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Trinity Episcopal Church

Genesis 1: 1 – 5

Ps. 29

Acts 19: 1 – 7

Mark 1: 4 – 11

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It's the beginning of another year. And tradition has it that we make New Year's resolutions. Get in shape. Lose weight. Enjoy life to the fullest. Spend less, save more. Spend more time with the people we love. Get organized. Learn something new. Travel more. Break addictions with smart phones and computer games, smoking, alcohol or whatever. Laugh more. And the lists go on.

Resolutions are a good thing. They are sort of a secular, cultural repentance ritual. They're an acknowledgment that we know we're falling short in some way or another and we'd like to do better. They're about giving up old, bad habits and taking on new, better habits. It's an attempt to change the direction(s) in which we are headed through sheer determination and will power. We'd like another chance. We'd like a new beginning. And that's what we hear about in today's readings: new beginnings. For all of Creation, including us.

In the reading from Genesis, it is indeed a new beginning. For God and for the cosmos. It all happens through the voice of God, God's self-expression, the Word of God. The Trinity, as we know it, is there, though certainly the authors or editors of the Hebrew Scriptures would not have understood it that way.

In the NRSV translation, it says, "...while a wind from God swept over the waters." In Hebrew, it's *ruach*, in Greek it's πνευμα, but in both languages, the word can mean wind, breath or spirit. A wind from God, or the Spirit of God, blows over this soupy, primordial mix. And then, of course, there is God the Creator, the first person of God. So we have the Word, the Spirit and the Creator acting as one to bring a new creation into being. For what it's worth, the very first phrase in Hebrew is constructed in such a way that it is as if it begins in mid-thought, or as if there are three dots in front of the first word, and there is no definite article. A more accurate translation of the Hebrew would read, "...in a beginning." Which is pretty interesting theologically.

It all begins with God speaking Light into the world. Scientists would probably call it a burst of energy, or the Big Bang. Whatever the details, God likes what God creates. God calls the Light good and moves on from there to separate the Light from the dark, and calling them 'day' and 'night.'

Psalms 29 doesn't speak so much of a *new* creation, but it does talk about God's *effect* on creation. And more importantly, it speaks, again, to the power of the voice of God. "The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD over mighty waters. The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty." Once again, it is the voice of God, speaking over water, and that voice is potent.

In the lesson from Acts, Paul is speaking to some folks who had been baptized by John in a baptism of repentance, but not by Jesus, in which they would have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. So, Paul lays his hands on each of these people and it is a new beginning for them as well. The first baptism was a new beginning as they turned back to God from wherever their focus had been. But this second baptism in Christ is a completely new beginning as they begin to be empowered by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, to speak in languages they have never learned, and to prophesy.

Then, we get to John's Gospel and the story of Jesus' baptism by John. Once again, we are so used to this story, that we have a difficult time understanding just how embarrassing this part of the story is to Jesus' earliest followers. Why, after all, does Jesus (the Christ) *need* to participate in a baptism of repentance? Or, perhaps, why does Jesus *want* to do this? And why is John out at the River Jordan baptizing the people instead of them participating in the Temple rituals?

Let's deal with John and the River Jordan first. Why the River Jordan? Because for the Hebrew people, the river, running from north to south into the Sea of Galilee, is highly symbolic. Marcus Borg, author and Episcopal priest, wrote that for the Israelites, "the River Jordan was the traditional boundary between 'the wilderness' and 'the promised land.'" It was through the Jordan that the Israelites had entered the promised land from their exodus out of Egypt more than 1,000 years earlier. And again, a little more than 500 years before Jesus, the Israelites, who had been exiled in Babylon, returned to their homeland through the wilderness, probably crossing over the Jordan and certainly following along by it. So, John's choice of location to perform the baptisms resounds with references to exodus and exile. His baptism would be seen as the way that leads from bondage to liberation, and from exile to return to Yahweh, God. Both entering the Promised Land and returning from exile are relevant to John's call to repentance. And of course, that baptism is a new beginning for these people.

But why would anyone be shocked that John is baptizing here and not at the Temple where people are used to making sacrifices for repentance? The Rev. Rick Morley makes an interesting comparison. He writes that in the Jewish tradition of the time, there are specific ways to deal with sin and to atone for it. It depends upon what the sin is as to what is required for atonement. Levitical law, he points out, is written from the perspective that sin is inevitable, and that it systematically effects the whole community if not handled properly. In other words, sin is not an individual problem.

Repentance or atonement is made through sacrifice, but there is also a ritual bath, a mikvah, done at the pool of Siloam, prior to entering the Temple. Only after being ritually cleansed can one then go and make the required sacrifices. John's being at the River Jordan completely circumvents the Temple. He simply invites people to step into the waters of the Jordan and be cleansed from sin. We don't have any comparable system to the Temple, other than making a personal confession (beginning on p. 446 in the BCP, if you're interested!). So, we miss how upsetting this is to the leadership of the Temple.

Imagine, Morley writes, if Starbucks started advertising Venti-sugar free- skinny Communion. Come on in, relax, tell your story. Listen to some ephemeral music in the background. Pay for it on your smart phone app at the register and then, take and eat the Sacrament, prepared by a trained barista/sacramentalist. That idea would just irritate the stew out of many of us. Here a business, a corporation, is doing what most properly ought to be done in a church! How dare they! What would really get our goat is if people (not any of us, of course) started going in huge numbers to Starbucks for this Communion. Why, pretty soon, our buildings would be empty on Sunday mornings and Starbucks would be overflowing. Hmmm. That part might already be true.

But that is analogous to what John is doing. The Temple leadership sees this wild and wooly firebrand out at the river, usurping power and practice from them. Then along comes Jesus. Maybe, then, one of the reasons that Jesus *chooses* to participate in a baptism by John is to say, from now on, sin and repentance are going to be handled differently. The day is coming, Jesus will say later, when people won't need the Temple, because he, Jesus, will be the new Temple. And through the gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism, the Holy Spirit will reside within each of us and make each of us temples to God.

As Jesus comes up out of the water, he hears God speak those lovely words, “You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well-pleased.” According to Mark, it is only Jesus who hears God speak. It is, once again, the voice of God speaking powerfully over the waters. God speaks to claim Jesus. There is an interesting parallel with the Genesis account. When Light comes into the world, God says it is good. So now, when whom we know as the ‘Light of the World’ is claimed, God is well-pleased. Another reference to a new creation in the making.

Baptism is all about new beginnings, about becoming a new creation in Christ Jesus. All of Christian life is rooted in repentance, in constantly turning back to the God who keeps giving us another chance to get it right. And if all of Christian life is rooted in repentance, then all of Christian life is therefore also rooted in baptism. Becoming a new creation filled with the Holy Spirit and with new possibilities. Anglican bishop, N. T. Wright, reminds us that in the original exodus, God’s presence abides with Israel in a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. Beginning with the baptisms done in Jesus’ name, God chooses to abide within the people of God as the air we breathe and the fire in our hearts. The whole of the Christian Gospel, Wright says, can be summed up in this: that God says to each of us at our baptism what God says to Jesus at his in the River Jordan. God sees us not as we see ourselves, but as we are in Jesus Christ.

In a few moments, we will be renewing our baptismal covenant. I invite us to think of the things that we are covenanting as our New Year’s resolutions, as a new beginning in Christ Jesus for a New Year. Let us close with a prayer from Jean McCallum [*Read Mark and Pray: Prayer Handbook 1992*, ed. Graham Cook, London: United reformed Church, 1992]:

*Jesus, you are the one who rises from the water  
and the tomb to offer new life to all.*

*We offer our life as a sign of our worship.*

*Jesus, you are the one who agrees to be baptized to be at one with us.*

*We offer our baptism as a sign of being with you.*

*Jesus, you are the one for whom the heavens open  
to allow the Spirit to descend.*

*We offer our ready heart as a sign of our open life.*

*Jesus, you are the one who is the Son so well loved  
that God’s delight is in you.*

*We offer you our own delight and joy as a sign of our everlasting love. Amen. +*