

“Let There Be!”

January 7, 2024

*Based on Genesis 1:1-3 and Mark 1:9-11. Water, Spirit, Word, and Light*

The most effective tag line in American Protestant history, in my opinion, comes to us from the United Church of Christ: *God is still speaking ...*

The idea, which Presbyterians also believe, is that, while the canon of biblical literature is officially closed, you and I are now living out the Third Testament, through radical listening - in community - as the Spirit calls each generation to make the faith our own, within whatever context we happen to find ourselves.

Jesus shows us how to do that, as he models for us, in his baptism, a conviction that God is still speaking to his generation, in his historical context, as he makes his way from Nowheresville Nazareth - in the poor and culturally contemptible Galilee - into the Jordan in the wilderness of Judea - which is the center of first century Jewish life and learning - through Samaria - which is enemy territory - and abandons himself to the waters.

Something of God has spoken to Jesus, and not just as he rises from the river with the sound of a dove squawking around his head calling him Beloved. Something of God has propelled Jesus in the first place, from Nowheresville Nazareth, through enemy territory, into the center of power and then back out to the wilderness, as he plunges into the waters and renounces all of the ways that we who are human have tainted this good creation toward violence and evil. Jesus wants to be a new creation.

Baptism is, for Jesus in Mark's Gospel, a rite of passage to this new creation, an initiation of sorts, a liberation, a protection, and a commitment to a new way of life for him and for those who follow him, that inspires hope out of chaos and solidarity out of suffering. As Jesus rises from the waters, he is ready to be tested in this new way of life, and he is found worthy. As Jesus rises from the waters, he is ready to teach non-violent radical love as the only valid form of resistance to the powers of domination, division, and demonization.

Those powers are as present for Jesus as they are for us, entering a year we are told will be the biggest global election year in history: fully half of the world's population in 60 countries will make or break self-governance in our time. In some countries, as in ours, genuine fear pervades the populace that democracy may not survive. There is no guarantee that it will. As our poet reminds us, in the span of time it takes for light to travel from a star to the earth, empires rise and empires fall, the earth withers and the flower fades.

Even if democracy does survive this moment, depending on the definition of the ones who believe they are defending it, the chaotic turbulence of a shifting world order will be with us for at least a generation, if not more.

We do not get to opt out of this moment. Our children do not get to opt out of this moment.

Our only option is to choose how to respond, as those who say we want our faith and practice to be rooted in the Way of Jesus, a Way which insists on non-violent radical love as the only valid form of resistance to the powers of domination, division, and demonization.

In the coming weeks and months we will explore that Way in detail, beginning with next week's Martin Luther King theme of Shifting the Cultural Climate Through the Study and Practice of Nonviolence. The following week, our Sunday Seminar will begin our journey through the Power of the Enneagram guiding us through the inner work of social action. The week after that we will ordain and install our newly elected Ruling Elders and Deacons with a special prayer for their role in leading the congregation through the inflection point of the year that lies ahead.

Today, we come to the waters, as Jesus did, knowing full well the danger that lies before us, hoping beyond hope that God's good intention for creation - and the human experiment within that creation - can still come to pass, propelled by the same Spirit that spoke to Jesus at the Jordan, even if we are still stuck home in the snow, calling us Beloved, inviting us to healing, protection, conviction, and shared purpose.

Yes, we fear corruption and chaos. But God is still speaking a new creation into being, and we still get to choose to be part of it. We get to live in such a way that those who look back to us nine hundred years in the future can see our light shining into the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it.

In our Baptismal Blessing today, God is still saying, Let there Be ... And there is!