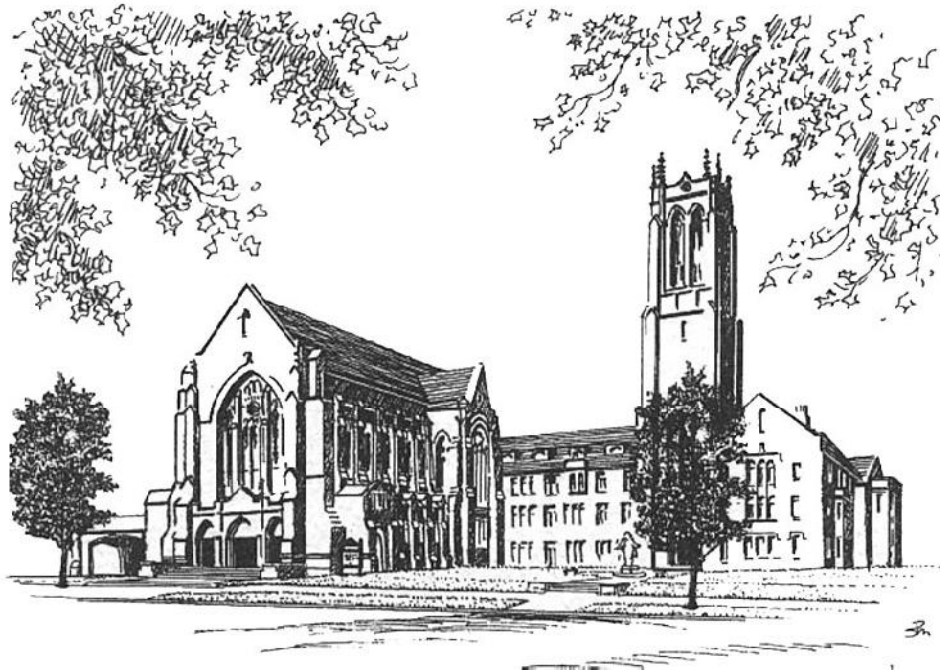


BEGINNING
by
Dr. L. James (Jim) Bankston
(*Baptism of the Lord*)
8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



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Texts: Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29 (UMH 761); Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

Genesis 1:1-5

¹In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the 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.

³Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And 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. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He 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. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

According to Genesis, creation begins when God speaks a word over the waters, “Let there be light.” Light out of darkness, order out of chaos, there is something instead of nothing, life instead of nothingness because of the movement and word of the mysterious presence of God. It is a great way to talk about life and meaning and why we are here. And in the rest of Genesis, chapter one, after every act of creation, God says it is good.

It was a great beginning, a good start. God is powerful and mysterious and relational, and creation and life are good. Likewise, when Jesus is baptized, he comes to the waters, not the primordial waters, but the Jordan River. A word is spoken by John and an affirmation made by God. “You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

It is the same pattern. Water, word, and affirmation. A good beginning. It is the way life begins for all of us: water, word, affirmation. And it is the story of our baptism as well, the beginning of our Christian journey. Water, word, affirmation. A good beginning.

The Sunday after Epiphany in the liturgy of the church is the day we remember and celebrate the baptism of Jesus and our own baptism. When you were baptized, it involved water, a word spoken by the minister and an affirmation. Affirmation by proud parents if you were an infant that they would raise you in the church and in a Christian environment. And if you were an adult, an affirmation by you that you would live a Christian life, God helping. And in both cases, as with Jesus, God affirms, “You are my child with whom I am well pleased.” It’s a good beginning.

How is it today? What course corrections, if any, need to be made on your Christian journey? How do you follow a good start?

In this season of New Year’s resolutions and new commitments, ole John the Baptist out there in the wilderness sets the pattern. Like many of us at the beginning of a new year, he adopts an austere diet – locusts and wild honey – he chooses his wardrobe carefully – camel hair garments and a leather belt – and he provides a way for people to repent of past misdeeds and make a new start. He is the prototype for new beginnings. What a perfect character as we think about New Year’s resolutions and perhaps some new commitments to things that matter.

About this time of the year every year, most of us make a good start at such things. Christmas celebrations and candles in the darkness, and New Year’s resolutions are still fresh with us. But already, the world is beginning to return to its normal routine, Texans playoff victory notwithstanding. Old patterns of behavior call to us and the hope of the candle in the darkness seems like a distant memory. How

do you move forward with faith, hope, and love in this New Year after a good beginning? Or, to put it another way, how can you be a changed person in a world that hasn't changed very much at all?

Perhaps it is good to remember that the consistent witness of the Bible is that faithful living always happens in the midst of the real world. After those beautiful stories of beginnings in chapters one and two of Genesis, the rest of the Bible is about life and faith amidst temptation and conflict. Life is lived east of Eden where people are not always their best selves and indeed where brother kills brother. The story goes there very quickly in the book of Genesis.

Jesus himself is born in a stable because there is no room in the inn. And according to Matthew's gospel, the holy family has to get out of town pretty quickly so Herod can't kill the Christ child. If you think the Bible is not about faith in the real world, then you haven't read it closely enough.

And if you think that Jesus doesn't understand the things you face on a daily basis, you have forgotten his story. Faith, hope, and love always happen in the real world. And the witness of our faith is that in the every day routines and conflicts, every now and then there is an ordering of the chaos, a light shines in the darkness, and a voice comes from somewhere in some form that says, "You are my child. With you I am well pleased."

Beginnings and new beginnings and good intentions are wonderful things, but do not get discouraged when the going gets tough. Remember, each new day, by God's grace, is a new beginning. Each new day, the light shines in the darkness.

When Jesus came up out of the water and the voice was just an echo, he stumbled up the muddy banks of the Jordan River and out into the wilderness. We really don't know anything about Jesus' early life. There was a 30-year silence. Do you think Jesus had some idea about what was ahead for him? I think he did; yet he went anyway. He went to be baptized, he went to the wilderness, he went to life, and he went to the cross. He embraced his calling and vocation as we all should.

The vocation for all of us, as it was for Jesus, is to be a child of God in a sometimes harsh world. That is the calling of each of us as baptized people. In such

conditions, we all must listen to hear that voice of our baptism again, the voice at the beginning, “You are my child. With you I am well pleased.”

Did you see the story of the church of the Nativity on Christmas Day? The Church of the Nativity is in Bethlehem. It is built over the traditional site of the actual birthplace of Jesus, the cave or the stable or whatever. The old church has been there for hundreds of years. I’ve been there. It is an inspiring place. There is a star in the granite to approximate the actual birthplace of Jesus.

Like most holy sites in Israel, more than one religious order claims some authority. In the Church of the Nativity it is the Armenian Christians and the Coptic Christians. Most of the time, the tension is managed. But this year, on Christmas Day, right there in the Church of the Nativity, two groups of clergy got into a fight. There they were, those old priests arguing about something that must have seemed important at the time, beating each other with canes and staffs. When I read that story, part of me wanted to say, how terrible. Can’t we at least keep the birthplace of Jesus a place of peace on Christmas Day? Yet another side of me said, how perfect. That’s our world. We fight over things that finally don’t matter, or if they do matter, it is not worth the violence.

About that same time frame, there was another story about a banquet for old retired professional football players. And there were these two old guys who had played on opposite teams and had never really been friends. I’m thinking, OK, they are going to let bygones be bygones, shake hands and be friends. But no. There are these two old guys in their 80’s, going after each other. We do live in the world of Cain and Able. It is the world into which Jesus was born, the world into which Jesus was baptized. It is the world into which you were born and into which you were baptized also.

There are a lot of great baptism scenes in movies. Robert Duvall in *Tender Mercies* where a broken down old country-western singer tries to make a new beginning in life. Robert Duvall in *The Apostle* where the fallen-from-grace Pentecostal preacher re-baptizes himself in a Louisiana Bayou. There’s that wonderful scene in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* where the not-so-bright one of the three odyssey characters is baptized in the river with the church folk as Allison Krauss sings in the background.

But perhaps the best baptism scene in a movie is one that is unintentional, or if it is intentional, it is subtle, so subtle you may have missed it. The Tim Robbins character in *Shawshank Redemption*, you will remember if you saw the movie, has been imprisoned for a crime he didn't commit. Even though prison life is brutal, he remains hopeful and endures a very hypocritical warden and all of the other indignities of prison life. During the years the prisoner is secretly digging a tunnel out. Near the end of the movie, he executes his plan, breaks through a wall and crawls through the prison sewer to escape beyond the wall. You may remember he makes it to river, plunges in, strips off his prison clothes, and heads toward freedom. There are more baptismal images there than I can count.

You and I live in a world that is still awaiting full redemption. In the meantime, it is a world into which God brings some order out of the chaos. It is a world into which the light of Jesus has come and the darkness has not overcome it. At the beginning of this New Year, remember that you are baptized: there's water, word, and affirmation.

“You are my child. With you I am well pleased.”

You are set aside in this very world to live with faith, hope, and love.