

“The Font of Identity”  
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Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:4-11

It all begins right here: The Font of Our Identity. A river of grace that flows from the beginning of time . . . to the end of time . . . and every time in between . . .

Because in the beginning, our Scriptures tell us, the earth was empty and had no form. But the God of Genesis did not create the heavens and the earth ‘out of nothing’ as Western Christianity has come to believe. According to the first chapter of Genesis, God birthed the new creation that culminated in humanity from the marriage of a dry and barren soul-sucking desert on the one hand and a deep dark chaotic storm system on the other. This is how the desert people of the Ancient Near East who compiled the Book of Genesis understood the cosmic origins of their existence, in a sweeping mythic narrative whose deep truth dwarfs any contemporary need to read this sacred story as literal or scientific fact.

The deep truth of the foundation of our identity that we glean from our Ancient Near East biblical ancestors is this: in the beginning the earth was a formless void, and turbulent waters were covered by darkness, and the God of our ancestors whom we worship and serve still today birthed a new creation from out of this chaos. A creation that includes everything that came before us and everything that will come after us. All beginning right here at the Font of Identity from a river of grace that flows from the beginning of time . . . to the end of time . . . and every time in between . . .

And a *ruach* of God—meaning a wind or breath or *Spirit*! of God—was swooping over these deep chaotic turbulent waters of primordial existence. And the Word of God spoke! And the Word of God said, “Let there be!” And there was! Over and over and over again! And God saw that it was good! And it was!

And there was order out of chaos! And there was life out of desolation! And there was hope out of despair! And there was *humanity* out of earth and water and spirit and word. You and me and all of creation bound together in one common cosmic conception: from earth, water, spirit and word. Which is who we have always been. From the very beginning. Which is why everything we do to the earth we are also doing to ourselves. And everything we do to the waters we are also doing to ourselves. And everything we do to the image of God in everyone else we meet we are also doing to ourselves.

The foundation of our identity as God’s good creation is this: we were created to make life flourish! The same way this river of the water of life makes life flourish! It was the first commandment ever given to humankind: a co-creating task from the Creator of all right here in the first chapter of Genesis in the job description of the human race, the foundation of our identity in the image of God: we are to make life flourish, to cultivate gardens and create cities, to celebrate abundance, to care for creation as creation has cared for us, to delight in the earth and the water and the wind and the word without which not one of us would have our existence.

Wouldn’t it have been great if we could have just closed the book right there?!

But we didn’t. We fell.

We can call it the Garden of Eden and the Tree and the Apple. Or we can call it the profound failure of the human race to rest in Sabbath delight of the glory of the creation that defines every part of our identity, in the blessed miracle of each one of our lives birthed from the divine union of water and earth and wind and word.

Whatever we call it, we have chosen to know evil, as well as good. And we have chosen to practice evil, as well as good. And by the time we get to the Gospel lesson from Mark, the people of God who are our biblical ancestors have indeed known evil of every kind and practiced evil of every kind. They have murdered and they have been murdered. They have raped, and they have been raped. They have enslaved, and they have enslaved others. They have begun wars, and they have been victims of wars. They have been thrown into exile, and they have thrown others into exile. And by the time we get to the Gospel lesson from Mark, they are crushed under a Roman occupation that controls every part of their lives.

As far as they can tell the land of promise and plenty has devolved dangerously close to that formless void and chaotic turbulent deep water of chaos that God calmed in the beginning. And they want God to start over, to make things right again. So they gather at the river around a man named John, who proclaims a baptism of ritual purification in preparation for another new creation. And along comes Jesus. And the rest, as they say, is history.

But this “new” history of the baptism of Jesus comes flows from the same river of grace that was the foundation of our identity from the beginning of creation! With the same *ruach* of God—but we’re speaking Greek now, so it’s a *pneuma*—but it’s still the same Spirit of God swooping yet again over the face of the waters. And it’s still the same Word of God speaking yet again through the chaos, saying, “This is my Beloved . . . my Son . . . in whom I am well pleased.” And it is still the same God who sees yet again that it is very, very good. And it is!

Which is what Jesus proclaimed throughout his ministry to anyone who would pay attention! You are all God’s Beloved children! So pay attention to what you are doing to one another! Pay attention! The new creation is at hand! I have passed through its waters and you can too! And it is GOOD NEWS! To whom? The poor! The captives! The blind! The oppressed! RIGHT HERE! RIGHT NOW! And if, my some sheer grandeur of fate you are *not* among those who are poor or captive or blind or oppressed, how about shouting alleluia and repenting of any unjust privilege that has been passed down to you from generation after generation and diving into the waters of the new creation in solidarity with those who *are* by some sheer madness of fate among the poor or captive or blind or oppressed?

Because this new creation springs forth from the font of an identity that has been with us all along! That we may *all* flourish in abundant life! That we may *all* release our desire to know evil or experience evil or enact evil! That we may end *once and for all* the cycle of violence that claims our existence! Because with the gift of our collectively transformed and renewed lives in the waters of baptism, *we really can end the cycle of violence that claims human existence! We can END it!* Which is what we mean when we talk about a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

I used the New Century Translation for this part of our Gospel reading this morning because it gives a full meaning to the Greek word usually translated as “repentance.” So often we equate repentance with badness: I did wrong. I confess. I promise not to do it again. And this is certainly one way to understand that term. But the

Greek work *metanoia* is about *transformation*! A new heart! A new mind! A new life! A new creation dawning from whatever chaos of deserted land or turbulent water would drive us to despair! And it is happening all the time!

A baptism of true repentance can be a powerful, powerful thing. A drug dealer can decide to turn his life around. An addict can seek help in recovery, and it happens right next door every day of the week! A child who has nothing can find a teacher who truly cares. A gang . . . or twenty gangs! . . . can gather at a church and learn to listen to one another. An abused spouse can leave a toxic relationship. An old cynic can learn to love. God can make a way out of no way. God can transform *every* part of our lives. Which is what God is doing with “all the people from Judea and Jerusalem” who are gathering at the Jordan for a baptism of repentance at the hand of John. They want God to “re-form” them as a new creation. And God does!

Of course the great debate in biblical and theological scholarship around this baptism story from the Gospel has been about why *Jesus* needs to be baptized. If he is truly without sin, scholars wonder, what was the point? But baptism is broader—both then and now—than the individual sins we commit and our need for forgiveness from them. Baptism is also about the sin committed *against* us and our need to be healed from it. And Jesus knows more than his fair share about that.

Jesus really did, in the end, “take on” the sin of the world, and not just as a priestly sacrifice on our behalf. He was betrayed, denied, despised, rejected, beaten, oppressed by an occupying power, spat upon, tortured, killed. Experiencing in his own flesh the absolute worst of what we call “man’s *inhumanity* to man.” I would go so far as to say that the baptism of Jesus in the river of grace that formed the font of his identity was about sealing him in the protection of who God had always created him to be. It’s a seal of protection! It’s our font of identity that can never be destroyed! It’s trusting God to transform the sin that would be committed against him into a resurrection of hope and a promise of everlasting victory over sin and suffering and despair. I would go so far as to say that his baptism sustained him as he encountered the sin of the world, as he stared that sin down, as he felt abandoned, as he died.

And I would say that our own baptism in the river of grace the flows from the beginning of time, to the end of time, and in every time in between does the same for each one of us. That it serves as a saving grace, a healing balm, a protective seal covering whatever wounds we bear in these bodies of earth and water and wind and word. Whether those wounds are “Self-Inflicted-Nonsense,” which is the root of so much SIN. Or whether they are deep scars inflicted by a creation that has delighted far too much in knowing evil rather than glorifying good.

And when we say that we are baptized into Christ’s resurrection in the fullness of time, what we mean is that one day we will be able to touch our wounds, just like Jesus did with the so-called “doubting” Thomas. But they won’t hurt anymore because the new creation will have finally dawned and the evil we have endured will be nothing but a distant memory in light of all the goodness of God’s glorious new creation. Because *this* truly is the font of our identity! From the beginning of time . . . to the end of time . . . and every time in between.

Amen.