



## Proper 1, Year B – January 8, 2012

Genesis 1.1-5

### A Homily preached by the Rev'd Tara Livingston

Today we prepare to welcome the newest member of the Church of God, Rubina, we do so recalling not just the voice of John calling in the wilderness, and not just the baptism of Jesus Christ himself, but also the movement of God throughout creation or what we might refer to as human history. And we read of that in Genesis One, Chapter One with three of the most recognizable words in the English language... "In the beginning"

And that got me thinking a little bit about the mystery of our transcendent God – God who is of such great mystery and so far beyond our human comprehension that we are unable in our human limitations to truly conceive of who God is. I distinguish that very carefully from the same God I usually preach about who is in us and with us, especially in the intimate encounter with the person of Jesus Christ. And that's because there's more than one way to experience or understand God, limited though we are. And so with the Genesis reading coming to us today in the lectionary, let us explore the theology of God.

There are a couple of ways of thinking of God, generally speaking. One is by descriptive terms and one is by feeling or experiential statements. Both are valid. Theologians have a habit of using descriptive words to describe who God is, or to help us develop a sense about God's character. We see that in doctrinal statements, we see it in prayers and collects, we understand it from scripture and we sing it in the words of our hymns and canticles. In fact, any time we have a conversation about God, or our faith, we are doing theology. It is one of the ways our faith seeks understanding. If we were to write down for instance, on a chalkboard, all the words we might use to describe God, we would eventually start to repeat ourselves using synonyms, and eventually we would start to get frustrated by the awareness that our language simply is not able to capture all that God is. If we try to comprehend all of the logical conclusions to what we read or feel we understand, we can find ourselves throwing our hands up in frustration because we simply cannot figure it all out.

The other kind of language that is universal is the language of math and science. At Regis College, a Jesuit college where I did some of my training, a professor told us that "mathematicians made the best theologians". That's because there is a particular kind of logic that can bring one to an "ah ha" moment, one that may or may not lead us to a logical conclusion. That conclusion can show that our thinking is flawed and that in itself reveals something about God. If we listen to secular scientists talk about the big bang theory using whatever models of quantum physics they have to explain the universe – even they concede that what is behind that – what philosophers call the first cause or the first mover – is beyond even their comprehend and interpret. They recognize this as not as a statement of faith, but as a statement of mystery and in that mystery is where God resides. After centuries of debate theology and science are no longer and at an impasse – they have caught up with each other.

Both our descriptive language and the language of science demonstrate our inability to fully comprehend God and are therefore shown to be limited human activities.

Now, none of this is particularly earth shattering, and by about now I suspect that you are wondering where I am going with it. Well, I haven't gone anywhere yet – we're still talking about the beginning. And I take us back to my opening statement where I said we have two ways of looking at God; descriptive and experiential. Science and language are the descriptive pieces. And they seek to explain "outwardly" something about God and give us some structure to hold on to.

The experiential piece speaks to our interior experience of God; feelings that, like God, cannot always be captured in language, and can certainly not be captured in science. This is our spiritual side. This is where we start to encounter – sometimes with some resistance, who we truly are, and who God truly is to us – especially to us. If you have ever struggled to describe how you are feeling, especially in relation to how you are experiencing God, you will know what I’m talking about. Words simply don’t do it.

Genesis tells us, that in the beginning, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Another way of understanding the wind of God, is the breath of God, or the spirit of God hovering over the primordial waters. This is not a statement of God creating something from nothing. This is God, creating order out of chaos. This is God, present and in control – separating the waters, relegating the darkness to night, rather than banishing it, having mastery over day and night, naming it and declaring it good. In the Hebrew cosmology, creation is effortless, peaceful and good which you can see brings us back to the descriptive language.

But for our purposes today, I draw your attention to the breath of God or the spirit of God as that which is life giving. Certainly as Christians, we recognize that all life comes from God and that where there is breath there is life. That’s the obvious part. But in baptism, we really are born into a new and different kind of life – reborn with another heartbeat if you will. And like the primordial waters over which the breath of God hovered, so too over the baptismal waters is the life giving breath of God present.

We read also today about John baptizing people with water, for the forgiveness of sins. But when Jesus is baptized, and the sky opens up, and the spirit descends on him like a dove, we do well to know that this represents a new kind of communication between God and humanity. And that comes to us through our interior feelings and promptings – for this is where God speaks to us. It is one in which that heartbeat in our life journey, if we pay enough attention to it, will move in a greater rhythm with that of Christ. This is what it means to be spirit filled. It won’t always be easy. It shouldn’t always be easy. We can take heart that sometimes, even being spirit filled, we will encounter desert times just as Christ did, – moments when we are swept away as if by that same wind, that same breath – into areas we would rather not go. Perhaps these are among the pivotal times when we must be satisfied to sustain ourselves on the meager diet of descriptive words.

And so we journey forth, in the fullness of a presence of God; of an indescribable, inexpressible God who is both known and unknown to us, trusting that we will all encounter at different points of our life, a variety of experiences along the way; all of which bring us back to our baptismal covenant. We have made promises to God and God in turn has renewed the active spirit in each of us. The same winds that blew over the earth at the moment of creation are the same winds that blow through us now, bringing order to chaos and creating in us a new self in Jesus Christ.

And for that, thanks be to God.

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