

Now, and Not Yet

Mark 1: 1-11



©Rev. David Carter Florence
Swarthmore Presbyterian Church
January 7, 2018

There is a strong sense of movement in the creation story that is not captured by the translation usually. It is an on-going creation, even in the Genesis text for this morning and throughout the over twenty two creation texts in the Hebrew Bible. There's not just one or two creation stories (the ones we are familiar with) but there are links to creation stories throughout the Bible and most of them have a sense of a creating world that is ongoing. It has movement and power that tells us that God is alive and that God is begetting life over and over again.

This is reflected in our motto of the Presbyterian Church - that we are Reformed, reformed from the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches, but also and always, Reforming: *Semper Reformanda*; *Ecclesia Reformata* - Reformed and Always Reforming. This points to the verbal, moving nature to our understanding of scripture, to our understanding of God, and ultimately to understanding ourselves.

Mark's gospel begins with the baptism of Jesus, framed by the activity of John the Baptist. It's a powerful picture of a turning point in history. John has been proclaiming that now something new is about to happen. This is the very thing Isaiah spoke about generations back, long before - the one thing all the people have been waiting for. What are they waiting for? The one thing that breaks into history and changes everything ... this was a history of trouble, a history of failure, of being conquered and occupied, being disloyal, failing again and again, revealing the very nature of being a human being. To use John Milton's words from *Paradise Lost*, we are "sufficient to have stood and free to fall."

But the now at this moment, John is just beginning this new discovery and this is a discovery we share in. The discovery of who Jesus is. Who he was, who he is, and who he will be. Will he be the Warrior King who makes things right? A mighty warrior who will throw the Romans out? the Babylonians? the Egyptians, or the Persians out? Is this finally the one to save us? Will he be a Priest who cleanses and upholds the Torah in the most beautiful and magnificent ways, making all things right? Will he be yet another Prophet who has the guts to name the truth, to speak to the principalities and powers, to name the truth, to work for justice, and make things right? Mark's Gospel plays with these tensions between these various persona of Jesus. While Jesus is usually understood in various scripture in the persona of a King, or a Prophet or a Priest, we are left with the question of who Jesus is. This is an on-going life question.

Many more recent studies have placed Jesus in the desert as a peasant, perhaps having visited the Essenes, those who held apocalyptic and eschatological visions of the end time, and Jesus would be the one who would break into history to change everything for the better. He may be the one who could overthrow the Romans. Maybe this is where John's community was, out in the desert, thinking about revolution.

The precise answers are never exactly clear. When it may be exciting to wade through these studies and consider who Jesus was and is, we are still left with many possibilities. As interesting as this may be, we are still left with a core faith question. What does it mean to us that God came to earth to live with us? Who is Jesus and what is our relationship to him?

The answers are not clear. We don't know what will happen and who Jesus will be. The **now** is happening, but the **not yet** nature of this story keeps us not knowing. We don't know how this will play out. And here we are now with this picture of John in the river, performing baptisms -- the old way of cleansing gentiles who were becoming part of Israel.

John's authority was being questioned by the powers; the Priests, Scribes and Pharisees. Meanwhile the people of the Judean countryside and Jerusalem, they know. They know something is going on. They come to the river, almost as a mob, crowds of people coming, not only the people of Israel and Jerusalem who followed the purity laws, or the Temple people, but especially Gentiles. The "unclean" were coming to the river for this cleansing ritual, knowing that they are the ones who need this, recognizing the truth of his message! The truth is the one thing that holds authority! Always. And they knew who had authority.

This is the kind of scene that movie directors love because it is the defining moment for the major character of the story, the defining moment for John, who is quite a character, and Jesus! Jesus may seem very tame and maybe a little boring compared to John. When I survey the film depictions I see radically different approaches that help us to see the tension in this moment for Jesus.

Picture a calm, beautiful, gentle day where lovely music plays as Jesus is dipped in the water, and the blue sky opens gently and a dove descends to light on the Savior's shoulder? Or you may picture something quite different: Is it a raw desert landscape, with the sun glaring, crowds of people caught up in John's hell fire and brimstone preaching, mobs descending through the mud, and Jesus is there in their midst as a person ... the smells are rich and the sounds are rich and it is alive. Until he steps in the waters - John's wild-eyed ranting and attacking of the authorities goes on, risking his very life, and then Jesus steps in the water and the mood changes. All that John has been saying, he knows now is about to come to fruition, and he may not know exactly what will happen, but in all accounts he contends that the Messiah has arrived and this is the pivotal moment.

I appreciate the raw desert scene with the longing people clamoring for a chance to be a part of a world that will change! The world needs to be changed. It's like the churches that happen sometimes in our basements and in our Sunday School rooms. The AA groups and Twelve step groups who are all about change, but perhaps do not show up here for worship. It's muddy. It's hot. It's risky. It's so carnal and alive, that it's hard to picture.

In another story John refuses to baptize Jesus, but Jesus urges him on - the heaven is ripped open (perhaps foreshadowing the ripping of the Temple Curtain when Jesus dies) and a dove, behaving more like a predator than prey, dives in to confirm that this is someone who will change the world. This is the Messiah. And then we hear a voice, maybe John declaring, "you are my Son, the Beloved, I am well pleased!" And now we are ready to begin the Gospel. This is Mark's beginning, and an overview of the whole struggle of incarnation.

Theologian Lee Barrett describes this exchange like a see-saw. On one side sit Isaiah, all Hebrew Scriptures, the Law; the Torah, in its beauty and in its confines. On the other side, Jesus, walking through the crowds down to the river to meet all that has gone before. John is situated underneath the see-saw, acting as the fulcrum, acting out the past, the present and ushering in the future. God is active in the world. God continues to be active in the world, and here we are now. "As the archetypal preacher/prophet witness, John links Jesus to God's promises in Israel's past. The setting in the wilderness evokes memories of the preparation of the people of Israel for entrance into the promised land."

Any way we look at this event within the scope of the total Biblical narrative, the symbolism is arresting. It doesn't seem that Jesus is worried too much about the authority that everyone else seems to be worried about. In fact his decisions about who he is, how he will live, and act, and teach and heal, and die are probably facing him here now in the most immediate way.

The Spirit immediately drives him out into the wilderness for forty days to be tempted by Satan. The other gospels pick up the extent of the temptation. Is this a potent call to turn around the world and use power? John has said, turn, repent. John has said, make it clean. Make the path straight. Is that what the calling is? Does he take up this messianic kingship? John brings that rather strongly. Is this the calling of Jesus? I don't think so. I think Jesus is responding to a new thing. A new thing that is intimated in the scriptures, something that is written not only on tablets, but on our hearts. It's sort of a sub-theme, a sub-plot in the prophets. It's not the core message of the prophets.

Matthew and Luke make it clear that Jesus has made some choices in the desert. Jesus will not be limited to legal, prophetic, or messianic teachings that lead to power and leadership and changing the existing world. He will not succumb to the desires of all to have this change, but he will bring something new. He will bring a message of God's grace, of love, of peace -- not the message that worldly powers and principalities really ever use with authenticity. Propaganda maybe, but not authenticity. The message of justice with peace, not justice through war or violence is strong, and never becomes a dominant theme for most Christians either.

He leaves this desert on a path that surprised the world. So today here we are here with John's legal teachings, his ethical strength, and even though Jesus validates John's ministry and teachings, he's going further to a new place, and he's taking us with him.

Do we still repent and do we need to? Each Sunday morning we say prayers of confession, and I appreciate this simple act of saying these words, but the real action happens in our hearts, and in our home at night, on walks, in our struggles of how do we turn? And how do we turn anew to God? Repent means to turn. How do we turn, and turn again? We may not believe in this metaphor or this story of a personified evil, or Satan, but we do stare evil in the face more than we may know.

Now with Jesus we have a new way to do this staring, and this turning because we have a message that's different. We have a freedom to choose, and we have to choose again, because we will fail and we will struggle, and we will choose again, and we exercise our freedom as Jesus exercised his freedom.

The Baptism of the Lord today reminds us of so many promises of love, and grace and covenant, but we may walk away without our human agency being truly engaged if we are not looking around. Looking around at the world as if we were in the wilderness, and all the choices of how we might live, how we might love, how we might die. As much as God is sovereign over all the universe, as much as God's providence embraces us, we still have decisions to make, choices, work to do and places to turn, knowing full well that we will need to choose again, and again.

Because it is by turning and turning again that we do come round right, as the song says. So it is in this way knowing full well that our human condition is something that Jesus did experience, we are invited to Baptism and invited to the table. To the table we are welcomed to find him again, making choices, offering grace, living fully human lives and expressing the fully divine.