

A New Beginning  
Sermon on Genesis 1:1-2, Acts 19:1-7, and Mark 1:9-11 Preached at Highland Park UMC  
Sunday, January 8, 2006

As my friends and co-workers will tell you, I do not like to get up early, which I define rather broadly as anytime before 9:00 a.m. I especially don't like to get up early on Monday morning. I don't like the alarm clock to go off, I don't like the phone to ring, and I especially don't like the doorbell to chime. So you can imagine my mood one Monday morning in England when my doorbell rang at 8:00 a.m. Since the manse served as both my house and the church office, I had no choice but to answer the bell's intrusive summons on my summer slumber. Running my fingers through my hair and rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I got downstairs before the bell could ring again.

I opened my front door to see the headmaster of a local school standing there with a small stack of papers in his hand. "Oh good morning, Reverend," the man said in his typically cheerful manner. "I hope I haven't wakened you." "It's all right, David," I lied politely. "What may I do for you?" "It's about the arrangements for Matthew's baptism," David said. "He's got to be immersed you see. That's what the word means. I've taken the liberty of looking it up." And with that, the cheerful headmaster handed me the papers, photocopies of the entry for "baptize" from a Greek-English dictionary.

Because it was 8:00 a.m. and I was in my pajamas, I wasn't in the mood to debate the nuances of biblical Greek nor the relative validity of each of the different modes of baptism. So I thanked David for his work and promised to get back to him. Performing this baptism correctly was no matter of mere ritual propriety or intellectual integrity. Matthew was David's teenaged son, so it was important that everything be just right. To that end, we rented a birthing pool from a local midwife, set it up on the lawn behind the church, and filled it with water from a hose.

That Sunday was a glorious one as Matthew renounced sin and the devil, professed his faith in Jesus Christ as Lord, and promised to live a Christian life. Then, with his father beside me to assist, I immersed Matthew three times—in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—as a crowd of his family, friends, and church members looked on proudly. The party that followed was one of the best I have ever attended.

I love to remember Matthew's baptism, and I hope he does, too. Not everybody gets to be baptized in a bright blue birthing pool. We had talked about going to the beach, which wasn't hard to do on the island where we lived, or a river or to the aquatic center. One family had volunteered to buy a small kiddie wading pool. But the more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea of that birthing pool. For the midwife who owned it, the pool was a tool of her trade: In its comforting waters, mothers in labor could give birth. For the church that used it, the pool became a symbol of Matthew's rebirth: his spiritual birth by water and the Spirit. For Matthew, and for all who receive it, baptism is a new beginning.

So much of baptism's power comes from its use of water. In these modern days, spirituality has become all the rage. We use yoga and tai chi and meditation to find inner peace. Spirituality becomes a means of escaping the world with its clutter and noise and things, to realize an experience that transcends earth and time. But the baptismal waters remind us that matter matters. God chooses common, ordinary, everyday things like water and wine and bread as vehicles for his grace, making them—and us—holy.

Water is holy because “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 waters” (Gen. 1:1-2). By water there is a new creation, something that has never been before. By water there is a new beginning. In that beginning a wind from God swept over

the face of the waters, or we could equally appropriately say the spirit of God hovered over the waters. Either way, God uses water to mediate creation; creation comes about through water and the word. The wind blew and God's spirit hovered, purposefully moving the creation toward the fulfillment of God's will. Because God was present, because it was the wind of God's breath or spirit moving over the waters, that activity of God is in some profound sense creative.

This creative activity of God is encompassed in the Hebrew word *bārā'*, a verb of whom only God is the subject in the Old Testament. *bārā'* describes what only God can do and is "used to speak about the fundamental newness and uniqueness of what God brings into being."<sup>1</sup> This same term, *bārā'*, create, says Walter Brueggemann, "asserts distance and belonging to. It is affirmed that the world has *distance* from God and a life of its own. At the same time, it is confessed that the world *belongs* to God and has no life without reference to God."<sup>2</sup>

It is this distance and belonging to that provided the occasion for Jesus' baptism by John. That lonely prophet, attired in camel's hair and fed by locusts and wild honey, stood on the banks of the Jordan River calling people to repentance. That call to repentance was a cry to look at the distance that separated men and women from God. In making the creation free, in giving men and women lives of their own, God took the extraordinary risk that the creatures he had made for relationship with him would reject fellowship with God in favor of their own autonomy.

In modern, capitalist, democratic republics such as ours, we have come to place tremendous value on autonomy. We understand autonomy to mean freedom from all external constraints, independence consisting of self-determination, or the right to be self-governing. Indeed, autonomy involves the power of self-direction, possessing the ability to act as one

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<sup>1</sup> Terence Fretheim, *Genesis*, New Interpreters Bible vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 342.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 198) 17.

decides, independent of the will of others. But through insisting on our autonomy, our dependence on no one but ourselves to guide our thoughts and actions, we fall into sin. We separate ourselves from God, putting distance between us. We forget that we are made for belonging and that belonging to God requires our obedience.

And so John appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. In his act of proclamation John was summoning people to immediate response: to realize their separation from God and to return to him. Our distance from God is never so great that God cannot reach out to us, to call us back, to bring us back to him with outstretched arms. Such is God's desire to restore our relationship with him that he sent Jesus not only to us but as one of us that we might be one with him.

When Jesus came to the Jordan to receive John's baptism of repentance, he did so in solidarity with sinful humanity. Although Jesus remained without sin, I believe he underwent John's baptism, a baptism intended for the forgiveness of sins, to show how completely he identified with us. And as Jesus came 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'" (Mk. 1:10-11).

It is this Jesus, God's only and dearly loved Son, who through his humility and obedience even unto death on the cross (Php. 2:8) bridged the distance between us and God and restored us to right relationship with God. It is by submitting to baptism—and continually living into it—that we find possibility for new beginning. St. Paul says, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a

death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Romans 6:3-5). Baptism is about distance and belonging: distancing ourselves from sin and evil, turning back to the God to whom we belong. In our baptism, God claims us as his unique creation, creatures made for fellowship with God. Baptism, then, is just the beginning, the beginning of a new creation, a creation only God can make, the beginning of new and everlasting life in Jesus Christ.