

Waters of Love
Genesis 1:1-5 and Mark 1:4-11

Life begins in the waters of creation.

The void. The deep. And the spirit of God swept over the face of the waters –

first creating one-celled,

then multiple-celled,

and eventually the endless numbers of intricately-evolved organisms

that populate the earth today.

And God called it good, beloved.

Life begins in the waters of creation.

The womb. We've all been there. Floating in the watery sac of amniotic fluid,

we each grew from 2 cells,

to multiple organs,

to the wondrously complicated being that sits in the pew next to your neighbor: you.

And God called you good, beloved.

Life begins in the waters of creation.

The Jordan River. The place where Jesus stepped out of the waves and into his mission and ministry.

Growing from one Word of love,

to multiple acts of justice,

into an infinite call for each person to follow... into new life.

And God called the baptism good, and God's child beloved.

The Deep. The Womb. The Jordan. New life begins in the waters of creation.

And the new life is good.

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We've just come through the season of Christmas, when we celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Each new year we remember this birth of something ever new and life-changing.

It is the Christ, the one who will show us once more the way to new life, new ways of living.

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke both tell the story with images of a child born of his mother.

But Mark celebrates the birth by different waters.

Mark opens his telling of the good news right here, with the waters of the Jordan River.

One preacher describes it by saying: "This is Mark's Christmas story .... In Luke 2, after Jesus comes through the birth waters, the angels proclaim, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom God is pleased.' In Mark 1 [today's reading], God declares, 'You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.' God speaks words of pleasure over God's latest creation just as God spoke words of pleasure over each new item in the litany of creation way back in the genesis of all things."<sup>21</sup>

God spoke words of pleasure over the birth of each piece of creation...including humanity.

And in Jesus' baptism, God did the very same.

And in every baptism that a church enacts, we can still hopefully hear the voice of God speaking the same words of love and pleasure:

"You are my child, Beloved".

During the sacrament here at Plymouth, we remind ourselves that baptism "is a vehicle through which God

expresses unconditional love for humanity”.

God created – and it is good.

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So if creation is good,
if the birth of Christ is good and pleasing in God’s eyes,
and if each one who comes to rebirth in baptism is a good and beloved part of God’s creation,
then we may wonder why Mark’s good news of Jesus Christ begins this way:

“John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness,
proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”.

Now there’s a word that progressive Protestants love to hate. *Sin*.

The word comes with so much baggage, whether we grew up in a strict faith with vivid images of hell’s fire or in a secular pop culture that enjoyed mocking belief in those same images.

Either way, sin is a word many of us shy away from.

But it comes up again and again in these stories of our faith –
and it seems we lose out on something important if we choose to never talk about it.
Yet it’s a demanding task to figure out how to reconcile our tradition’s statements on sin with the loving God that we have come to know in our faith.

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I have no doubt that God’s act of creation is the essence of love.  
That the birth of a child, like Jesus’ own birth, can be the embodiment of love.  
And that baptism into the family of Christ is a revelation of God’s and the church community’s love.

Yet every one of these acts has been equated with sin in some Christian thought throughout history.

The Biblical creation story is incomplete without commentary on the sin committed in Eden’s Paradise.

A child can only be conceived through sexual intercourse, which the theologian Augustine irreversibly linked with sin in his fifth century writings.

And in some traditions, baptism continues to be viewed as the magical rite that erases the stain of Original Sin from even the youngest, most gentle soul.

Today’s readings lead us right to the depths of this dilemma, and to the question asked almost every time I meet with an individual or family seeking baptism: “What do you believe about Original Sin?”  
And while it’s a question that we don’t often engage publically at Plymouth, I never take it lightly, because the doctrine of Original Sin has inevitably damaged or distanced generations of Christians from knowing the love of the Creator.

And so any talk of baptism in our tradition must take into account the wounds that many people carry with them because we’ve been told in countless ways that we are sinful from birth.

People are most familiar with the understanding of Original Sin from the Catechism of the Catholic Church.  
In brief, that catechism partly states:

416 By his sin, Adam, as the first man, lost the original holiness and justice he had received from God, not only for himself but for all human beings.

417 Adam and Eve transmitted to their descendants human nature wounded by their own first sin and hence deprived of original holiness and justice; this deprivation is called “original sin”.

404 ...it is a sin ‘contracted’ and not ‘committed’ – a state and not an act.<sup>ii</sup>

But let’s not just pick on the Catholic Church – our UCC Reformed lineage has contributed more than enough

to keep humanity focused on our lowliness: John Calvin's classic work The Institutes of Christian Religion has this as the title of Book 2: Chapter 1:

“Through the Fall and Revolt of Man, The Whole Human Race Made Accursed and Degenerate. Of Original Sin”<sup>iii</sup>.

Just as I have no doubt that God created all good, our ancestors in faith truly believed that every child is born with stain on his or her spirit.

If together we believe that all creation is good and pleasing to God –  
how can we reconcile the concept of sin?

Where do we turn when confronted with such painful questions?

We cannot simply scoff at supposed human ignorance and turn our backs when someone brings up sin.  
So how do we begin to make faithful sense of it?

As Christians, we look to Jesus' life.

His is the Way that we try to follow, and so we turn again to stories of his life to show us the way.

And this morning, his story is one of stepping into the waters of rebirth  
and humbly accepting the baptism of John –  
who proclaimed a baptism for repentance  
and the forgiveness of sin.

So up 'til now I've clearly stated my beliefs –  
that creation or birth is good;  
that God takes pleasure in the creation and all that was created;  
that Jesus was good and beloved *long before* he stepped into those waters.  
And yet enter them he did.  
And God was well pleased.

Jesus accepted a baptism for the forgiveness of sin ... *and* he calls us to follow.

But *not* for that Augustinian or Calvinist concept of original sin –  
not the idea of sin that is 'contracted' at the moment of conception.

“In both the Hebrew and Greek languages, the word translated sin is based on a metaphor taken from hunting. Both [words] originally meant that the hunter had missed what he was shooting at. The arrow fell short of the target... Thousands of years ago, human beings observed that their actions often fell short of their best intentions. Their behavior was frequently off the mark, a sidestepping or evasion of responsibility. The result of such behavior tends to be a kind of death, the deadening of relationships and of self-esteem. Or, as St. Paul put it: 'The wages of sin is death' [Romans 6:23]”<sup>iv</sup>

With this understanding of sin, we can see the ways we continue to fall short.

In our relationships,  
in the small interactions that leave us or others hurting.

And in the big ways,  
the seemingly insurmountable ways our culture feeds into social and global injustices  
for the sake of our comfort or convenience.

And in ways that we may not even consider in this category:  
deceiving ourselves that we don't have time for  
eating right or exercising or observing Sabbath rest,  
when God loves us enough to want these caring things for us.

Sometimes we call sin our brokenness, or our shadow side.

More often we like to just say “oops” and “I’m sorry” without having to name it sin. And that’s fine!  
 However we name it, it is the same thing –  
 and we as Christians have been called to respond to John the baptizer’s  
 repentance for the forgiveness of our “oopses”.

And this act of humility is a necessary part of our faith to acknowledge;  
*just as necessary as seeking justice and loving kindness.*

To be sure, we’re not called to dwell on our imperfect actions,  
 or to be martyrs for a world that has so much brokenness.  
 Unrelenting focus on sin is just another form of not quite hitting the mark;  
 but we don’t pretend we’re perfect either.

It’s a balance that we can’t always get right,  
 but happily, we share in community who helps hold us lovingly accountable.

And this is a part of baptism, the being there for our sisters and brothers of creation.  
 The final words of the covenant that Plymouth makes with a newly baptized person are these:  
 “We enfold you in our love, seeking *together* to grow in wisdom and stature  
 and in favor with God and all people.”  
 We’re not *done* being renewed at our baptism. It’s only a beginning.

When I share my understanding of baptism with families, I adamantly state my belief that it is not about sin:  
 baptism is that visible sign of God’s grace poured out on us.

It is new birth,  
 through waters of love and the Holy Spirit,  
 into the extended family of Christ.

*But for the assembled community, it is more.*

For us,

each baptism is also an opportunity to remember the path that we’ve chosen:  
 to follow Christ into the world,  
 humbly admitting and turning around again and again from our brokenness,  
 from missing the mark of our best intentions.

Baptism is an opportunity to  
 sense again that we are enveloped by those loving, birthing waters of creation,  
 to be renewed and refreshed by the Spirit’s brooding over us.

And Jesus’ baptism, celebrated each year, is an opportunity  
 to joyously hear God’s voice  
 speaking to each and every one of us  
 because we are part of this wondrous creation:

*You are my child, my creation; you are beloved.  
 With you I am well pleased.*

May we know it to be so. Amen.

- <sup>i</sup> “The Waters of Solidarity” by Mary W. Anderson at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=695>.
- <sup>ii</sup> From “The Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church” <http://www.christusrex.org/www1/CDHN/visible4.html>
- <sup>iii</sup> John Calvin’s *Institutes of Christian Religion* <http://history.hanover.edu/courses/excerpts/111cal.html>
- <sup>iv</sup> *The Essential Reference Book for Biblical Metaphors* by James Rowe Adams (Pilgrim Press: Cleveland) 2005, p. 271.