

Epiphany 1 (B)

Mk 1.4-11

It's rather unusual for us to have two readings that are interchangeable. We expect to hear some sort of thematic connection between the lessons on any given Sunday, and it's not unheard of for us to pick up a little historical background in one lesson that helps us make better sense of another lesson. But two lessons that are completely interchangeable: that's fairly unique. Especially when the two lessons we're talking about are the Old Testament reading and the Gospel reading.

“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 there was evening and there was morning, the first day.” That can just as well be read as a description of the baptism of Jesus as it can be as a description of the creation of the world.

“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.’” That can just as well be read as a description of the creation of the world as it can be as a description of the baptism of Jesus.

When we read either of these two stories through the lens of the other one, we discover important insights and lessons about both of them. And one of the most important discoveries we make is that these stories have something to say about *us* and about *our* lives, both our lives as individuals and our shared life as a community of faith.

Now, it would take a long time to draw out all the ways these two readings overlap and potentially inform one another. So rather than try and cover the waterfront, I'm simply going to lift up a few themes that appear in both readings, and then invite us to reflect on how these themes might inform and condition our experience of the life of faith.

But I also want to encourage you to spend some time this week with these two stories; I am not going to say anywhere near everything that could be said about the correspondence between them. Some time this week, maybe even more than once this week, sit down and read both stories, and then try transposing them: read the story from Genesis as if it's actually about the baptism of Jesus, and read the story from Mark as if it's actually about the creation of the world, and then ask God to show you all that both of these stories have to offer.

Both of these stories begin in darkness. In our reading from Genesis, of course, the dark is initially all there is. Before the creation of light and life, there is not even anything we can justifiably call “dark” because there's nothing except emptiness and chaos. Even the darkness doesn't have any definite character or shape because there is no light, no life, no structure or order.

Likewise, in our reading from Mark, we have a story that begins in darkness. There is the darkness of Israel's oppression under Roman rule: even though they had been delivered from exile in Babylon many years prior, God's people were still living under the rule of a pagan foreign power, and the throne of David sat empty. There is the dark silence of the prophets, whose voice had not been heard for centuries, a darkness that is now at last broken by the proclamation of John the Baptist. And there is the even more profound darkness of sin and death, still ruling over the hearts and the minds and the lives of human beings everywhere.

Both of these stories are about the coming of the light. In our reading from Genesis, light is the first element of creation, the thing that gives structure and dimension to everything that comes after it. Light is the condition that makes life itself possible. Centuries before Albert Einstein demonstrated the absolute value of the speed of light, theologians like John Philoponus and Robert Grosseteste recognized both the theological and the scientific importance of light.

There is likewise light in our reading from Mark: the light of God shines forth in a baptism that takes place in the Jordan River. That light shines forth *on* the one who is baptized, and it shines forth *from* the one who is baptized. We see it shine forth *on* the one who is baptized when the heavens are opened and the Spirit is poured out on the one God names as Beloved. We see it shine forth *from* the one who is baptized when he is revealed as the messiah, the one who has come to redeem Israel and to be a light to the Gentiles, the one who would go on to baptize with the same Spirit he himself received.

Both of these stories are about Jesus. In our reading from Genesis, Jesus is there as the one in whom and through whom and for whom all things are made, the one in whom all things hold together and find their meaning and purpose. God speaks, and God's Word gives structure and dimension to everything that is, and makes life itself possible. Without or apart from God's Word, not one thing is made.

In our reading from Mark, Jesus is shown to be one who does not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but who empties himself and is found in the likeness of sinful human beings. He is portrayed as one who identifies with our weakness and infirmity, one who takes on our human nature so that we might share in his divine nature. His life becomes the advent of a new creation, not a new creation that rejects the old creation but one that raises up God's good world to a new level of meaning and purpose. In his *Commentary on the Psalms*, the Reformed theologian John Calvin suggested that the world is "a theater for the display of the goodness, the wisdom, the justice, and the power" of God, and in Jesus all that glory is manifest in a way that goes beyond the glory of the first creation.

Both stories are creation stories. Both stories begin in darkness. Both are about the coming of the light. And both are ultimately about Jesus. These two stories very much complement one another, because they are both in a sense about one thing: they're both about the gift of the divine life that is given to the world in and through the Word of God. God tells this story once, and light shines forth in the darkness and makes life itself possible. God tells this story again, and a young Jewish peasant from northern Palestine is shown to be the king of Israel and the savior of the world. It's essentially the same story both times, but it unfolds itself in new ways.

And that brings us to today: what do these stories have to do with us? God tells this story again each and every time someone is baptized. God's light breaks forth into our darkness, and our lives are ordered and shaped by God's mighty Word. Through baptism we are joined with Christ both in his death and his resurrection, and he offers us the gift of his Holy Spirit. We become part of God's new creation, and we become those who are charged with the task of helping to redeem this world and raise it up to the life of God.

The challenge here for us is to learn to see ourselves and to see this world in light of God's new creation. We usually get this backwards: our natural inclination is to try and fit God into *our* lives and *our* world rather than see our lives within the context of *God's* life and *God's* love.

The apostle Paul talks about this in one of his letters to the Corinthians. At one time, Paul says, we knew ourselves and we knew one another and we even knew Christ from a human point of view. But now that's over; now we regard *no one* from a human point of view, not ourselves and not one another and certainly not Christ. Because God has reconciled us to himself—we didn't do that, *God* did that—and God has made us ambassadors for Christ, agents of his reconciliation, ministers of a new creation.

This is a challenging lesson for us to learn, because it means rethinking everything we thought we knew. Our experience of the life of faith and our ministry in the world depend on our learning this lesson. We want to know how to handle the challenges of life, both big and small, but we will only find ways of addressing these challenges by seeing them in the light of the new life of Christ. We can't fit God into our problems, but we can fit our problems into the pattern of the new creation given to us in Jesus.

We want to know how to handle things like global pandemics. We want to know how to contribute to the renewal of a culture that shows every sign of falling apart. Most of the time, we'd probably be happy with just being able to figure out the more mundane but no less challenging issues that seem to confront us every day in our families, in our work, and in our lives.

The key to doing all that is to learn to see those things within the horizon of God's new creation, to see those things from the perspective of what God has done and is doing and will do through Jesus. We don't have the answers; most of the time, we don't even properly understand the questions. But when we learn to see them from the perspective of God's living Word, they begin to take on order and shape and dimension. The darkness rolls back, and God's light shines through.

During this season of Epiphany, during this time as we begin a new chapter in our life together as a community of faith, during this season in the life of a world that needs ministers of new creation to help bring about the kind of transformation God has given to us in Christ and the Spirit, let us keep the covenant we have made in our baptism and boldly confess both in word and in deed the gift of new life we have received in Jesus, to the honor and glory of his Name. Amen.

10 January 2021
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral
Columbia, SC