

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Communion Service on Sunday, January 8, 2012
Lessons: Genesis 1:1-5 and Mark 1:1-13

BEGINNINGS

“In the beginning.” Before life or light, form or substance, there is only the great void – an emptiness the ancients feared and we modern or postmodern people still fear, even though we name it differently. They called it *tehom*, the Deep, and saw it in the great waters of the seas that surrounded the dry land and, to their minds, threatened always to pour in and overwhelm life and civilization. We call it by newer names like randomness, and we wonder if life has any meaning and purpose or just happens however it happens.

But Genesis has a message: “In the beginning, God.” To the peoples of the ancient world, the void – the great darkness – was like a monster ever threatening to consume life and swallow all light. The Deep was fearsome and almost, somehow, hungry like a great beast waiting to spring upon the living and devour them. Think of what we call a black hole in space which swallows whatever comes near, even light itself, and from which nothing escapes. But, says Genesis, though “darkness was upon the face of the deep,” “the spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.” So the message, the word of life and hope, begins. Though the darkness is deep and the emptiness consuming, God is greater, and the spirit of God moves freely and without fear. “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and at God’s command, the darkness is dispelled. Life cannot be reduced to nothing, robbed of meaning, in the presence of the Spirit. Wherever God’s Spirit is moving, there is life and hope. God spoke into the darkness, “and there was light.”

The opening creation story in Genesis comes down to us from the dark and empty years of the Jews’ exile in Babylon when their old life as God’s covenant people in the land of promise had been destroyed and was gone beyond recall. The Babylonian Empire seemed almighty, irresistible, and magnificent in its power and glory. But the God whose spirit had moved over the face of the Deep without fear and at whose command the heavens and the earth were born, sent a new prophet with a word of salvation that called the depressed people to look with new hope even if it lay beyond the reasonable limits of hope.

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

The same God who had led the Hebrew slaves out of their bondage in Egypt would lead the Jews out of their exile in Babylon back to their homeland. Neither chaos monster nor proud empire can intimidate or hinder the God whose redemptive love lays claim to us. The spirit of God moves freely through the darkness and right over the face of consuming emptiness but fears no threat of the void or any destroyer of life. On the ground, the empire may seem almighty, but from above, it is tiny and quite pathetic when it struts its power. No, God's love for Israel will not be hindered by so small a thing as Babylon.

A child cries out in the night. Some dream of monster or predator planted during the day has awakened the child to fear of an unseen threat that seems present in the dark and closing in upon its small victim. Then father or mother, having heard the cry, clicks on the light, and fear is dispelled, not merely by the light, but by the presence of the parent in whose love and care the child trusts. If we understand that common incident of fear overcome by love and trust in that love, then we should be able to comprehend and perhaps even feel the message of this first chapter of Genesis to the exiled Jews as they struggled with the seemingly futile hope of ever being free, going home again, and regaining their life and purpose as God's covenant people. They were alone in the dark, and the empire that held them captive was so strong that it seemed impossible it could ever falter. Even worse, the exiles knew they had only themselves and their parents' generation to blame for their lack of hope, purpose, and vision for their future. From the darkness of exile, devoid of hope, first came this Genesis creation story, to proclaim the love of the Creator God who would seek out the beloved people wherever they trembled in the dark, embrace them, forgive them, calm their fears, inspire hope's new courage within them, and lead them home.

That's the life story of people trapped in darkness, in chaos overwhelming, in an emptiness that like a black hole in space swallows any light that seeks to enter it. I do not think I am talking about something foreign to most of us but of something we know only too well. Grief, shame, and disappointment are very real experiences of the power of darkness to smother life. Addiction is a darkness it may seem to the one caught in it that even God cannot enter, and mental illness is a chaos that consumes a person from within. It is a terrible thing to be afraid of your own mind. Fear drains from us the strength to strive for life and freedom. Accumulated anxieties rob us of joy in any present day, no matter how sunny. Guilt can weigh us down so we can't slog forward. Cynicism and pessimism try to defend us against further disappointment by mocking and dismissing any light of hope that might start to shine for us.

All of these negative conditions of heart and soul, these destroyers of life that can grip and hold us, seem to me more understandable in the biblical terms of chaos than in judgmental terms of blame and punishment. People living in consuming darkness need a

friend who will embrace them in that darkness and help them emerge from it much more than they need yet another spiritual beating to drive them down even further.

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” With those words, Mark’s gospel starts to tell us of the coming of God’s redemptive love in a new and most human way. John the Baptist calls upon the people to turn toward God, entrust themselves to God’s forgiving love, and be baptized to enact a new beginning for themselves – a new life arising from the waters of chaos. Die to the old, and rise to a new beginning. Let there be light. Let there be hope. Let there be love. Jesus responds as he stands poised to begin his ministry. Without pride or presumption of being special and therefore exempt from our struggles, he goes to John to be baptized in the Jordan’s muddy water. He will live as God created human beings to live: not virtuously in the strength of his own goodness and purity, but faithfully in the true and far greater strength of God’s grace. He has not come to be better than we are. He has not come to rule and be served as the world’s great people rule and are served; he has come to offer service to even the lowliest of the people and to give himself for their freedom. He will break their bondage and restore them to God, bring them home and give them back to each other.

God believes in new beginnings and believes in offering them to people who have lost their way or have been trapped in some confinement whether they were put there by others, by the circumstances of life which are not fair, or by their own mistakes, failures, poor choices, or wrongdoings. The Spirit of God moves freely and boldly over the very face of the emptiness that consumes life and hope like a black hole and for the one who is trapped, lost, or defeated, God commands in whatever way is needed, “Let there be light.”

Deliverance into freedom does not come easily, quickly, or automatically. Even Jesus, right after he hears the voice declaring him God’s own beloved Son, must then struggle with temptation and doubt. Life requires the strength of faith to live it and a community of faith to support it. That’s why we are here preparing to come together at the Lord’s table and hear Christ’s “welcome” spoken to us. He who went into utter darkness where all life and hope perish, now calls us to walk with him into new light. Amen.