

"THEN GOD SAID..."
Genesis 1: 1-5 Psalm 29 Mark 1:1-11
January 10, 2021
York Center Church of the Brethren
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Do you remember back to November 29th - I know, it was a lifetime ago! It was the first Sunday of Advent and we heard the cry of the prophet Isaiah. "*Oh, that you would rip open the heavens and come down here!*" It was an audacious invitation to God to send the unrestrained power of the Divine to invade the earth. It was a plea for the barrier between heaven and earth to be breached so that it could never again be sealed. It was the cry of the prophet on behalf of a devastated people who know they are in a desperate situation and yet still have a bold hope in the power of God.

We spent the season of Advent seeking to understand the ways in which God has closed the distance between us- between heaven and earth, and between those of us on the earth.

Today we turn to beginnings- the beginning of creation in the book of *Genesis* and the beginning of the good news of Jesus from the *Gospel of Mark*. Both of these texts warn us that the power of God is on the loose in the world in new, powerful, and surprising ways. Into the chaos of nothingness God speaks and the divine wind- the Spirit- dances over the darkness and brings forth order and light. Above the Jordan River the heavens are torn apart, God speaks words of love to Jesus, and the Spirit, in the form of a dove, dances down to empower him.

God speaks and new life, new creation, is possible. God speaks and the ministry of Jesus is born. The word of God changes reality; it transforms the world as we know it. God speaks and things happen.

Psalm 29 shows us the immense strength of the voice of God. It thunders with power and majesty; breaks trees, and makes mountains dance. The voice of God sends forth flames of fire, shakes the wilderness, and strips forests bare. God's voice is seen, heard, and felt in ways that cannot be ignored or misinterpreted. And yet we do both- all the time.

So many things were disturbing about the insurrection on Capital Hill Wednesday. But what upset me the most was the prevalence of Christian words and symbols. I saw people carrying crosses and Bibles. Signs proclaimed, "Jesus Saves!" and "God, Guns, and Guts Made America, Let's keep all three." At one point someone yelled, "Shout if you love Jesus!" and the crowd cheered. I cannot comprehend how people who call themselves Christians have twisted their faith so severely that they think they are doing God's will by attacking our democracy and supporting a dangerous presidential administration.

Taking the Lord's name in vain took on terrible new meaning as these same people held their Bibles while admiring a makeshift gallows and noose and waving their confederate flags.

Imagine if those terrorists were not white Christians but were instead, brown and black Muslims, marching into the Capital building in their religious garb clutching the Quran. There would have been a **very different** outcome. The sad history of our nation is one in which Christianity and white supremacy have been wed since the first Native American was called a savage by a white European immigrant and the first kidnapped African was shoved off of a slave ship and sold to a white plantation owner. Christianity has been used, for centuries, to uphold racism and protect white privilege. The irony of course, is that Christians profess to worship Jesus, a brown-skinned Middle Eastern Jew who spent his life reaching out to the weak, the poor, and the vulnerable.

Every preacher I know struggled this week with what to preach today. Some have congregations that are evenly divided between our two political parties. Some have many vocal supporters of the current president. Others, like me, have congregations who are mostly progressive and seek a government that promotes justice and equality. (And you have no idea how grateful I am for that.) I am aware that over the years we have lost a few members who didn't agree with decisions we made or stands that we have taken.

I speak to you today, more convinced than ever that when the voice of God speaks, that voice speaks for justice, equality, fairness, and inclusion. The God who spoke the world into being and called Jesus, "my beloved," hasn't suddenly become the god who approves of the kkk and the proud boys.

We have just celebrated the birth of Jesus- God's ultimate way to close the distance between us; when God spoke love right into our world. This one born of Jewish peasants, in a stable, visited by shepherds and strange foreign wise men, was also the one hunted by a dangerous, insecure king who sought only destruction and personal power. This one, the babe in the manger, was God wearing human skin. He came as one of the least of these and that is who he ministered to and with.

In Jesus, the power of God is loose in the world so that the forces of evil may be overcome, and the reign of God may be on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus, God's presence is experienced on the earth like never before: the sick are healed, the hungry are fed, the weak are made strong, the lost are found, the outcasts are welcomed, the oppressed are set free, the sinners are forgiven.

In Jesus, we found a whole new definition of power, success, and political authority. In Jesus we meet the God whom we cannot control or tame. We meet the one who will not be complicit with evil and will not ignore wrongdoing.

Knowing that God's power is alive among us should make us both excited and afraid. Because if God is here among us then maybe God expects something of us. When Jesus came to the river to be baptized, he didn't jump to the front of the line. He took his place with everyone else and waited his turn. He, who was without sin, stood with those who weren't. And after his cousin, John, lowered him under the water and brought him up again, God claimed him by ripping open the heavens and sending the Spirit to be with him. And then came the voice. We don't know if everyone heard that voice, or just Jesus, but the message couldn't have been any clearer. "You are my son. You are my beloved. You bring me so much joy!"

With those words ringing in his ears, before he even had a chance to dry off, that Spirit pushed him into the wilderness and then into his ministry.

The power of God loose in our world today is that same creative power that spoke the world into being. It is the same loving power that spoke Jesus into being through Mary. It is the same power that names us beloved and calls us to recognize that others are God's beloved as well.

Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm reminds us that *"Jesus' baptism represents a scandal of the greatest possible magnitude. God crosses the impenetrable boundary between divine and human realms and acts as one who identifies fully with human sin, life, and longing. Jesus' coming shatters our assumptions and confounds our sense of what is expected. His baptism not only identifies him as God's Son but also empowers him for ministry to all people."* (1)

There is no doubt that we are broken people living in a broken world. But it is a world that God treasured enough to enter into, bringing a new sense of hope and belonging. We stand on the riverbank like those baptized by John, poised between a troubled past and an unprecedented future.

We, as God's beloved, are called to radical transformation- transformation of ourselves and of our world.

On Friday, as I was writing this sermon, a friend sent me a statement by the Dominican Sisters of Springfield , IL. They sum up what I have been feeling- a sense of outrage, sadness, and yes, even a tiny bit of hope.

*Statement of the Dominican Sisters of Springfield
Regarding the January 6, 2021, Mob Assault on Congress and Its Consequences*

On January 7th people in the United States awoke to a new reality—but not one without hope. It is possible now, for all of us to see as clearly as we ever have the fault lines that divide our nation. We firmly believe it is also possible to heal them.

The assault on truth and the democratic rule of law at the U.S. Congress on January 6 revealed the depths to which a nation can fall when its leaders are blinded by hunger for privilege and power at the expense of their own dignity, the dignity of all its people, and the common good.

The violent mob-action that breached the barely-secured walls of the Capitol was a frightening and predictable consequence of years of assault on truth, the Constitution, civil rights, and democracy itself.

What we witnessed January 6 in our most sacred civic space has revealed an urgent need to forge a path for the renewal of our sacred bonds as members of a nation whose highest ideals—if we are honest—have never yet in our nation's story been equitably made available to all.

As citizens of our beloved nation and women vowed to serve the truth of God's infinite love for all creation, we offer our prayers, our energies, and our collective desire for national healing and renewal. When we as a nation acknowledge our historic failings and recommit our energies toward assuring sacred treasured rights for all, we can begin anew the process of building a republic of citizens, recognizing one another as a people, indivisible, who uphold our common desire for liberty and justice for all."

Walter Brueggemann challenges us with these words: *"The prophetic tasks of the church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair."*

With God's help, may it be so with us.

Amen.

End Notes:

- *PREACHING THE GOSPEL OF MARK, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm. Westminster John Knox. 2008. P.10.*

