

**Rev. Christopher Bishop
St. Martin's Radnor PA
1 Epiphany, Jan. 8, 2011**

Lectionary:

Genesis 1:1-5

Psalm 29

Acts 19:1-7

Mark 1:4-11

It is altogether fitting that after our advent season, Christmastide, and last week the Naming of the Lord, that this first Sunday of Epiphany, at the baptism of Jesus, we hear the first lines of Genesis. The beginning of the story of the beginning of everything. A few nights ago I was discussing this text with a friend, and she began reading it, and recited the whole creation story, up to God resting. And at the end I said, "Wow, we just have the first 5 verses this Sunday." And she asked, "Why didn't you stop me?" And I answered, "Because you just created the entire universe for me! Thanks!" And it felt just that way.

We are all somehow invested in the Genesis story of creation. Irrespective of what we believe about it it's an active part of our public and private dialogue, our public and private devotions, or debates. And its tempting to get distracted by all the religious, cultural, poetical, or political questions around it: what is empirically true, what is spiritually true, what is of fanciful mythmaking, about it? But by dwelling in unanswerable questions and engaging in what some would argue to be irrelevant human bickering, we stand the chance of losing out on the extraordinary beauty and profundity of this deep and abiding story of how all things, including us, came to be, and what our relationship to all things, is.

What I want to draw your attention to today is that the verses depicting creation in Genesis are primarily liturgical in nature. In their structure, density and movement they can be seen in their own right as a kind of worship, a litany, a form of praise and acknowledgment of God. Listen as I read the second day. Recall our 1st reading of the 1st day from a few moments ago, and listen to the musicality, replicated in each verse: "And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the

dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.” As we move on, notice how each stanza perfectly mimicks procedurally what science has confirmed as the general sequence of things coming into being, how each verse is perfectly structured and balanced to reflect this creating of form from chaos, this ordering of us and everything else in God’s universe.

For us as a church, Genesis, this whole first movement of creation, is in a sense precisely what we experience through our liturgies here every Sunday.

I have heard the language of these verses compared to a fugue, or to the rhythms of the tide. And its effect is oddly the same in any language in which we speak it.

It’s poetry and effects are primal and powerful, and call us specifically into the creation of, and stewardship of, the world with God. Just so, our liturgies. As Episcopalians, Anglicans, we are known by the phrase *lex orandi, lex credendi* the Latin loosely translatable as "the law of prayer is the law of belief". We pray what we believe. If you want to know what we profess as a church, experience our liturgies. We do not prefer a Luther, or a Wesley, or a Calvin, or encyclicals from the pope. Our Anglican heritage was and is a group liturgical creation process, begun by some religious geniuses in the 16th century drawing from the best from Roman Catholic, reformationist, Celtic, and Eastern orthodox traditions, and continuing up until today.

And liturgy is one of our most powerful connections to our Gospel, the baptism of Jesus. In the Episcopal Church Baptism is understood to be the central act of our Christian lives. If you look in the index of your Book of Common Prayer you will see this liturgy is set apart. It is the cornerstone rite of our experience of faith together, our promise of community.

In Mark we get an interestingly nuanced picture of baptism: John comes proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and then says: “I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” In Acts the Apostle Paul tells his community, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." So Baptism is both an act of preparation, and that for which we are prepared—full relationship with God. And, critically, this happens in community, in Mark’s customary effusiveness, “And people

from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him.” Just as we gather.

And, importantly, we prepare through confession, cleaning the slate, and seek repentance, from the Greek *metanoi*-- *meta*-big, and *noi*- knowledge. If we think of repentance just to mean, “stop doing rotten things,” we completely miss its meaning. What it means is once we have the huge, earth-shattering, mind-blowing knowledge of the living God present and working among us, we don’t want to be doing rotten things to people, or ourselves. Because they, we, are all our people, all children of God. Those, like us, who Jesus came to find, to lift up, and to love. In that kind of relationship is nothing less than the possibility of transformation, of transcendence.

And one of the places where we as Christians receive and grow that knowledge among us most powerfully and explicitly is here, in our liturgies together. If you wonder about the ultimate importance and beauty of our weekly devotions, imagine St. Martin’s or any church that just stopped services, quit worshipping. That church would merely die, or become something completely different. No, each Sunday we rehearse, recreate, relive the whole of the story, of Genesis, the children of God, the prophets, and through the story of Jesus, come to reconcile the whole of creation back to God. This is our spiritual grounding, and all of it is connected through our very lives, we, the sometimes reluctant fulfillment of God’s promises.

Last week, Brian Penny and Kathy Wynn were considering ways of following up on our common promises of time and talent made during our stewardship season. And they had the most terrific idea: to renew and enact our commitments first through liturgy. So on the 29th of this month, we will have what we are calling our Congregation Sunday. Our whole service, our liturgy that day will be designed and carried out by you, members of the congregation. We are inviting you to do things in church you’ve never done, or thought you wanted to.

For a morning, try on being an usher, in the choir, an acolyte, a reader, preacher, presider, or bread and wine distributor. Or if you wish to help plan the liturgy itself, you also are invited into the co-creation with God, with this parish, of our worship that Sunday. And in doing that, whether we get all of it or not, we really do get to co-create

God's world in the love of Jesus, revealed and working through us, every day. And I personally hope we have some fun doing it.

In the birth and baptism of Jesus, in this Epiphany, or manifesting of God, the divine is breaking through all the laws of the universe, all the laws of our skepticism, all the laws of our habits, to make direct contact with us. As we form and live out our liturgies, an integral part of our answer to God's presence, maybe it's not about the details, getting it all right. Maybe it's just about the longing of human life for the divine, and the longing of the divine for human life, a longing for relationship, that matters. After his baptism, when the clouds parted and God said of Jesus, "This is my child, with whom I am well pleased", we need to know that those words are for us too.

In the name of the One Eternal always beckoning God, through Jesus Christ, Amen.