

Just the Beginning
Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:1-14
Rev. Dan Schumacher

Next week, the Muskrats will meet by video conference for its first lunch of the new year.

Many of you know about the Muskrats. It's the clergy group made up of pastors from the eight historic downtown churches. The name, Muskrats, comes from the joke that we pastors are like Muskrats – when there's trouble, we keep our heads low and swim downstream.

I think the group has been meeting for over 50 years now even as pastors have come and gone. It was founded by the longterm and now retired pastor of First Lutheran Church, Paul Peel. Those of us who know Paul aren't a bit surprised that he'd be the one who coined the moniker, Muskrats, for our clergy group. Paul was never known to take himself too seriously.

For example, it was a few years ago now that we were scheduled to meet at Phantom Canyon Brewing for our monthly luncheon and Paul was the one hosting the lunch. (By the way, nothing quite gets attention like a group of clergy – many of whom were wearing their clerical collars – rolling into a brewery in mass and upsetting expectations. People start looking around as if they accidentally walked into a sanctuary and not a brewery.)

Well we all started to show up at the restaurant, piling up at the hosting booth, waiting for Paul who was the one that had set the reservation. After a few minutes of waiting, we just said to the host, "He's always a few minutes late. Why don't you just seat us and we'll wait for him at the table?"

So they took us to our table, and as they did we exchanged handshakes, took our seats, went through the normal pleasantries, and otherwise got situated. Still no Paul.

Our waiter came our direction with food menus in one hand and beer menus in the other. He took one look at the table and sheepishly set the beer menus aside. He took our drink orders. A few minutes later, he delivered our drinks. Still no Paul.

We began sipping on our waters and coffees and sodas, and chatted about ministry. Still no Paul.

We began to twiddle our thumbs and wonder if we should order food or not. I mean, Paul was supposed to pick up the tab, but by this point it was 25 minutes after noon – which was late even by Paul's standards.

And about the moment we were going to throw in the towel, Paul walked in. As he sat down he said, "Sorry I'm late. I got distracted as I was walking over."

Well, now he had piqued our interest. He continued, “You know the guy who stands at the corner of Bijou and Tejon – right at the southwest corner of Acacia Park; the guy who brings along his mini-karaoke machine; the guy who stands on the bench and through his microphone announces that the end is near?”

We all shook our heads... yeah, yeah, we know him.

Paul continued, “Well, today, he saw me and he pointed his finger right at me and began to tell me that I was going to hell. I don’t know if he saw my clerical collar or just doesn’t care for Lutherans, but he began to tell me that I was going to hell. He started preaching to me about how the world is coming to an end, and then pointed straight at me and said that if I didn’t straighten up I was holding a one way ticket to hell. And so I stood and listened for a bit. And you know what? *He made some good points.*”

Of course, Paul delivered that last line with a completely straight face, and we all got a good chuckle.

If John the Baptist were alive today, he’d be like the man standing on the corner of Bijou and Tejon, microphone in hand trying to get us to repent before it was too late. “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me,” he announced. “I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:7-8).

The one that John thought was coming after him was the one he believed would usher in the end of the world. And so he called people to repentance in view of the coming eschatological judgment. John’s mission was clear: baptize people in preparation for the end of all things.

But here we are some 2000 years later still longing and praying for the day when God will set all things right. That is the major difference between the way John the Baptizer baptized people and the way we do today.

For John, baptism was preparation for “The End.” For us, baptism is just the beginning.

I love that the Revised Common Lectionary pairs the story of Jesus’ baptism with the first creation story for this Sunday, because both announce new beginnings:

- Genesis 1:1 – “In the *beginning*, God created...”
- Mark 1:1 – “The *beginning* of the good news of Jesus Christ...”

Beyond that, both stories imagine the presence of God descending over water:

- Genesis 1:2 – “... a wind from God swept over the face of the waters”
- Mark 1:10 – “... as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.”

And, in both stories, we hear the voice of God:

- Genesis 1:3 – “Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.”

- Mark 1:11 – “And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”

The voice of God. The presence of God’s Spirit. The elemental image of water as a meeting place with the Divine. And *new* beginnings.

I think we sometimes default to the belief that God’s work in the world is done; that God created the world, spun it into existence, turned it loose, and then kicked back and hasn’t done much sense.

The writer of Ecclesiastes says it like this:

“What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun...” (1:9).

And I think we tend to agree.

But that is not the witness of these two passages. The witness of Genesis 1 and Mark 1 is that God is always up to something new – God is always working some new beginning.

Isn’t that why we celebrate Remembrance of Baptism Sunday – not because “there is nothing new under the sun,” but, because through our baptisms, God worked something new in us?

The same thing was true for Jesus at his baptism, too.

While Matthew, Mark, and Luke differ on the details of Jesus’ baptism – each emphasizing its own unique perspective – what they all agree on is that Jesus had no public ministry before his baptism. It was only after Jesus entered the waters of the Jordan River, was baptized by John, and experienced the presence of God that Jesus then began teaching, healing, calling disciples, preaching parables, blessing children, challenging the religious structures of his day, calling people to become more compassionate and generous and loving and forgiving.

What happened at Jesus’ baptism that so altered his life that he could no longer sit on his hands or keep his mouth shut?

A “new thing” is what happened. Mark calls it “the beginning of the good news.” He doesn’t think it starts with birth stories or genealogies. Mark says that the good news of Jesus Christ begins with his *being baptized* by John – because Jesus’ baptism was his inauguration into messiahship.

As Jesus came up out of the waters, he saw the heavens torn open and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. The thin veil between God and humanity torn open, the spirit of God moving in our direction and lighting upon Jesus – the symbol is clear: God will be present to us in this human named Jesus.

But just in case you're not a visual person — just in case, you're a better auditory learner than a visual learner — God doesn't stop there. A voice came from heaven speaking directly to Jesus, saying, "You are my Son, my beloved; and with you I am [already] well pleased" (Mk. 1:11).

And from that moment on, Jesus was turned loose in the world.

There's an episode of *The Simpsons* from a few years ago in which the neighbor, Flanders, is chasing after the baby Jesus from his outdoor nativity. The wind had gotten hold of it and was blowing it away. As he runs after it, Flanders says, "If baby Jesus gets loose, he could do some real damage!"

At his baptism, a different kind of wind got hold of Jesus and turned him loose in the world — and nothing has been the same since. *That's* what baptism did for Jesus: it gave him his identity and it turned him loose in the world.

And, isn't that what happens at our baptisms, too?

Sure, it's different, because we aren't Christ. But, says Paul, at our baptism we are clothed with Christ (Gal. 3:27). That means baptism is risky, because at our baptism Jesus is turned loose in our lives. And once he's in there, we never know who he will shape us to be or what he will call us to do.

I haven't told this story in a long time, but I bet some of you will remember it.

I was baptized when I was six years old. My parents were very hesitant to let me be baptized that young, but they finally did let me get baptized. We must have visited about it regularly for over six months before they consented. And I was thrilled, because my dad, who was an ordained minister, was going to be the one to baptize me.

The big day came and mom sent me to my room before church with a brown paper bag to gather the appropriate things for my baptism. My six year old mind went to work.

What would I need to wear for this occasion? Well, I would be standing chest deep in a huge tub of water... which is kind of like a swimming pool. So what would I need for a swimming pool? I would need swim trunks (mine were bright yellow and blue), I would need goggles (mine were red) and, because it's church, I'll need a shirt. I had the perfect one! It was a green t-shirt with a scuba diver on the front. I threw all of these things, along with a towel, into the bag and trotted upstairs to leave for Sunday school.

Right after Sunday School, I went to the changing room and put on my baptism outfit, goggles and all. Mom stuck her head in to check on me, and I knew something was wrong when her jaw hit the floor. We were a lowbrow church — we didn't have white robes for baptizees — but we weren't "scuba-diver-t-shirt and goggles" lowbrow.

She began to panic, and I knew something was wrong, so I began to cry. Then my dad walked in to check on us. He looked at mom and then looked at me, still crying. Without saying a word, he took off his clergy robe and hung it on the hook. Then he undid his tie and placed it in the chair. He unbuttoned his white over shirt and slipped it off. He reached down to me and pulled off my green scuba diver shirt. And then he pulled off his white undershirt and tenderly pulled it down over my head and onto my bare body. White is much more appropriate for a baptism than a scuba diver anyway.

He redressed, took his place, and a few minutes later he lifted me out of the water in front of my congregation. But I don't really remember that part. I remember the part that no one else but me and my mom witnessed.

I believe that my dad showed me that day what it means to be Christian. He showed me what it meant to literally take the shirt off of his own back and to give it to one who needs it. And he showed me what it meant for Christ to take something of himself and to use it to clothe us in our baptisms.

That is my memory of my baptism. It certainly wasn't the rending of the heavens or the descending of a dove. But it was a moment when my father told me that I was his son, his beloved; in whom he was already well pleased.

I had now idea then what that baptism would lead me to; no idea what it would call me to.

It was just the beginning, but it has shaped who I am ever since. It has led my life. It has even led me to you.

You never know what new thing God might be up to when you step into the water; you never know what wind God will turn loose at your baptism – because it is just the beginning.

But you thing you will know? Even at the very beginning, God is already well pleased with you.

Amen.