

“The Face of the Waters”

Baptism of the Lord Sun., Jan. 10, 2021

Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Mark 1:4-11 NRSV

New London UMC

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I hope you were able to prepare your worship space today so you have a bowl of water in front of you. Because you are going to use that bowl of water in two ways – the first will be during this sermon. [*So if you didn't do this already, you should hit “pause” and get a bowl of water before we continue.*] What kind of bowl the water is in, and what kind of light sources are near the bowl, will help determine how you experience the “face” or surface of the water in your bowl. In some situations you might look down into the bowl and be able to see a reflection of your own face on the surface of the water. In other situations you might not be able to clearly distinguish where the surface of the water is. But I'd like you to do is to take a breath of air and gently blow it across the top of the water. How did your breath move across the water and change the face of it? Did it briefly become chaotic – but then settle down again? Or did the water become so rambunctious it sloshed over the top of your bowl? Mop up (if you have to) and let the water settle in the bowl.

Now if you are able to darken the room you're in – please do so. Obviously there will still be a glowing screen – but if your bowl of water is in the dark and you took another breath of air to blow across the top of the water – how confident are you that you can direct and control your breath as it moves across the surface of the water? How can you tell if your breath has even moved across the water? How does your perception of the water change because of the darkness?

The Bible starts with these words:

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.

Genesis 1:1-2 NRSV

When God created the heavens and the earth apparently the heavens didn't need much fine tuning, but the earth . . . the earth was a deep, dark, formless void of water. It needed work. It had no shape, no color, no order. It needed something that God called “light.” . . . I know it's hard for us to imagine the earth without “light.” But imagine there being no light at all. . . . When I think about the absence of light I can begin to understand why this “wind from God” swept around and over the face of the waters. I think that might have been the God equivalent of what we do in the dark when we slowly move forward with arms stretched out to try to avoid falling into something we can't see in front of us. Perhaps the “wind from God” was God's way of reaching out to feel where the waters were in this deep, formless void. But was it still too mysterious even for God to navigate around this way? I would think that not being sure where the surface of water is around you could get old fast, so I'm not surprised that it isn't long before God says, “Let there be light.” And God saw that the light was good. And perhaps it seemed even better when God separated the light from the darkness so there could be a rhythm or pattern of light

and darkness; what God decided to call Day and Night. . . . Wow! Those were some incredible ideas and fundamental decisions that God made during this creative process.

And to think that water was there from the beginning – even before there was light, and the marking of time passing from day to night, to day again. Water was there. . . . It's kind of wondrous when we think about how ancient and ever present water is. And yet we often take water for granted. We live where there are plenty of natural water sources, drilled wells, and public utilities for water. We have water that is safe to drink and use for food preparation. We have the luxury of readily accessible water to wash ourselves, our dishes, our clothes, our cars with. Water to power dams, and to use in manufacturing. Water to fish or swim in. Water to kayak, go boating, pontoon, or tube on. Water to skate or ski upon. Water to irrigate crops or to grow crops hydroponically, or to use in aquaculture. Most of the time we even forget that water is a substantial part of our own bodies, and essential for us to live.

It really shouldn't surprise us that water is used to symbolize our connection to life with God, and to our sisters and brothers in the family of God. In baptism water is used both literally and symbolically. We are reminded of water's role in life from the beginning of God's creation; throughout the history of God's people; and in our own relationship with God today. We see and feel water in the same ways that all of our faith ancestors have seen and felt water. We are invited to imagine how God's breath, moving across the waters of the earth, has always enlivened water and given us life. And given our history, it hits home for us when the psalmist describes the powerful voice of God thundering over the waters, causing the oaks to whirl, and stripping the forest bare. And because we know what it's like to see trees whirled about in the thundering wind – we have no doubt that the voice of God could tear the heavens apart. But to think that God did so while also gently – so gently – sending the Spirit to rest like a dove on Jesus. Well, that leaves us with only one question: How softly or loudly did God speak the declaration, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” as Jesus came up out of the water? Did Jesus have to shake the water out of his ears before he could hear God? I don't think so. I think God knows how to move over the face of the waters and how to speak into being what God has to say so it can be heard and done. And whatever volume God chose to speak at – it was the right volume for Jesus to clearly hear God. Because the voice of God will accomplish what God intends.

And I think that is still true today. So I would suggest keeping an eye on that bowl of water you've got in front of you. It may seem pretty tame and manageable right now, but you need to be ready for whatever God may choose to do with that water, and with you, as we prepare to reaffirm the vows made at our baptism.

Amen.