

The Baptism of our Lord
January 10, 2021

The Lessons: Genesis 1:1-5
 Psalm 29
 Romans 6:1-11
 Mark 1:4-11

The Hymns: # 407 (1-4) *To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord*
 # 578 (1,2,6) *Thy Strong Word*
 # 594 (1,5) *God's Own Child, I Gladly Say It*

The Collect: Father in heaven, at the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River You proclaimed Him Your beloved Son and anointed Him with the Holy Spirit. Make all who are baptized in His name faithful in their calling as Your children and inheritors with Him of everlasting life; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reign with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. **Amen.**

The Sermon:

The Baptism of Our Lord
 Genesis 1:1-5
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“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. It’s interesting how the first two verses of Genesis read. God the Father is there, creating everything out of nothing. He’s not alone, either: the Spirit of God is present, too; and we know from John 1 that God the Son is present, because all things are made through Him. So the account of creation begins with the presence of the Triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It’s worth also noting the first created thing that’s specifically mentioned: you’ve got an earth that is without form and void, and then you’ve got water. The Spirit of God is hovering over the face of the waters.

God goes on to create, and He creates by speaking. “Let there be light,” He says, and there’s light. He’ll soon call for dry lands and seas, and there they’ll be: likewise, sun and moon, plants and animals, birds and fish. He’ll take extra care in making man and woman, but He’ll speak all the same to create them. It’s a phenomenal miracle, this way of creating. Our words, at best, are simply informative: they can give information, but they can’t cause anything to happen. When God speaks, though, His Word is effective or causative: that is, He causes things to happen simply by speaking. He creates things simply by commanding them into existence.

And what He creates is good—and good means “holy” and “perfect.” Good is not an average score on a scale of “bad” to “excellent.” This isn’t a B+ creation: when God declares something to be good, He means that it couldn’t be better—it is just as He designed it to be.

Before our short Old Testament lesson is ended, He creates light and separates it from the darkness, then sets day apart from night. He creates light on the first day, and that’s remarkable, when you think about it, because He doesn’t create the sun until the fourth day. Some would say that this is proof that Genesis 1 isn’t a chronological account of creation, but they would be wrong. God doesn’t need the sun to give light to the day: God is light and can enlighten whatever, wherever He wants. He could just zap the earth with light from Himself every day. But God normally works through means: rather than acting directly, He provides through something He creates.

So God goes on to create the heavens and the earth. This is God at His most popular. If the Bible ends with Genesis 1, then you’ll find nearly everybody on the same page about God. We currently have an outbreak of vocal atheism in our world today, so it seems as if those who deny the existence of God are gaining the upper hand. It’s not so: they’re just louder than most, and they love to attack the Lord and His Church. Most people will acknowledge that there is a God and that He’s out there somewhere. And as I said, Genesis 1 is God at His most popular: if God remains a distant God out there somewhere, that gives us an awful lot of freedom in our creation. Actually, freedom is the wrong word, because God gives freedom by His Gospel. If God remains a distant, cosmic God out there somewhere, this gives us an awful lot of license to believe whatever we want about God.

If God is the distant Creator who keeps His distance from creation, then the theology of universalism makes perfect sense. Universalism says that all religions lead to heaven, because everybody is trying to find this distant God in his or her own way. Who are you to say that a religion or its surrounding culture is wrong, if God gives no further instructions?

In reality, the religion that underlies this universalism is the religion of deism—the teaching that there’s a God out there somewhere, who observes but doesn’t intervene. According to deism, you’re born into this creation, you live, you die and the world goes on. This was popular at the time of the birth of the United States, among the “founding fathers.” Thomas Jefferson actually rewrote the Bible, based on deism: it ends with Jesus, a great teacher, laid in a tomb. There are no miracles, no resurrection and no eternal life.

Studies show today that, while the majority of Canadians still identify themselves as Christians, they actually practice a form of deism: in one of the most important studies of the past few years, it’s been labeled “moralistic therapeutic deism.” Moralistic therapeutic deism. This religion is moralistic because it says that the goal of Christianity is all about being good, being moral. It’s therapeutic because the practice of Christianity is all about doing things to become better. It’s deistic because most Americans believe that God is out there, but He’s out there for a lifeline when things get tough. You don’t need to be bothered with God as long as life is going okay, so you only need to take religion seriously when you’re in big trouble. That’s why it doesn’t seem hypocritical to many when they say, “I’m a Christian, but I don’t need to go to church.”

Again, if the Bible ends at Genesis 1, all of this makes perfect sense. If God prefers to keep His distance and be the absent Father, if He has to keep His distance because He can't fit in the room, then it's left for you to pretty much do what you want and hope it all turns out okay.

Of course, the Bible goes on for a few more chapters after Genesis 1. And, of course, God doesn't stay far away from His creation. He draws so near as to become flesh; rather than spend life saying, "God is out there somewhere," He gives the world the pleasure of pointing to a manger in Bethlehem and saying, "There is God, born of Mary for us." He gives the world the joy of pointing to the cross and saying, "We don't have to wonder if this distant God will save us, because we see Him dying for our salvation. Praise be to this God who makes Himself known in Christ!" Of course, the world doesn't sing the praises of God. Instead, it takes great offense that the Lord would draw so near and save in such a specific time, place and way. Those without faith have no love for a God who draws near on a cross.

You **rejoice** that God draws near, for you know He draws near with grace and salvation. You find great joy in our Gospel lesson today, because you can point to that cosmic, omnipotent God of Genesis 1 in the Jordan River in Mark 1. The baptism of Jesus has a lot in common with the creation of the world. God is present there: God the Son stands in the river, baptized. God the Spirit hovers above the waters as He descends upon Jesus like a dove. God the Father speaks: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." The presence of the triune God there is astounding: creation is no longer good, but corrupted by sin and dying. Rather than kick creation to the curb, or wad it up and throw it away like a useless piece of garbage, God tears the heavens open and enters into His creation to save it.

He saves by His own sacrifice, and that's what the baptism of Jesus is about. There's no reason for Jesus to be baptized for Himself: baptism is for sinners, and Jesus isn't sinful. But He's baptized with all those sinners because He's taking their place. He's going to bear their sins and their infirmities to the cross, and that journey begins in earnest at His baptism.

He saves by speaking—speaking His powerful, effective Word that makes things happen. Usually when Jesus heals somebody, He does so merely by speaking. One might say that when Jesus heals, He is creating: He is creating health where sin has corrupted flesh, and He is creating life where death has put people into the grave.

Why does Jesus do these miracles? There are a few reasons for the miracles He performs, but perhaps the most important is so that you may know that He has the power to forgive sins. See, when Jesus says to someone, "I forgive you," that's His powerful, effective Gospel: by His Word, He takes sins away. He creates faith and makes life. He makes sinners good—not B+ better-than-average good, but perfect, sinless and holy in the eyes of God.

So there's much reason to praise God as you hear of the baptism of Jesus, that God would draw so near as to step into the Jordan, have the muck of man's sin poured on Him, and then haul it to the cross for your salvation. But you have more to rejoice in today, because God draws nearer. He draws near to you.

This is why you rejoice in your baptism, no matter how long ago it took place. Like Jesus' baptism, your baptism also has a lot in common with Genesis 1.

The triune God—who created the heavens and the earth—was present at your baptism for you. You were baptized “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”. The Lord was there: but rather than just zap you with grace, He worked through means as usual—just like He uses the sun to channel light to you, He used water and His Word to baptize you.

God the Holy Spirit was present at your baptism to wash away your sins, to give you forgiveness and faith and life (Titus 3:5,6). God the Son was there, joining you to His death and resurrection, saying, “You don't have to die for your sin because I've already died for your sin” (Romans 6:1-11). God the Father was there, too; and for the sake of His Son who went to the cross in your place, He declared, “You too are My beloved child, in whom I am well-pleased.” For the sake of Jesus, you're now a son or daughter of God and an heir of eternal life.

In your baptism, you were born again. You are now a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:16), because the same triune God who created all things in the beginning went to the cross to redeem His creation. Then He went to the font to create you anew. He drew that close to forgive you, specifically and personally. Nor has He left to watch from a distance. It is no coincidence that when Jesus instituted baptism in Matthew 28, He promised, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Having created you anew, He sustains you with His Word and His Supper until that day when He will deliver you out of this corrupted world to life everlasting.

What a difference forgiveness and faith make! Without faith, the world prefers God at a distance—and denies or resents the fact that He becomes flesh, wins salvation and gives out forgiveness through certain means. But the very things that enrage the world are those that give you great comfort. God is not watching from a distance and leaving you to chance or your own wits. He has redeemed you at the cross and given that redemption to you by name at your baptism. Thanks be to God that He draws so near with grace and salvation, for by His presence and work you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.