which draws heavily on the mythic language of the ancient Near East, we are assured that **nothing** stands against the sovereignty of God. This is a God who can even bring order out of *chaos*. Good out of *evil*. And thus, a God who brings stability and peace to the earth and its inhabitants.

I'm sure there are lots of prayers and hopes right now for stability and peace and healing in the world. The violence at the US capital on Wednesday left a lot of us feeling shaken – even if we don't live in the States. And coming at the end of a long year of suffering and death and, (for some but *not all* of us) economic hardship caused, or increased, by the pandemic, it's all the more disturbing to our sense of safety and stability. For months we've watched reports of the tensions and anger and even violence of people unable or unwilling to accept the need for restrictions to protect the vulnerable from the COVID virus. Or of people tired of dealing with prejudice and oppression and just *not* willing to deal with it anymore. And others who are unwilling to accept their own *loss* of power or influence or status, trying to bend the world to their own benefit. And then of course, there are the *ongoing* issues of homelessness and hunger and loneliness and despair and inequality that we *never* seem to get a handle on. And while there **are** also *lots* of things to *celebrate* and to have hope about – even in the dumpster fire of 2020 there were lots of *wonderful things* that happened in the world - when we look at all the trouble and pain and suffering in the world, sometimes it's *hard* to hold onto the belief that the world **is** inherently *good*. Now, in part this feeling is caused by the fact that our *news* focuses on what is shocking and dangerous and out of step with the 'usual' ways, and it thereby *magnifies* our exposure to the bad things that *do* happen. *But*, even so I suspect we *all* wonder, at least sometimes, if there's **ever** going to be an answer to the issues that plague our world – after all evil and suffering has been with us from *before* the dawn of history. Looking at the world, it's **not unreasonable** to fear that maybe God's goodness is **not** in charge of the world.

That fear was also experienced by the Children of Israel when they were in exile in Babylon - which is when most scholars date this part of Genesis. Exile was

incredibly destructive to the Israelite's faith and community. What the story of creation assures them is, whatever it may *look* like, reality is **not** within the sovereignty of **any** empire, but **is** the creation of Yahweh. And so, since it's something we need to be *continually* reminded of, at the end of each day of creation, when God looks at God's handiwork the ancient poet repeats the refrain, "And God saw that it was **good**." And in a seventh and final flourish, the poet adds that God looked at the finished work and declared it "*very good*". We're being admonished here to *never* forget that the world God created **is good**.

We are being reminded that, despite *whatever* problems the world faces, God **is** still at work in creation. God never *has*, and never **will**, abandon creation or turn away from us. As Walter Brueggemann describes it in his commentary: "God and (God's) creation are bound together by the powerful, gracious movement of God towards that creation. The binding which is established by God is inscrutable. It will not be explained or analyzed. It can only be affirmed and confessed. This text announces the deepest mystery: God wills and *will have* a faithful relation with earth...The binding is irreversible. *God has decided it*" (Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation*, 23-24).

Of course, it's this description of the chaos before God begins in *watery* terms that's the reason this passage is read today. This reference to the waters of creation is a reminder that creation itself is a matter of bringing order to a watery chaos. We are reminded that the baptisms of Jesus by John - and of Christians in the name of Jesus - are thereby connected back to the act of *creation itself*. Through baptism *each of us* is commissioned and affirmed as one whose *purpose* is to help bring *order* and **harmony** into the world's chaos and struggles.

The coming of Jesus the Christ into the *chaos* of the world brings *new life* to all those willing to accept it. But baptism is about more than *just* water - Jesus 'baptizes' us with the creative spirit of God. Into the formlessness and chaos of our *lives* comes redemption and a share of the divine creative purpose. In this new life, the purpose of God for humanity grows toward its full expression – which we call 'The kingdom of God'.

At creation it's God's *Spirit* that moves over the waters of chaos, bringing life. The Spirit is present at Jesus' baptism in affirmation that he's made in the image of God, and filled with the life of God. Jesus submits to the death-dealing forces of chaos at his crucifixion - and then the Holy Spirit raises Jesus from the dead. Through our own baptism the Holy Spirit is also at work as we too symbolically die and rise to new life. In baptism we reenact *Jesus'* own death and resurrection. And through it we participate in a re-enactment of the drama of *creation* itself - the overcoming of the chaos of evil and death to create new life. In baptism, the waters of chaos do their deadly work. But then, through the power of the Spirit, we become, as Paul says, 'new creations in Christ.'

Baptism is not an end, but a *beginning*. It's a sacrament meant to impact *every day* of your life afterwards as we respond to God's love and grace by living in a way that moves us ever closer to the image of God we were each created in. To live in a way that helps us *overcome* the chaos and suffering in the world, and thus to help *us bring* peace and stability and love to God's world. Because God's world is good! God *never* gives up on us or this world – and at our baptism each of **us** is commissioned to be an **agent** of God's creative power and love.