

They say it's always best to start at the beginning. But Jesus' first statement, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" doesn't sound much like a beginning. That seems more like the beginning of the end.

So let's back up a bit: (Take 2, if you will) Jesus begins his public ministry in the muddy waters of the Jordan River. Jesus starts by doing what he will continue to do: go out to where the people are, not idly hanging around his home base waiting for them to come to him. His first mission is to go where John the Baptist is – the wilderness.

Oh, wait. That wasn't the beginning. John in the wilderness! That was the beginning. (Take 3) John was in the wilderness, a hostile and dangerous place beyond the villages and towns, where the wild things lived. (No creature comforts here!) John, who had been born into a good, respectable family, chose to be a creature of the wild. He attracted the spiritual wanderers, those who were tired of the status quo, those who were curious, and those who were misfits. They came to him like moths to a flame. John is proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom, calling his listeners to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>1</sup> Into this rugged environment they sought him out, to listen, to learn, to be baptized. They emerged from their sense of set-apartness, their own untamed hearts, their own uncultivated spiritual landscapes ... as people in new relationship, with new intentions, a new community, and a sense of belonging.

But it seems that takes us back to an even earlier beginning! (Take 4) It all began in a garden, a different kind of wilderness. One that was safe and comfortable and pleasant and peaceful. Where chaos – physical, emotional, relational, or environmental – chaos of any kind had no place. One where belonging was not questioned, the formation of community was integral to the creative act ~ and as such, relationships were pure and loving, and intentions were always sincere (well, until they weren't.)

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 1:4

(Take 5) I'm reminded of that other beginning. The one that came about in seven days. The one that culminated in God's estimation that humanity wasn't just good, but "very good." That one started not in wilderness, but in chaos: the formless void, where darkness covered the face of the deep. It was chaotic in its disorganization, until God acted and the day was separated from the night, the waters of the earth separated from the waters of the heaven, and the land separated from the waters under the sky... Chaos banished; order established. Only once this was done could life have any hope of flourishing.

Goodness... (Take 6) That brings me to that other beginning, that came a bit later: lesser in some ways but no less significant to God's people. That one with Noah and his ark. It, too, was a beginning. The chaos of the human condition was contained and the cosmic order reestablished.

Yes, let's start there. At the rebirth of humanity.

Perhaps we need to remember that when we read this creation narrative (or any creation narrative), we tend to emphasize the human companionship piece to such an extent that we lose sight of the fact that we were also created for companionship with God. The thread that connects these beginnings, the underlying Truth of each of them, is that the One who created us never leaves us. And (as understood from a very human perspective) it is humanity's hubris of ignoring God, our attempt to abandon and reject God, that causes God to grieve and desire a new beginning.

"The flood, which from the human side looks like judgement, is seen differently from God's side. The movement from God's side is always one of [love. The flood was 40 days] of outpouring of grief before the grief subsides..."<sup>2</sup> and relationship is renegotiated. However, the re-negotiation is amongst God's own self: a covenant to always love those whom God created, and (as the story goes) marked by an outward and visible sign to remember this covenant for eternity.

The human-focused perspective of this story imagines that because of humanity's faults, all of creation must be undone should not be lost on us. In the author's view, as we go, so goes the whole world. Neither the Creator nor the created remains unaffected by human actions ~ the interconnection is by God's design. It

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<sup>2</sup> Celia B. Sinclair

is also not undone in God's attempts to make creation right. God chooses time and again not break covenant.<sup>3</sup>

And this is where we turn back to that other beginning... with Jesus entering this covenant in the River Jordan. Mark, a writer of few words and vivid imagery, points out that as Jesus emerged from the baptismal waters, he saw "the heavens torn apart (1) and the Spirit descending (2) like a dove on him." Two small phrases with significant meaning.

If we skip forward for a moment to Good Friday, we'll remember that just before Jesus dies, he cries out and breathes his last. (2) At that point 'the curtain of the temple is torn in two from top to bottom.'<sup>4</sup> (1)

'The Spirit descending like a dove on him,' as read in the Greek, implies that the Spirit of God, the breath of God, came down - not just *onto* but *into* Jesus. And according to the Greek, this Spirit is physically released through Jesus' last breath.

This same Spirit then drives Jesus into the wilderness for 40 days. The Greek implies that the Spirit didn't merely suggest Jesus go into the wilderness, or even give Jesus a directive to go out there, but rather the Spirit *violently hurled* Jesus into the wilderness. There was nothing gentle about Jesus's arrival in this place of physical and spiritual danger, where he dwelled with wild beasts and was tended to by angels.

Notably, the same violent tearing or rending occurs in the curtain of the temple as with the heavens at Jesus' baptism. The barrier between the created and the Creator is breached at these two moments in time – at the very beginning and the very end of Jesus's ministry. It's as though God is on the loose, making holy trouble here on earth, re-ordering the chaos so that life can flourish as intended.

Once again, remembering the covenant God made with humanity back in Noah's day and age, the eternal God intrudes into our human events by breaching the cosmic divide between divinity and humanity to make creation right. Through the work and person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the chaos fomented by mankind's hubris is re-ordered.

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<sup>3</sup> God is eternal, but not timeless ~ a point made by Walter Brueggemann. God is not immune to the flow of human events, but rather attuned to the progression of humanity and all of creation. So while God (the Alpha and Omega) may be bigger than our understanding of time, our human chronology is also experienced by God in real-time.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 15:37-38

I could call this yet one more beginning, but really, this is THE beginning. The perfect beginning. All those others were teasers to this ultimate Do-Over where we can finally see with some measure of clarity God's intention for us, our place in the created order. No barrier exists between us and God because God will continue to break down every barrier we devise: all the ones we impose upon/between/within ourselves.

St. Mark begins his Gospel by stating this: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." His Good News begins with God in Christ, because it all begins with God. And it continues endlessly, with unearned, grace-filled, covenantal love.

Which of these beginnings resonates most with you? Do you identify yourself as not just good, but very good? Or do you understand your fundamental self to be a child of the covenant? Perhaps you claim adoption as a child of God through baptism as your starting point, or saved by the grace of God through Christ's resurrection.

Truth is, we are all of the above. The task at hand for these next 40 days is to discern how we will best live into this identity as the children of God, made in God's image, graced by God's covenanted love, baptized into the household of God. We are redeemed and sustained, from the beginning and for all time.

Now is the time to explore these questions. Now that we are in Lent, we are gifted with 40 days to pray and consider our own beginnings and how we choose for our place in God's story to unfold.

We are blessed with an invitation to dwell in our own wilderness with our own wild beasts for a time, with the confidence that we will be tended to, so that we may allow these untamed spaces to be reordered. We won't be abandoned or ever left alone in that wild space, because Jesus has been there, and the Holy One continues to choose to join us there.

And of course we have the benefit of knowing how this story goes: Easter will come. That is both our beginning and our ending.