

Sermon – Mark 1:4-11; Genesis 1:1-5
David R. Lyle
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“Water and Spirit”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I wasn't there, and neither were you, but by all accounts it was total chaos. Mass confusion. Darkness and violence. Uncertainty about what would come of it all. Time didn't seem to move in a normal way. Had you and I been there, I imagine we would have been terrified. No, I don't mean this past Wednesday at the U.S. Capitol, although we'll come to that. Our first reading today brings us to the beginning of creation. While we usually hear this passage from Genesis in a rather sanitized fashion, we're invited this morning to pay closer attention. This story, this proclamation, is not one of the God who brings something out of nothing. It is about the God who brings order out of chaos. Oh, make no mistake. The Israelites believed that God was the One who brought all creation into being. But their existential question was not, "Is there a Creator God?" Their questions were, "Is the Creator God good? Can this God be trusted? Does this creation, do we, have purpose and goodness?" Perhaps these are our questions, too. So it is that the scriptures begin *not* at the beginning of all things, if there even is such a thing within the eternity that is God, but at the beginning of God's creating; that moment when God's incipient love bursts forth and begins to shape the chaotic, formless void. Genesis 1 is march from chaos to order, from separating light and darkness, both of which are good, to Adam and Eve, you and me, meant to steward and care for it all.

2. Note how the Creator works, and you'll see who the Creator is. God comes to the chaos, the void, and sends forth a sweeping wind. Then God speaks, and things begin to happen. Order emerges, not to dominate but to set free and give purpose. The Word speaks. The wind, or Spirit, sweeps. Creation moves from chaos to order. The triune echo of Father, Son, Holy Spirit is unmistakable. Into the formless void comes the Word. Over the watery abyss sweeps the Spirit, not in a violent rush but as a mother eagle sweeps or hovers over her young ones to protect them from violence, as the same verb is used in Deuteronomy 32. From the beginning of creation, God creates by entering in. Through Word. Through Spirit. To bring order from chaos, to form a good creation that is well loved.

3. For the Israelites, the sea was sign and symbol of chaos. Here there be monsters, and all that. I can relate. For seven years in South Carolina, we lived just minutes from the ocean. Often was the day when I'd stop by the beach on the way home from work and stand in the sand. Those moments were peaceful, calm; helping me to release the day's burdens. But I only felt that way because I wasn't *in* the ocean. As a midwestern boy, and not a great swimmer to boot, being *in* the ocean was never something that struck me as all that much fun; not to be in over my head, anyway; out in the undertow. Perhaps this is why the salvation of the Israelites at the Red Sea is so profound; it was not just water blocking their path. It was chaos and doom. But God made a way. This is how God creates.

4. God brings order out of chaos, but we in our sin bring back the chaos straightaway. The disobedience of Adam and Eve leads to the murder of Abel by Cain and humanity is off and running. The story of God's people in the Old Testament is the story of sin both without and within, and it constantly pulls them back under the surface of the water, threatening to destroy. So it is for us, we who are beset by sin and evil, by hatred and deceit, all threatening to pull us under; to capsize the fragile ships within which we sail.

5. It is fitting that Mark begins his telling of the gospel not in a manger, but in the water, not in the capitol, but at the margins. Out of the wilderness comes John, looking and sounding like a prophet of old, calling the people to repentance. Not to go up to Jerusalem to make atonement, but to the Jordan to confess. All the people go, Mark tells us (if with a bit of hyperbole), because all the people need to go. All have sinned, and the beginning of God's story of salvation is a time to come clean. Repent, for after John comes another.
6. Here, at the Jordan, we see a recapitulation of the creation story. Into the chaotic waters of human sin and suffering comes the Word, no longer only in voice, but in flesh. The eternal Word who called creation out of the waters now goes down to the waterside. To enter into the chaotic mess we have made. As he does, the old creation rips open. Jesus' Father speaks words of identity and love. And the Spirit descends, hovering and brooding over this beloved Son in the midst of this beloved creation, just as that mother eagle brooded over her young. God is drawing forth a new creation, just as God first created but also in a radically new way. The Word is made flesh, Jesus one of us, so that God can enter in more deeply. Having no need to repent for his own sin, Jesus goes under the foaming waters of our sin. But that which would pull us under has no hold on him. As his head breaks back through the surface of the Jordan, we see the fullness of what Jesus will do for us, this One who will go under the waves of death only to reemerge into the bright light of resurrection dawn. This is how God creates.
7. The God who creates by Word and wind; the God who enters our world as Word and Spirit; the God who enters into chaos, fear, and death to bring order, hope, and life; this is the same God who confronts us in our time. And what an interesting time it is. The scenes from the Capitol this past Wednesday were both shocking and somehow incredibly predictable.

Disappointment fueled by deceit, hatred inflamed by white supremacy and anti-Semitism, led to an armed insurrection in the heart of our democracy. It was horrendous and despicable. It was sedition and rebellion. And it was heartbreaking to watch. The church must condemn, does condemn, these treasonous acts, both for their violence and for the lies and the naked abuse of power that led to them. *Full stop*. But to the best of my knowledge, I'm not preaching to anyone who stormed the Capitol. I'm preaching to us, to you and to me. So, what about us? You and me? John this morning is not simply calling *those* sinners to come and repent. He's calling you and me to repent that we might be prepared for the One who is to come. While you and I may not have participated in Wednesday's revolt, while you and I may stand firmly against such things, are we not still culpable? Guilty? No, not in the sense of moral relatively, of both sides being a mix of good and bad. Good is good and bad is bad. Right is not the same thing as wrong. We name sin out there when we see it and we stand against it. But John will not let us off the hook this morning. As Solzhenitsyn has reminded us before, "The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart." Have we not contributed to the chaos of this world? Have we not benefitted from the suffering of others? Do we not perpetuate hatred and mistrust of those we name as other, different, less than? Do we not resist the call to live with love and work for justice, to sit complacent while others suffer? The sins of sedition and insurrection are terrible, and I pray we've seen the worst of it. But I can't repent for their sins and neither to you. We are called to repent for our sins, of which I am quite sure there is no shortage, as God prepares us for the work ahead.

8. Today, John demands that we bring our sin down to the river. Amazingly, it is not to punish us. All of these sins, all of our fears, all of our death – it is these things that make up the chaotic seas that swallow Jesus. But the water cannot hold Jesus, and neither will death. He breaks forth, this One who has his

Father's pleasure. He breaks now into our world, our sin, our life and our death, to pull us across to the far shore where goodness is restored in the order God always intended. Baptized in Christ, we have already died the only death we ever had to fear, and we've already been raised to newness of life. God's own wind, the breath of life, the very Spirit of God, floods our lungs. God has entered the chaos. In Word and Spirit, God enters in. This is how God creates. You, too, are now baptized. We live in a world of fear, of hatred, of vitriol, and deceit. But you have been baptized. You are bearers of the light, the same light that shone in that moment when God first got to work; the same light that is Jesus Christ who is not overcome; the same light set by the Spirit's fire within your heart. You, you are God's beloved child with whom God is well pleased. Having left your sin in the Jordan, go. Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. God knows our world needs your witness. That's why, in love, God enters in. That's how the God who is good creates, and why this God can be trusted. This is how God creates, and God isn't done yet. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.