

Westminster Sermon – “Called into Being”  
Scripture Readings – Genesis 1:1-5, Mark 1:4-11  
Sunday, January 10, 2020  
Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is Genesis 1:1-5. The water in Genesis represents the surging chaos out of which God’s spirit brings order in the creation of the world. On this first Sunday after Epiphany we remember the Baptism of the Lord. If baptism is understood as a new beginning, then our first reading is especially appropriate. Fred Craddock makes an interesting point when he says: *Theologically, baptism as new creation can be seen against the original creation. Just as the original act of God inaugurated the first creation so the baptism of Jesus inaugurated his career, and the baptism of individuals inaugurates their new creation.* Hear now the Word of God.

*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.*

Our second scripture reading is Mark 1:4-11. For Mark, Jesus’ baptism at the age of 30 is the beginning of Christ’s public ministry and also the beginning of a new age—an age of inclusiveness. Water continues to be a theme as we gather by the River Jordan with John, the Baptist and Christ, however the symbolism has changed; rather than representing chaos, water is linked to the utterly new beginning that comes with the gift of the spirit. Hear now God’s word.

*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 Jesus 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."*

The title of the sermon: “Called into Being”

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, we thank you for your clear and strong voice calling the world into being and for your “still, small voice” speaking to us, time and time again, in tender and unexpected ways. May the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you. Amen.

*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters... God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.*

Our Scriptures begin with the voice of God calling the world into being, creating order out of chaos, light out of darkness. The metaphor of God’s voice is clear and distinct. We cannot see God; however, we can hear God. God’s voice creates, sustains, disciplines, comforts, and calls us into being.

The voice of God is heard in the chaos before creation, in the thunder of the rainstorm and in the stillness after the earthquake, wind, and fire. God’s voice calls to the children of Israel before they pass through the deep waters on their way home from captivity and God’s voice calls to Jesus of Nazareth at the Jordan River on the day of his baptism.

Through the power of the spoken word and oral tradition, our faith story has been passed from generation to generation of God’s children listening for and discerning the voice of God amid the other voices in the world.

Our voices and how we choose to use them can be an instrument of God to empower, to speak truth to power, and to call one another into being. It is a privilege and a joy and something that must not to be taken for granted. Newborn infants respond to the voice of their mother with an unusual familiarity and trust because these are the tones and the sounds they have heard within the womb. Youth long for affirmation and identity in the voices of their parents, mentors, and peers. As we grow older, the voices of dear friends, family, and members of our faith community provide a comfort and a healing in ways we cannot fully comprehend. When we find ourselves overwhelmed by the unexpected waters of life, these are the voices that sustain us, uphold us, remind us of who we are and to whom we belong. Let us take a moment to reflect on the voices that have called us into being on our life journeys.

I remember the first time I heard my husband Peter’s voice. It was almost 30 years ago, on a Friday in March of 1991. I had not met him in person; however, I was anticipating his call. I heard a kindness and yet, a strength in his voice. It is a voice that has become a stronghold, a rock for me over the years, and it is a voice I needed to hear this past Wednesday.

Rev. McGill and I had just completed gathering in the Chancel and praying for members as part of our Prayer Ministry and mindful that it was the day of Epiphany. (Rev. Choi was away for an intensive study week as part of his Doctor of Ministry degree). We were returning to our studies when I received a call from Paul in Houston letting me know the Capitol had been breached. Trajan and I watched on my computer the chaos and listened to the cacophony with dismay and great sadness. In the midst of one of the darkest days in our country’s history, one could not help but have an epiphany, one could not help but see the light in the truth about the power of words and the importance of how we choose to use our voices. Will we speak in ways that build up or will we speak in ways that tear down? Will we call forth the better angels in one another or will we stoke the flame for hatred and destruction?

Today, as we commemorate Jesus' baptism and remember our own, we hear the echo of words spoken through the prophet Isaiah to God's people in another challenging time.

*"Fear not!" says the Lord, the one who created you, the one who formed you, "I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you...Because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you.*

In the voice of God, we hear the commitment and affirmation of the One who called us into being, the One in whose eyes we are precious, and honored and loved. In Jesus' ministry of healing, compassion and inclusion we hear the voice of God once again. A voice we can recognize because it is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. (1 Corinthians 13:4b-6)

As we reaffirm the baptismal covenant within this faith community, we give thanks for the children whom we miss during this pan'damn'ic, whose voices bring joy and hope, and whom we have promised to nurture and to call into being. We remember and affirm the strong and clear voices of Westminster's founding mothers and fathers, calling for *justice to roll down like an ever flowing stream* as abolitionists, conductors of the underground railroad, and members of the Dorcas Society advocating for justice and caring for the poor and oppressed.

Today, we give thanks for the powerful symbol of water in our life together; a symbol that reminds us not only of the chaos and danger of deep, overwhelming waters, but also of the still waters that restore our soul, and the cleansing and refreshing streams along the desert paths we are sometimes called to journey.

May we journey into the New Year, strengthened by the voice of the One who calls us into being; the One to whom we belong; the One who created the waters and who promises to be with us when we pass through them.

As we gather at the river, let us remember our baptisms with gratitude, joy, and hope. Amen.