

## WORD AND WATER

Baptism of Our Lord Year B: Genesis 1:1-5  
Psalm 29  
Mark 1:4-11

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**Key Passages:** *And just as [Jesus] was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."* (Mark 1:10-11)

*...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.* (Gen.1:2)

*The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the glory of God thunders, the Lord, over mighty waters.* (Psalm 29:3)

"Just hold your breath and put your face in the water." Six-year old Thad, my late husband, was in his first swimming class. His parents had brought him to the municipal pool, determined that he should learn to swim. This was a skill that neither of them possessed. Living in coastal Georgia, they often went as a family to the wide beaches of Jekyll Island. His mother would sit on the very edge of the water and carefully watch her young son play in the surf. But there was always an element of fear in her voice: "Don't get in too deep, don't let the waves pull you under." These experiences had shaped his fear of the water. And now the instructor thought he could blissfully stand in the waist-high pool and put his face into those dangerous waters.

Our fear of the water is instinctive and natural. Once we emerge from the watery womb, we must breathe on our own. The oxygen trapped in each molecule of water is not available to us. Water is necessary for life, but first we must be able to breathe.

The storm that we have just come through has renewed our fears of unchecked waters. In addition to the dangers of blowing snow and freezing temperatures, parts of our area were subjected to record high tides and icy waters plunging across seawalls, through the streets, into buildings, and covering parked cars. There were heroic rescues of people trapped by this water, and added misery of flash freezing. The projections of sea-level rise have been made more visibly frightening in these last days. We can see more clearly the dangers to life and property as surging waters overwhelm us.

The poetic opening of our Bible draws on those fears and makes a fundamental affirmation. It is no accident that the first words of Genesis celebrating God's

action in creation draw this picture: “In the beginning when 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,” (Genesis 1:1-2).

The beginning of the cosmos occurs when God broods over the chaos of the deep and speaks the worlds into existence. God is the tamer of the chaos of nothingness. The relation of Creator to creation is mysterious and gracious. God calls all that is into being in order that it may be bound to God. Whatever the physical forces are that accomplish this relation, the deepest meaning is clear: there is loving intention in creation. Genesis does not offer an explanation of how this happens. The purpose is not analysis. The purpose is wonder and worship at the deepest mystery of life.

Creation begins when God’s spirit moves over the face of the deep waters. God tames the waters, separating them by a dome called sky, so there are waters above and below. Then God gathers the waters below into seas and the dry land emerges. God makes the earth fertile and the seas teeming with creatures. This poetic song assures us that God’s spirit is guiding creation, and that the chaos of water is tamed and brought under God’s loving control. Life, including human life, appears and thrives under God’s care.

God accomplishes divine loving purposes through speaking. We read that it is God’s words that call all things into being. God says, “Let there be light.” God’s speech is generative of the worlds that come into being, ordering the light and then the waters and the earth and sky that form the foundations of living things. Everything that exists depends on the creative and sustaining power of God’s word.

The psalmist knows and describes the power of God’s word. In today’s Psalm 29, we read that “the voice of the Lord is over the waters, the glory of God thunders... the voice of the Lord is powerful, the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.” And there are more vivid pictures: we read of a voice that breaks the cedar trees, that strips the forest bare, that flashes forth like flames of fire and shakes the wilderness. We are in the grip of powers beyond our understanding: life-giving and life-taking power in and behind all existence. And our response, with the Psalmist, is worship of this God of amazing power: “In God’s temple all say, ‘Glory!’”

These passages have been wisely chosen as context for today’s Gospel, the account of Jesus’s baptism in the gospel of Mark. We recall that Mark has no birth narratives, no angels, no shepherds, no kings. The poetry is not comforting: we are in the wilderness, recalling the wanderings of the people of Israel prior to their entry into the promised land. Jesus, emerging as an adult, joins with the crowds who are attracted to the desert by a charismatic prophet, calling for repentance and offering baptism as a sign of forgiveness.

In an act of identification with all of humanity, Jesus also offers himself to be baptized. Unlike other gospel writers, Mark does not offer speculation or analysis about the reasons for Jesus' action. What he does offer is a gripping vision of Jesus coming out of the water, the heavens being torn apart and a voice speaking from heaven. The prophet Isaiah had yearned that God would "tear open the heavens and come down," (Isaiah 64:1). At this moment heaven and earth are transparent to each other. The violence of the picture reminds us of the powerful voice of God described by the psalmist, a voice of thunder and fire. And it takes us back to Genesis, where God's voice tames the chaos and offers generative creation.

Jesus hears God's voice as he comes out of the waters of baptism. God affirms that Jesus is God's Beloved Son. Our hearing today of that gospel—that good news—brings the story to life among us. The voice of God is speaking today, affirming Jesus as Beloved Son, and calling all of us into the relationship of adoption as children of God. The words we will speak and hear today in the sacrament of baptism contain that generative power of God, to mark us as God's own forever and to give us power to become children of God through God's merciful love. The words that we say are important as constitutive of the reality to which they point.

Words matter. The image of Jesus as Word made flesh reminds us of God's power to shape human lives. As that incarnate Word touches our hearts, we become part of the divine voice. Our own words are shaped by God's powerful love, creating and sustaining us as people of faith.

In the movie "Darkest Hour," we see England struggling to stand against the overwhelming deadly force of Nazi Germany. Prime Minister Winston Churchill listens to the voices of common people and determines that his country must continue to fight. His words—his speeches—have the power to solidify the nation, to create the courage to mobilize and to defend their land. Words matter.

Today our celebration of the sacrament of baptism uses words as a visible expression of our faith in a transforming God. The baptizands and their sponsors will affirm their trust in God and make promises about the orientation of their lives. As a community we will reaffirm our participation in that covenant, placing our trust in God and promising to help these children as together we learn to follow Christ. As the celebrant prays over the water, we recall God moving over the face of the deep in creation. Those being baptized will symbolically go down into the depths of those waters and emerge, sprinkled with the new life that God desires to give them. Through the power of the Holy Spirit we claim God's promise of new life, which comes through the power of Christ's love to transform us.

God's promises shape our lives, as individuals and as a community. We come together today to hear the stories and to claim those promises, the covenant that makes us into a people who learn to live together by living with God. From the chaotic elements that threaten us, from snowstorms and floods, from cancer cells and psychoses, from war and violence, from despair screaming at us from many sides, we come together in the warmth of this place to listen to God's words. Like plants turning to the light, we are drawn toward the assurance of God's care for us. We hear God's voice affirming that we are beloved children, that God's care for us will never end. We follow Jesus, God's own Son, who promises us, not that there will be no suffering, but that he will be with us forever.

There is a verse of Scripture that I believe captures this moment for us today. We don't read it very often; maybe you have heard it at a wedding. Listen now for God's voice speaking to you:

“Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm;  
For love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave.

...

Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it.

*(Song of Songs, 8:6,7)*

My friends, that is the covenant we renew today: the promise of unfailing love for us as God's own children. In baptism we are sealed as Christ's own forever. We come through the waters of baptism with this life-affirming realization that nothing can drown God's love for us. Nothing can ever separate us from God's passionate care for us. God in Christ says, “You belong to me. You are my beloved forever.”