

Baptism of Our Lord B 2024 — Mark 1:4-11, Genesis 1:1-5

I am not much of a resolution person, but when I look at a new year with the hope or expectation that things may be better, that desire for change comes from somewhere. We can't look forward to things being different unless we have a point of reference for what they have been in the past. The way the calendar falls, we happen to start this year with two biblical beginnings: the first story of creation in Genesis and Jesus' baptism, which as this gospel lacks a Christmas narrative, is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ for Mark. However, both of these beginnings, even the beginning of creation, are really continuations.

Lutherans don't read the creation stories of Genesis like we would read a science or history book, as literal explanations for how the world got here and how we came to be in it. We only have to read as far as chapter two to find two very different descriptions of the mechanics of creation which emphasize very different characteristics of God. In chapter two, God gets down in the dirt and with muddy hands forms Adam—whose name means “earth creature”—out of the dust of the ground. Genesis chapter one is much less messy, but even as it describes order being imposed on chaos, it stretches our imagination beyond logic. On the first day, God creates light, but it's not until the fourth day that God creates the sun, moon, and stars—the sources of light. So light existed before its source; God existed before any of the creation. It's a beginning, but there was something—or Someone—before that beginning.

Not only was God there before creation, all of God was there. We never find the word “Trinity” in scripture, but there are a couple places where we encounter God in three persons, and this is one of them. God who we understand as creator is at work; the wind from God swept over the waters, *wind* being a translation of the same Hebrew word that means *air*, *breath*, or *spirit*; and as opposed to the hands-on method described in chapter two, here each step of creation is the result of God speaking, the act of God's word, and Jesus is the Word of God. It's easy to think of the Son not showing up until Christmas, or in Mark's gospel, until his baptism by John in the river Jordan, yet Jesus existed from the very beginning.

This gospel scene is another Trinitarian God-sighting. Jesus is baptized while the Spirit descends like a dove and the voice of God the Father calls from heaven, claiming him as Beloved Son. This is the first mention of Jesus as an adult, the first mention of Jesus at all in Mark's gospel, and the first act of Jesus' public life. But again, this beginning didn't come out of nowhere. Jesus' cousin John was commissioned for his work before he was even born. Just to make sure we recognize the role he's supposed to fulfill, Mark tells us that John dresses, eats,

acts, and preaches like the Old Testament prophets who went before him. If any biblical character should be associated with new year's resolutions, it would be John, because John baptized people for repentance, that is, turning away from one way of living to go in a different direction. He is a symbol for people leaving their old life to live in ways that more closely reflected the will of God.

The other gospels give us a more in-depth story, where John tries to talk Jesus out of being baptized, since John understands that Jesus is the main attraction and he is only the opening act. And, if John is baptizing for the purpose of repentance and forgiveness of sins, Jesus, the sinless Son of God need not apply. Yet this baptism, which marks the beginning of Jesus' public life and ministry, shows us something important about God: God is already there any time we think we're starting something new. Jesus will live a life of humble service: teaching, healing, and feeding; and even in the face of death, Jesus won't give up on God's way of justice and peace, not even to save his own life. But Jesus hasn't done any of those things yet. As far as Mark is concerned, Jesus just now shows up, and before he cleanses a single leper or multiplies a single loaf, God announces, *You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.* Before Jesus *does* anything, he is already known and named, claimed and loved.

Now, as Genesis showed us, Jesus existed from the beginning, so it's not like God the Father just saw him for the first time that day at the Jordan River. But the God who made us and claimed us in baptism already knows us, too. And though, unlike Jesus, we will have days where we fail spectacularly at answering God's call to holy living, through our baptism into Christ, we are already named as God's beloved children, no take-backs.

So if you have picked one or two specific ways to be better this year, good for you. If you're resolved to look at each day as it comes to see what opportunity it might present to live more fully into God's way of life, that's just as good. But whatever new beginning—or no beginning—we may be planning to make, we remember that God knows all about our last year, and all the years before it, and all the ways we'll struggle in the year ahead, and still calls us *beloved child*. God didn't wait for us to turn over a new leaf, nor is God waiting see how far we get or how well we do before coming to walk with us. The God who existed even before the beginning of time and who encompasses eternity itself loves us already, right now, and forever.