

New Things
Baptism of Jesus
Genesis 1:1-5
Mark 1:4-11
10 January 2021
sermon preached by Rev. Jessica McCrae

Today is a new day. The first day of the rest of your life. What will you do with the gift of it? What will you do to make this day count? How will you live it to the fullest?

At the start of the new year I read something on social media that said “a new year brings with us 365 opportunities”. After the year we just experienced, what an interesting and positive way to look at it. 365 opportunities. We have been so focused on the obstacles ahead of us, on the unknowns and the fears, what if we focus on the possibilities. What is the opportunity open to you today? And how will you respond?

Our scripture lessons today are all about new beginnings and opportunities and the place of God within both. Today we have these two interesting and at first glance very different passages – the first being one of the creation stories and the other the baptism of Jesus. And apart from the fact that both include water they don’t really seem to have that much else in common. At first glance. But let’s look again.

In our creation story what stands out for you? Here at the very birth of our world, in the midst of formlessness and void and darkness in the midst of nothingness and potential, was God. We are told that before all else came into being, there was God. Blowing winds across the waters, God saw that there was potential in this formless void, exploring the face of this darkness God saw potential.

In a sweeping moment God saw the birth of organisms, the heartbeat of life, the evolution of species, dinosaurs, mammoths, Neanderthals, humans, birds, whales, mountains, rivers, oceans, jungles.

In that moment God saw ice ages, glaciers, great lakes, continents shifting, community, democracy, pyramids, philosophy, love, mathematics, space travel, space stations, vaccines, surgeries, cities, farms, horse and buggies, the automobile, mass transit.

God saw the crusades, the plague, trenches in France, the holocaust, Hiroshima, 9/11, ISIS, bombings in Paris, wildfires, climate change, Covid. But even amidst terror and fear God saw humanity capable of carrying light, of random acts of kindness, heroism, neighbours helping neighbours, and strangers saving strangers. God saw grace.

In that moment God saw the potential in a vast formless void and water, and as God swept across the face of it all God brought it to life, calling forth light. Inviting it. Awakening. And there was the first day of opportunity. And God saw that it was good. God was well pleased.

Fast forward billions of years and we arrive on the bank of the Jordan river. We see Jesus who at last encounter was a baby in a manger, now a young adult who, having embraced and ignored the various opportunities of about nearly 30 years, finds himself at this place at that time, face to face with his cousin, a scruffy passionate prophet who places another opportunity before him. Baptism. More water, more opportunity, new life.

And so to mark the start of his public ministry we see Jesus accept the opportunity to be baptized by John. And in that moment as God's breath hovered over that face of that river God saw in an instant healings, community, relationships, preaching, courage, miracles, broken bread, arrest, broken body and empty tomb. And as Jesus emerges from that formless dark void of water we hear the voice of God again. A new day of opportunity. This was good. God was well pleased.

What I think is most striking about both of these passages is the incredible sense of timelessness, continuity and powerful presence of God.

From the moment the earth was created out of a dark and formless void, God was there. And God was not only there, but seeing the potential of the earth and of every creature that would crawl, swim, fly, walk and run upon it, before any of us had come to be. Later, billions of years later, along the edge of a river bank, with the same water molecules that were present the first day of creation, God again sees the potential in the relationship we are to have together, through Jesus Christ, the joys and the sorrows and once again God engages fully. God sees the potential and God creates another new day. A new day of relationship, love and opportunity.

Fast forward again, two thousand plus years, January 10, 2021 in the midst of a pandemic we could not have imagined one short year ago, in a transformed and transforming world, on the shores of our own rivers of uncertainty and opportunity And God is with us. In an instant God is seeing the potential held within each one of us, within our community, our society, flashing forward in God's minds eye the many things we have done and the many things we have left to do. God sees the potential for relationship, for healing, for unity. God sees our potential as a bearer of God's life and love and hope, God sees that within you. A new day of opportunity. God sees that it is good and God is well pleased.

So how will you respond?

In the Methodist church, one of the denominations in which our United Church has its roots, and the founding denomination of this congregation, the first Sunday of the year is a recommitment or dedication Sunday. Now I know this is the second Sunday of the year, that is ok. It isn't too late, and this gospel passage calls us to that act of recommitment today. Recommitment - an intentional act that helps to anchor ourselves in purpose for the year ahead, to remember whose we are and in whose name we act. It is a good tradition and one that we perhaps should embrace more than we do. Recommitment.

Recommitment to this God who has been with us from the beginning of time. Recommitment to this God who knows us through and through, who sees our path and guides us and places us in the place where we are meant to be at the time meant to be. Recommitment to this God who calls to us from the depths and the heights of our lives, and from the everyday ordinary of our lives. Recommitment to this way of being in the world that does not place us at the centre but as part of a wider and incredible creation, created by this God who loves us, who is well pleased, who gives us new days and new opportunity.

Because that is also what our scripture passages today are about - commitment. When God embarked on creation, when God saw the potential in the darkness and the waters and the formless void, God made a commitment to be present and active in creation. When we step into that creation, when we step into the waters of baptism, the waters of relationship we make a commitment in return. We commit to be present to this God who is present for us. We commit to be recreated through the work of God, through the vision of God, to welcome opportunities to be the fullest most whole versions of us that we can be. We commit to opening ourselves to letting God bring to life and newness within the formless voids within us.

What is quietly forming within you at the start of this new year?

Can you feel God's winds blowing across you, urging you to bring this new thing to life? Can you feel the reassurance of God's presence, the promise and the commitment that stretches from the beginning of time to the very end of time, and beyond.

Can you allow yourself to understand that you are a part of a long story of God's faithfulness to God's people, a story that is whole, and full, and right, when you, and all of the other parts of creation are in it with you.

Can you appreciate the continuity in the story of God's creation? Can you see how the story of God with us, did not really begin with Christmas, nor did it end with Easter. Those are chapters in an ongoing story, a story in which you now play a role.

How will you express that role? How will you take your place? How will God breathe life into this new thing quietly forming within you at the start of this year?

What comfort we have, that wherever our road this year takes us whatever we are called to do, to confront, to nurture, to co-create, to heal, we do so with the faithful, powerful and creative presence of God with us. Always. Seeing our potential.

May we respond to creation, to each other, to this gift of life we have been given in ways that are good and pleasing to our God. And may we open ourselves to the many opportunities to be a creative and loving presence in this world.

How will God breathe life into this new thing quietly forming within you at the start of this year? Listen as a new day is created for you, and as God proclaims it good.

May your journey this year bring you closer, to the redeeming and healing power of God and may it affirm for you the active presence of God in your life, in our world. Amen.