

## Beginnings

For some time now I have not really participated in the custom of New Year's resolutions. Looking around me, I haven't seen that they really represent transformations in the lives of those who make them, including myself. A few days or weeks after they have been made, habit takes over and there has been no change. As the devotional I quoted in the January newsletter by Dietrich Bonhoeffer points out, these resolutions seem to be full of good intentions but rarely make any great or long lasting difference in the lives of those who make them. Most of these resolutions full of good intentions strive for making a new beginning, usually related to a change in lifestyle for that person...that from now on they will do things differently. As Bonhoeffer pointed out, our ability to actually make these changes is basically zero, especially if we make the attempt on our own. He points out that true new beginnings only happen with God. Our text from the Hebrew Scriptures this morning comes from page one—it is the first statement we have about God and creation. The probable reason that it appears as a text to be read today is that in addition to the designation of today as Baptism of the Lord Sunday, yesterday was day designated as the Epiphany of the Lord. In the chosen Genesis verses, we have God beginning creation with light which works well with the story of the light which guided the magi to the place where they found the new-born king. But our gospel reading from Mark is a description of the adult Jesus coming to John the Baptist at the Jordan River. The appointed reading skips the opening verses of the Mark passage where we are told that what follows is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This close proximity of beginning events described in our texts seemed to be telling me something important and needing closer examination—especially in relationship to our conception of time and God's activity. Genesis 1:1 is so familiar to us that although we immediately recognize it, we often overlook some of the information given. We get caught up in assumptions based on familiarity about what it tells us. This first story of creation which goes from Genesis 1:1 to 2:3 is a beautiful and orderly account of the events of creation. But God's work of creation itself exhibits a certain messiness we don't often consider—in the beginning there is this wind which sweeps across the face of the waters, over the deep which is covered in darkness. And creation itself is not a sudden one day affair; God doesn't snap the divine fingers and immediately bring the creation into being. God takes his time in this creating—this speaking creation into being. And do we ever pay close attention to how God speaks these words. We usually view them as commandments. But listen closely to what God actually is doing: "Let there be light" is the first utterance. This is not an imperative command, instead it is a verb form which is declarative and indicates a continuing action of becoming. In many ways it is a statement which issues an invitation, which gives something permission to become. It is not a one-time action. It doesn't fit the one and done which is a common comment these days. It indicates that God was taking God's own time about this process. That is why I added Genesis 14-19 to this morning's readings which describe what God brought into being on the fourth day—the sun, moon, stars, etc. Those things by which we determine time—day and night by those measurements did not appear until well into the process of creation. From the first action, after each step God has taken we are told that there was evening and morning and a day interval is given, but this time

interval was not measured by the sun or moon. Bringing the creation into being over time signals that creation is a dynamic process and not a finished product. God did not create and then step back and stop the process or become just an observer. I think we often fail to appreciate that aspect of the creation story. Additionally, during this creation process God seems to keep issuing invitations rather than commands. God catches up the created along the way to participate in what is happening—let the waters bring forth....let birds fly...let the earth bring forth...let us create humankind. God invites the earth and waters and micro-organisms and you and me into the creative process. After each stage, God looks over what has come into being and then pronounces it good. God makes an evaluation of what God has observed about the process so far. That word “good” has a wide range of meanings and the one most often attached to it is one which is a moral judgment. But since this process is occurring before the disobedience of Adam and Eve; before the entrance of sin into what is being created that doesn’t seem like what is meant here. Another use of the word is more aesthetic—looking at something and declaring that it is just right. Of course, when we look at this story as something that has been completed long ago, then we might wonder why God makes this evaluation at each step of the way. Of course we think, whatever God has created would be perfect. But then God commands these humans to have dominion over it all. In some translations this command is that they are to subdue creation. Remembering that the verb used here is in a pre-sin context and there is no evil or enemy there, what is present to subdue. Subdue also has the sense of “bringing order out of continuing disorder”. In this sense, it seems that God doesn’t view creation as a finished product—at the end of the seventh day when God rests the earth has not been fully developed. God’s creation is a much longer term process than seven days. God’s creation is going somewhere; ever in the process of becoming. We can see this in the geological history of the universe—nature shows us the earth-with the changing activities of glaciers, earthquakes, volcanoes and hurricanes. There is a continuing disorder in God’s good world that needs to be subdued by being brought into order—yet, that very disorder is also evaluated as good. What we need to take from this look at our text is the sense that God is still active and creating and we are a part of the process. As the commentator Sibley Towner stated in his work: “If there were no freedom in this creation, no touches of disorder, no open ends, then moral choice, creativity and excellence could not arise. The world would be a monotonous cycle of inevitability, a world of puppets and automation.” But God instead chose to invite humankind into the creative process. God left us to make choices and sin entered the world. But God did not take back his evaluation about creation when sin entered. Instead you find God telling us through the prophets that we are precious in God’s sight. This brings me to the gospel reading which is about another beginning...the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. I can’t think of another illustration which better illustrates God’s continuing work in the creation of humankind—the creation of the being we were meant to be as described in Genesis. Unlike Luke’s gospel account which begins before the incarnation or John’s account which begins before the beginning related to us in Genesis, Mark chooses to call the baptism of Jesus as the beginning of the good news. Jesus comes to the Jordan River to find this man who has appeared in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He is being heard by many who come from the surrounding countryside to hear what he has to say. He proclaims that he is the “voice” given the task of preparing the way for the Lord to come and that his coming is near. In Mark’s

gospel when Jesus arrives at the river he has come from Nazareth, his home town. There is no indication that he has yet taken up the mission given to him as God's Son. It is here, as he is coming up out of the water that Jesus sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descends like a dove upon him. This is Jesus' anointing, and he hears a voice from heaven declaring: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." In this narrative it seems that Jesus may be the only one who sees or hears these things. But this is the point that Mark declares the beginning...and it denotes the beginning of this particular reaching out of God to the creation begun so long ago. But in many ways it is a continuation of the creative process. God is still working in creation to bring order out of disorder...to bring justice and righteousness into the world. When we read Mark's introductory statement, we need to understand that he is not just talking about the beginning of his narrative. We are also being told that what he is relating is just the beginning of the good news...the good news of God's creative participation in history and the lives of all of humankind. God is still creating, bringing order out of the disorder of our lives through the teachings of his Son and the work of the Holy Spirit. And God is still inviting us to be a part of the process. Thanks be to God.