

## “New Beginnings”

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Genesis 1:1-5

Mark 1:1-11

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ – the Messiah,  
the Son of God, the One Who descended from God.”

Mark 1:1

Let us pray... O God,

By our baptism,

we have become part of your family ‘in Christ’.

Help us to see the grace you send each day, each hour, each minute –

even the next moment as opportunities to choose

a life of forgiveness and thanksgiving.

Amen

We are a week into the New Year and – and I wonder how many of us  
have already broken our New Year’s resolutions?

Well, you know what they say:

Resolutions go in one year and out the other.

One particularly “breakable” resolution is trying to lose weight,

which can be done as a disciplined commitment to diet and exercise –

but it really helps... to have a school reunion coming up, too.

New Year’s resolutions can be similar to

those Ash Wednesday promises of giving up something for Lent –

like not eating meat, or forgoing dessert, like chocolate.

Rather than some negative resolution of abstention,

wouldn’t it be better to resolve to do something positive –

before you have to put it on your ‘bucket list’?

Why not resolve to do something creative...

The beginning of Genesis is about that original creative act of  
God calling the universe into being.

Everything was still a blank page, unfolding as it should –

that is until humankind showed up on the 6<sup>th</sup> Day

and well... here we are in the situation we’re in.

But the story reminds us of the wonder and beauty

of our world and of worlds beyond our world –

and that our God is a Creator and we were made in God’s image

with the capacity to create – or re-create, too.

And what if we saw that not only as a possibility,

but as an obligation to make something of our lives –

even to make something of each day.

Willard, p.2

We need only listen to the news to know that ‘making a mess’  
seems to come quite naturally to people.

The foolishness and selfish disregard for others  
comes as readily from white collar folks as well as blue collar,  
female as well as male, ‘us’ as well as ‘them’.

And we might lose heart in the face of all that goes wrong  
in terms of personal health or fortune,  
in terms of economy, society, or environment.

We might get stuck always looking back to the past  
or by not being able to look ahead into the future.

We can be stuck between remorse for what can’t be changed  
and fear for what may yet be.

And into this broken world, God has come as one of us  
to live a life of courageous self-giving.

And we have that as our sacred story –  
the story of Christ that begins with his baptism.

Mark’s gospel opens with a reference to the Prophet Isaiah  
as a voice calling the Israelites freed from exile to enter the wilderness  
and make a way for God and themselves to go back to Jerusalem.

But that verse is reinterpreted in Mark, coming from the perspective  
of already being in the wilderness and calling to the people of Jesus’ day  
to make way for God to enter their world.

It is the kind of wilderness that had become a wasteland –  
perhaps as an ecological disaster, but also an emotional or spiritual one.

And that prophet’s voice was John the Baptist –  
a person who lived in the wilderness and was well-acquainted  
with the wasteland – but not of it;  
Street-smart without becoming hardened like the street-wise.

And John challenged the people of his time  
to make a change of heart and mind – to turn from their sins  
of self-indulgent nastiness and self-inflicted negativity.

And he washed them in a ritual bath to cleanse them  
for a new beginning.

Now, that doesn’t mean we stop doing those selfish and self-defeating  
things we do.

We don’t suddenly become perfect –  
But we become connected to what is perfect...

Willard, p.3

By our baptism, we enter a relationship with God 'in Christ'  
who helps us see the difference between what is worthy of us  
and what is second-best until we learn to choose "the Good".

By our baptism, we enter a 'state of grace' that is dynamic and fluid,  
constantly correcting our course to that middle way of the Golden Rule –  
'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.'

The specific baptism of Jesus was something quite different –  
rather than his personal repentance and forgiveness,  
it was about his commitment to participate in the human condition  
and God the Creator's affirmation of him as our example to follow.

Jesus' baptism is symbolic of his heroic journey to break  
the vicious cycle of envy, blame, and retribution.

And it is symbolic of the journey we all have to make  
of dying and rising into new life –  
of letting go what is false and arising to what is true,  
taking away the mask of ego to become who we are.

Then, we can dance on the waters with Christ  
like the Holy Spirit gliding over the Face of the Deep at Creation.

The ritual of Baptism by water is necessary only as a one-time event,  
the initiation rite into the faith community of the Christian Church.

But it is also just the beginning of a way of life – a promise made  
to God, to other Christians, to yourself, and so to the world.

And it is a promise to renounce what is false and choose a life of truth and love,  
a life of repentance and forgiveness, of justice and peace,  
of grace received and thanksgiving offered,  
of life eternal and an authentic life now,  
of joy even in the midst of concerns.

The ritual of baptism symbolizes this whether we get dunked, or doused,  
or dripped upon, or sprinkled.

The manner of baptism doesn't matter – how it gets done is not as important  
as the doing of it to publicly recognize this relationship  
between God, the Church, and oneself.

Case in point, was when St. Patrick baptized King Aengus  
of Munster in Ireland about 445 AD (CE).

It seems that St. Patrick and his followers were passing through that land,  
and Aengus – having already some knowledge of Christianity,  
was anxious to be baptized  
and Patrick readily complied with his request.

Willard, p.4

Now, it so happened that St. Patrick had a walking stick fashioned  
as a crozier – which symbolizes a shepherd's crook.

It was sharpened at one end for him to stick in the ground  
while performing a service of worship outdoors.

That is what he did –

though he inadvertently stuck it in the king's foot  
apparently after the baptism and did not realize this  
until he saw all the blood on the ground.

And St. Patrick begged the king's forgiveness then asked him,

“But why did you suffer in silence, Man?”

The king replied,

“Tis no matter, you see. I thought it was part of the ceremony.  
One thing's for certain, Father – I'll not soon be forgetting it!”

Let that be a lesson to us –

Though you may not even know the events of your own baptism,  
remember that it is about a relationship between you & God,  
you & other Christians, you & yourself,  
and therefore, you & all the world as well.

By your baptism, you are forgiven and loved  
so that you can forgive and love in turn.

And though the ritual of baptism is a one-time event,  
it announces a relationship of grace  
available to you each day, each hour, each minute –  
even the next moment for opportunities to choose to create  
a life of forgiveness and thanksgiving.

Amen

*Our scripture lesson today is Genesis 1:1-5 which is the beginning of the Creation Story.*

*As we start the New Year, let us consider how each day can mean a new beginning and a new opportunity to create for ourselves and for others, a new world...*

<sup>1</sup>In the beginning

God created the heavens and the earth.

<sup>2</sup>The earth was barren, with no form of life;

it was under a roaring ocean covered with darkness.

But the Spirit of God was moving over the water.

<sup>3</sup> God said,

"I command light to shine!"

And light started shining.

<sup>4</sup>God looked at the light and saw that it was good.

[God] separated light from darkness <sup>5</sup>and named the light

"Day" and the darkness "Night."

Evening came and then morning—

that was the first day.

## Mark.1

[1] The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

[2] As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way;

[3] the voice of one crying in the wilderness:

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight -- "

[4] John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

[5] And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

[6] Now John was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey.

[7] And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.

[8] I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

[9] In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

[10] And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove;

[11] and a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased."

## Romans 6

- [1] What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?  
[2] By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?
- [3] Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?
- [4] We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death,  
so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father,  
we too might walk in newness of life.
- [5] For if we have been united with him in a death like his,  
we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.
- [6] We know that our old self was crucified with him  
so that the sinful body might be destroyed,  
and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.
- [7] For he who has died is freed from sin.  
[8] But if we have died with Christ,  
we believe that we shall also live with him.
- [9] For we know that Christ being raised from the dead  
will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.
- [10] The death he died he died to sin, once for all,  
but the life he lives he lives to God.
- [11] So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin  
and alive to God in Christ Jesus.
- [12] Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies,  
to make you obey their passions.
- [13] Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness,  
but yield yourselves to God as men  
who have been brought from death to life,  
and your members to God as instruments of righteousness.
- [14] For sin will have no dominion over you,  
since you are not under law but under grace.
- [15] What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?  
By no means!
- [16] Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to any one as obedient slaves,  
you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin,  
which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?
- [17] But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin  
have become obedient from the heart  
to the standard of teaching to which you were committed,  
[18] and, having been set free from sin,  
have become slaves of righteousness.
- [19] I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations.  
For just as you once yielded your members to impurity  
and to greater and greater iniquity,  
so now yield your members to righteousness for sanctification.

[20] When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.

[21] But then what return did you get from the things  
of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death.

[22] But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God,  
the return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life.

[23] For the wages of sin is death,  
but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

## Romans 6

- <sup>1</sup>What should we say? Should we keep on sinning,  
so that God's wonderful kindness will show up even better?
- <sup>2</sup>No, we should not!  
If we are dead to sin, how can we go on sinning?
- <sup>3</sup>Don't you know that all who share in Christ Jesus by being baptized  
also share in his death?
- <sup>4</sup>When we were baptized, we died and were buried with Christ.  
We were baptized, so that we would live a new life,  
as Christ was raised to life by the glory of God the Father.
- <sup>5</sup>If we shared in Jesus' death by being baptized,  
we will be raised to life with him.
- <sup>6</sup>We know that the persons we used to be were nailed to the cross with Jesus.  
This was done, so that our sinful bodies  
would no longer be the slaves of sin.
- <sup>7</sup>We know that sin doesn't have power over dead people.  
<sup>8</sup>As surely as we died with Christ,  
we believe we will also live with him.
- <sup>9</sup>We know that death no longer has any power over Christ.  
He died and was raised to life, never again to die.
- <sup>10</sup>When Christ died, he died for sin once and for all.  
But now he is alive, and he lives only for God.
- <sup>11</sup>In the same way, you must think of yourselves as dead to the power of sin.  
But Christ Jesus has given life to you, and you live for God.
- <sup>12</sup>Don't let sin rule your body.  
After all, your body is bound to die, so don't obey its desires  
<sup>13</sup>or let any part of it become a slave of evil.
- Give yourselves to God, as people who have been raised from death to life.  
Make every part of your body a slave that pleases God.
- <sup>14</sup>Don't let sin keep ruling your lives.  
You are ruled by God's kindness and not by the Law.
- <sup>15</sup>What does all this mean? Does it mean we are free to sin,  
because we are ruled by God's wonderful kindness and not by the Law?  
Certainly not!
- <sup>16</sup>Don't you know that you are slaves of anyone you obey?  
You can be slaves of sin and die,  
or you can be obedient slaves of God and be acceptable to him.
- <sup>17</sup>You used to be slaves of sin.  
But I thank God that with all your heart  
you obeyed the teaching you received from me.
- <sup>18</sup>Now you are set free from sin and are slaves who please God.

<sup>19</sup>I am using these everyday examples, because in some ways you are still weak.  
You used to let the different parts of your body  
be slaves of your evil thoughts.  
But now you must make every part of your body serve God,  
so that you will belong completely to him.

<sup>20</sup>When you were slaves of sin, you didn't have to please God.  
<sup>21</sup>But what good did you receive from the things you did?  
All you have to show for them is your shame, and they lead to death.  
<sup>22</sup>Now you have been set free from sin, and you are God's slaves.  
This will make you holy and will lead you to eternal life.

<sup>23</sup>Sin pays off with death.  
But God's gift is eternal life given by Jesus Christ our Lord.

## Mark 1

<sup>1</sup>This is the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

<sup>2</sup>It began just as God had said in the book written by Isaiah the prophet, "I am sending my messenger to get the way ready for you.

<sup>3</sup>In the desert someone is shouting, 'Get the road ready for the Lord! Make a straight path for him.' "

<sup>4</sup>So John the Baptist showed up in the desert and told everyone, "Turn back to God and be baptized! Then your sins will be forgiven."

<sup>5</sup>From all Judea and Jerusalem crowds of people went to John. They told how sorry they were for their sins, and he baptized them in the Jordan River.

<sup>6</sup>John wore clothes made of camel's hair. He had a leather strap around his waist and ate grasshoppers and wild honey.

<sup>7</sup>John also told the people, "Someone more powerful is going to come. And I am not good enough even to stoop down and untie his sandals.

<sup>8</sup>I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit!"

<sup>9</sup>About that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River.

<sup>10</sup>As soon as Jesus came out of the water, he saw the sky open and the Holy Spirit coming down to him like a dove.

<sup>11</sup>A voice from heaven said, "You are my own dear Son, and I am pleased with you."