

In the Beginning

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Genesis 1:1-5
Mark 1:4-11

I.

Life begins with labor pangs, and faith begins with questions and sometimes crisis. I remember the boring days of both my sons: the mixture of elation and worry. New parents - be they biological or adoptive - know what it is to dream of our children's future, and simultaneously to realize that there is someone in this world we now love more than we love our own selves: love means hope but it also means concern and even fear for the future.

In the beginning, it isn't easy. Newborn children take a while to focus to take it in, to separate out one being from another, day from night... In the beginning - in birth and in every major change in our lives, there is chaos, and confusion, blinding light and unpredictable wind: and there is then the gradual separation of light and darkness, clarity out of chaos, love out of fear. .

II.

In the beginning of what is arguably the oldest of the gospels, the Gospel according to Mark, faith begins not with a birth but an adoption. John the baptizer appears on the edge of the wilderness, a mysterious figure clothed in camel's hair held in place by a leather belt. He lives on what he finds in the wilderness, locusts and wild honey. He calls out to people to come and be immersed: the usual translation says "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

More than half a century ago, Clarence Jordan, a radical preacher who tried to start an interracial community of folk living together in rural Georgia called Koinonia Partners, pointed out some problems with this translation. Clarence Jordan wasn't prone to wearing camel's hair—and he didn't eat wild locusts: but he wore work clothes for farming I think, and he planted trees and vegetables and harvested pecans. Oh and he called people to give up their racism and start living a whole new way! Here's what he had to teach us about what John the Baptizer was up to. "Repentance, he reminded us," is the Greek word *metanoia*, which is parallel the word meta-morphosis. Metamorphosis is what caterpillars go through to become butterflies. But metamorphosis is a

transformation of the body. Metanoia suggests a transformation of the *mind*. So let's try that reading again. John the Baptist appeared "Proclaiming a baptism into a new mind, for the forgiveness of sins."

OK, bear with me now friends, because in line with old Clarence Jordan's way of thinking I went back to take a look at two other critical words in this bible story. Using my limited linguistic abilities and an interlinear bible, I took a look at the Greek in which the text was first written, as well as the English and a couple commentaries. So the first problem word is "forgiveness." Just what do we mean by forgiveness? Forgiveness can mean a lot of things! And so what is THIS forgiveness? The same Greek word, *aphesin* can also be translated release, remission or redemption. Forgiveness suggests pardon. Release suggests freedom. Redemption means liberation from slavery. Remission suggests payment. Release suggests the opening of prison doors! Take your pick. OK. Still with me? We will put this all together in a moment.

The next question is even tougher for the bible student. Forgiveness for WHAT? Release from what? One other word I want to focus on is the Greek word *hamartion*, translated almost universally as "sins." OK but what are sins? Pretend you are from another planet and have never been to church. What is a sin? If you go to the Christian doctrine section of the library you will find one set of answers. That set is at least is preferable to what many of you have heard from the TV preachers. But it turns out that if you go to the CLASSICS section, and read up on an ancient Greek play or two, this same word describes the tragic flaw that winds up getting the hero in a tragic situation. Elsewhere in ancient literature it can simply mean error.

When you and I say "sins", something in the word may just smell like the fundamentalist preacher's brimstone. But when John the baptizer called folk out of their lives of tragic relationships and impossible choices, of class division and deep oppression, he may have been saying something a bit different!

Now all this is important. After all this is one of the very first sentences in one of the oldest bits of source material we have on the life of Jesus. The man who dunked Jesus in the river Jordan was calling folk to baptism—literally a bath, an immersion—but for what?

Here is the alternative read, the interpretation that seems most reasonable to me: "John the baptizer arose in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism into a whole new mind and way of seeing, immersion for release from captivity to error, for liberation from tragically flawed lives and relationships".

In the beginning Jesus was immersed for the sake of a transformed mind and a new vision: and he was transformed! For as he arose from the water, he heard a voice and saw a spirit like a dove, and the voice said, "You are my beloved child...."

The beginning of a transformed mind, a released heart, a new life, was the recognition that he was God's beloved, God's child. What if that were the same thing, in our own way, that each of us were to receive, marking the beginning of a whole new journey?

III.

Her name is Conceicao. I got to know her over the last couple years, first as she came to visit us in North Carolina from Maceio, Brazil, and then as I had opportunity to visit with her in Brazil this past August. Perhaps she and her husband will come someday to visit you here.... I learned some of her story as we sat at a table in Rio de Janeiro on morning at the meeting of the Alianca—the alliance of Baptists of Brazil, one of the most progressive protestant groups in Latin America. She grew up a little girl in a very traditional and conservative Baptist church there in Brazil, in a community she loved. But, she says, it was pretty narrow—and so was she! It wasn't until she became a woman in her thirties that she says Jesus started to open her up more, to accept more and different people, to realize that her old mindset wasn't the only way to look at the world. In 2013 she was elected the lay leader of her congregation there in Maceio, Igreja Pinheiro, Baptist Church of the Pine. So what? She was the first woman to be asked to serve in such a position in that church—ever. Influenced over the years by her reading of the bible she now helps lead a church committed to land reform, rights for the poor, the liberation of the Afro-Brazilian community and indigenous people. She has come to lead the congregation at a critical juncture in welcoming and affirming Lesbian and Gay people. And she is a participant in their own local homegrown brand of Maceio Brazilian Christian feminism.

She is a very humble woman, Conceicao, despite a fine education and important work and a lovely home. As we sat there at the table in a retreat center, I asked her what had changed. "When our church began to change," she said, "I had to pray about it. It wasn't easy for me. I keep having to pray about it. But Jesus opened me up to the possibility of looking at things in a new way. And once it began there was no stopping it. The Holy Spirit keeps opening me up more and more. There is no going back." Her face shone as she spoke, remembering the beginning of her transformation of mind and soul. And it was clear to me that every day for her is a new beginning, a new transformation, a new *metanoia*. She started with personal salvation but she has come to know that also means liberation. She started with the love of her own people; she has come to know that Jesus calls us to love people very different from us. She started with a narrow and condemning understanding of sin; she has come to understand that much of what the world needs is healing and justice.

IV.

In the beginning... today we have dedicated to young children to being brought up in the knowledge and love of God, a task they are too little to embrace for themselves, and so we embrace them and we embrace the challenge of helping them experience the love of God through the love we have for them, and teach them to have for the world. Children do most of their learning by watching...and imitating. Most of us have some humorous story of doing something not so great and having a short person imitate us almost immediately afterwards. But it is not all on us. The breath of God still moves upon the waters, the same spirit that rested on Jesus still descends like a dove into a world desperately in need of some redemption, some hope, and some peace.

As these twins join the fold of this congregation, or wherever they land up, may God bless them with new insights daily, with an expansive and open understanding of truth and good and light.

May they, and we, be drawn to follow in the footsteps of John the baptizer, recognizing the possibility of a new way of dealing with the world, minds torn open by Love. And may they—and we- be constantly open to the new thing which is beginning, flowers in our deserts, wild honey in our sometimes bitter coffee, justice in the midst of chaos, a dove descending from the heavens saying, “YOU are my beloved children. In you I am well pleased.”