

First Sunday after Epiphany, Year B

Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 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. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. There was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Genesis continues the next day when God erects a dome in the midst of the waters, separating the waters from the waters. The dome was called Sky. There was evening and there was morning, the second day.

This is the basis of Israel's and our cosmology, these two bits of Genesis. There is a massive, deep, wet chaotic state. This is where Leviathan lurks. Then God, in a breath of air, ruah, swept across the face of the waters. Illuminating, bringing light, then, making space. Imagine a deflated balloon under water inflating. A space is made in the deep, the primordial chaos, and looking outward it looks like a dome, the sky. A sheltering sky, holding back the murky abyss. That's the universe story.

This cosmology, of light and space inflating within the oceanic chaos is fascinating. First off, these are the waters of Babylon. When Genesis was written, Israel was in exile in Babylon. They were just becoming a literate people at this time, so it is natural that they assimilated the local story as their own myths were recorded. The Babylonian epic “Enuma Elish” was their source material. This epic tells of Tiamat, the primordial goddess deity, whose very body formed the cosmos. The story goes that her consort Apsu was annoyed by the younger Gods for disrupting his rest, and the resulting mêlée left Apsu dead and an avenging Tiamat locked in combat with a young, angry storm god named Marduk. Marduk raises his sword and splits Tiamat in two, like a shellfish, lifting one, as a dome to form the sky. Within the body, the womb of Tiamat, chopped open, the universe arises. The Hebrew scribes mixed their creation story with the Babylonian cosmology, a universe cleaved out of a watery, feminine chaos, but instead of Marduk, a single god among Gods, the Hebrews inserted their One God, one not even named yet, one who would later travel in a stormy pillar of smoke, who would later be called YHWH. YHWH is the cleaver of the watery, womanly Gaia goddess of ancient times. Something to think about.

Second, what makes this cosmology particularly interesting, is that this ancient metaphor of a space being opened in the chaos might be accurate. A good description of how the big bang worked is taking a deflated balloon and stippling very tightly with a marker. As it inflates from one point, the spread of the ink analogizes the inflationary nature of the universe. Red-shift measures this. Something to think about.

Have you ever seen *The Last Temptation of Christ*? It is OK. The music is awesome. Peter Gabriel did the score and is beautiful. Martin Scorsese's vision of Judas is very interesting. The long dream sequence of the temptation is a bit silly. Willem Dafoe's Jesus is, well a bit Willem Dafoe. But the Baptism scene, the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan: it's riveting.

We're at the edge of the Jordan, a tiny, muddy trickle, a lot less impressive than the Artichoke River, and there is bedlam, true chaos. John is looking crazy, long stringy hair and beard, loins girded in leather, and all around are a bunch of mostly naked men and women lost in ecstasy: shaking, dancing, sounding out with that high pitched Middle Eastern whirrl. Jesus approaches, stumbling into the Jordan towards John. John turns, and as he sees Jesus, there is dead silence. All of the chaos is still going on, the naked

people flapping around, and the theater is engulfed in a black silence. The Lord is presenting himself, to John, the messenger, for Baptism with water.

OK, so back to the Bible not Martin Scorsese... So here Jesus, goes out into the Wilderness to get water put on his head by his crazy cousin. As this happens, the heavens are torn apart, and the spirit descended upon Jesus, like a dove, descending through a hole ripped in the heavens, and a voice from those heavens proclaims, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

This is the first recorded story of Jesus we have. Mark was the first Gospel written. This short story in Mark is a cosmological story as sure as the one in Genesis. Cosmology is basically an understanding of everything material; and in this very, very short story a beautiful, radical, transformative cosmology, a story of what everything that IS IS, is laid out. It contains THE Christian Cosmology. God, the most actual reality is revealed through a hole ripped in the heavens.

We mostly understand that the world in which we live is a stable, predictable one. There are physical, immutable laws that exist: gravity, action:reaction,

movement/inertia, things that die stay dead; things are they way they are, even with the notion of evolution and an understanding of complex, dynamic relationships, ecological interdependency consciousness, there is still a basic cosmic stability. If you have concrete laws, you need a concrete foundation, a starting point. The metaphor of a dome of stable reality carved out of a chaotic pre-reality is an apt metaphor for the Creation by God with this world view. God created reality out of the chaos, and each day in the Genesis 1 story leads to more complex, more highly ordered tiers; it leads to stability, predictability.

This very little story in Mark tells us that that is not true. That is not the Gospel of Christ. The Gospel of Christ is that the old order of understanding was wrong. Things are not as they seem through conventional eyes; through old order eyes. Everything is reversed. Paradox is the story of God. The first will be last the last will be first. Five loaves feed five thousand, so little feeding so many. Its ridiculous. Blessed are the poor; not really, they are not blessed, they are POOR. But really, in God they are. As you do to the least of these, you do to me. God is not a majestic Lord to be bathed in praise and gifts, it is being kind to your mother in law, it is feeding the birds every time the feeder is empty, it is giving a couple of bucks to a guy on the

street because he asked for it, he must need it. That is praising God according to Jesus. The reversal is that God is found in the least among us, the tired, the poor, the sick, the prisoner, the miserable, in people in Gaza particularly this week, and with the meek, the depressed and addicted, the abused, the battered, the raped, the molested. God lives with them. God lives with us when we suffer, the poor banished children of Eve that we are.

As Jesus was Baptized, that great dome of taken-for-granted stability was torn open, the heavens were “torn apart” and the Spirit descended like a dove upon him. Can’t you picture the scene? The bedlam and splashing and then whooof... silence. Everything changed. The last time the dome opened was in the 7th chapter of Genesis when the windows of the heaven were opened and the cold chaotic waters poured in, flooding the Earth and floating the Ark. We didn’t get the message then, so Jesus, under the same hole ripped in heavens, came to teach it again.

There is no miraculous birth story in Mark. It starts: Jesus getting baptized. Evelyn Underhill, the great Anglican spiritual guide tells it that the fullness of Jesus’ consciousness was revealed in the Baptism. His consciousness of being the Son and of the cosmic reality is revealed through a hole ripped in

the heavens that remains, it is right here, above THIS assembly of people, revealed to us in our humble mammalian nature particularly when we gather at the Eucharist together. True reconciliation comes in recognizing our humanness, and in that self-emptying act of knowing and feeling ourselves, we turn invariably outward and begin to know and feel people around us. Knowing and feeling others, we begin to know and feel God. Jesus' ministry starts in this story. Jesus' ministry starts with his Baptism.

So does ours.

Some talk about Baptism as washing away sins or purifying. That led to some bad dying baby baptizing habits. It is not just a symbolic welcome into a community, though it is that. It is not just a beautiful and meaningful rite of passage no matter your age, though it is that, too. Baptism is the awakening of the true nature of God. It is participation in Christ, and Christ's life, and everything. Living water, the most ancient thing we can imagine, symbol and descendant of the primordial chaos, is poured, or bathed in, and the irreparable hole ripped in the heavens, the actuality of God being here for us when we most need God, is made real again.

The ministry of Christians, the priesthood of all believers, is commissioned in this act of baptism. Why? Because for us, the Baptized, that hole ripped in the heavens was made real, and with it was revealed a knowing. No matter how deeply buried this knowing is in our hearts and minds, it is there. The knowing that servanthood is our vocation, that we must work to alleviate suffering, that our salvation is absolutely dependent on the salvation of our neighbors, and strangers and enemies and the despicable and the unlikable, and the forgotten. Revealed is the knowing that God is here, with us, with everyone, every sentient being, every tree, every dandelion, every stone, every puff of wind, and with you and people you love, God is here, now, no matter how happy or how grief stricken you are; no matter how good or bad about yourself you feel; no matter if you've been naughty or nice, you are loved to the core of the universe. And knowing that, within us we know it, it was revealed to us through our Baptism under a hole ripped in the heavens, we the Baptized have the God-given responsibility to serve a world that has forgotten that it is loved. AMEN