

A DAY OF NEW BEGINNINGS  
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A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church  
in Brookfield, Connecticut  
on January 7, 2024

Texts: Genesis 1:1-5 & Mark 1:4-11

Genesis 1:1-8

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. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

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.

Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he 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."

Today is a day of new beginnings. It's the beginning of a new year for all of us. It's the beginning of new ministries for the church officers we'll be ordaining and installing later in the service. And we've got these two readings this morning, both of which are about the beginning of something. The reading from Genesis—the story of creation—is about the beginning of the world. The reading from Mark—the story of Jesus' baptism—is about the beginning of his ministry.

At first, it might seem like that's all these two readings have in common. But when you take a closer look, there's a much deeper connection. Mark actually makes a reference to Genesis. And he doesn't do that just for the fun of it. It's the key to the whole story. It's the key to understanding what Jesus' baptism is really about.

The problem is, we don't get the reference. It goes right over our heads. Because Mark was writing for an ancient audience that looked at the world very differently than we do. So what we have to do is try to understand their perspective. And the way to do that is by looking at Genesis 1.

In the beginning, the story goes, there was water, and that was about it. The world was a big wet formless nothing covered in darkness. Then God said, "Let there be light"—literally "Let light be"—and God separated the light from the darkness, giving us day and night. Then God did something really interesting. God put a dome in the middle of the water, dividing it

into two separate bodies, one above and one below. The water above was where rain came from, and the water below formed the oceans and rivers and lakes. God called the dome Sky. But it wasn't what we think of when we think of the sky. Ancient people thought of the sky as a solid structure, like a giant glass bowl.

That may seem like a strange idea, but when you think about it, it actually makes sense. The sky kind of looks like a dome, especially when you're at a high elevation on a clear day, and you can see the curve of the earth.

So the ancient view was actually very rational. It was based on what people observed. But there was a drawback. It created a sense of separation from God. It made it seem like God was up there, taking care of things on a cosmic level, and human beings were down here, going about their business, and in between there was this physical barrier. And while it's nice to know that God is busy maintaining order in the universe, it's not very comforting to think that we're literally cut off from God. But that's how people saw it way back when. God wasn't involved in their lives directly. God did God's thing up there in heaven, they did their thing down here on earth, and there wasn't a whole lot of interaction.

Now hold that thought, and let's jump over to Mark.

Jesus goes out into the wilderness to be baptized by John, and as he's coming up out of the water, he sees, according to the text, "the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending

like a dove on him.” And as modern people, when you and I read that, we get that this is a big moment, we get that something important is happening here. But it doesn’t mean as much to us as it would’ve meant to people back in Mark’s day. They would’ve immediately recognized what’s really going on here: God is tearing a hole in the dome and coming down to earth. God is breaking through the barrier that has separated us from God for as long as we’ve existed.

So this isn’t just a big moment. This is the biggest moment since creation itself. That’s what Mark is saying here. That’s what Jesus’ baptism means to him. It’s a whole new beginning. It’s the moment when the relationship between God and humankind changes. It’s the moment when there’s no longer any space between us.

I wonder, though, if it’s really that easy.

The truth is, we don’t really need a giant glass bowl to separate us from God. We do that all by ourselves. We put limits on our relationship with God. We allow God into some parts of our lives but not others. We worship God on Sunday, but we don’t think about God too much during the rest of the week. We live the way Jesus showed us, as long as we can still do what we want to do. We go where the Spirit calls us, within reason. And for most of us, if we’re honest, that’s how we like it. We want to have a relationship with God, but we also want to hold back a little. We want to

be close to God, but we also want to keep some distance.

It’s like we’re afraid of something. It’s like we’re afraid of losing ourselves if we remove all the barriers and let God into our hearts all the way.

But here’s the thing about that. In the reading, when Jesus comes up out of the water and sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending, he lets God into every part of his life and every corner of his being. And he doesn’t lose himself. He finds himself. He finds out who he is, and he sets out on a path of grace and hope and connection. And the good news is, we can all do the same.

So today really is a day of new beginnings. And I pray that 2024 will be a year of new beginnings. I pray that each of us will experience God in new ways and discover new opportunities to learn and grow, and to serve and witness. Amen.