

Genesis 1:1-5

¹In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Psalm 29 (UMH 761)

¹Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

²Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name; worship the LORD in holy splendor.

³The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over mighty waters.

⁴The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.

⁵The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.

⁶He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox.

⁷The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.

⁸The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

⁹The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, “Glory!”

¹⁰The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.

¹¹May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!

Acts 19:1-7

¹While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. ²He said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” They replied, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” ³Then he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They answered, “Into John’s baptism.” ⁴Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.” ⁵On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied—⁷altogether there were about twelve of them.

Mark 1:4-11

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” ⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved with you I am well pleased.”

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible with Apocrypha

New Beginnings

There once was a man named Joe and he was talking to God and he asked, *"How much is a penny worth in heaven?"* God replied, *"One million dollars."* Then Joe asked, *"How long is a minute in heaven?"* God said, *"One million years."* So Joe asked for a penny and God said, *"Sure, just wait a minute."*

This morning our Old Testament scripture reading is the first five verses of the Bible, the story of creation in the first chapter of Genesis. It is somehow appropriate to talk about the beginning of everything at the beginning of the year. We have a whole year ahead of us filled with many possibilities. This is one of those scripture readings that can be controversial to talk about. Why is so it controversial? Well, I'm not sure, but the creation story seems to be one of those hot-button issues that divides Christians.

You probably wouldn't find many Christians that would get in a heated argument over the interpretation of Jesus's sermon on the mount, or the Apostle Paul discussing the fruits of the Holy Spirit, but the creation story is another thing altogether.

You may have heard the arguments - some people believe that the creation story is literally true and correct as written - that it is a scientific account of creation as well as a religious account of creation. Others believe that is a story of *why* God created the universe rather than *how* God created the universe. These people are comfortable with evolution and the Big Bang theory, but still believe that God created it all. It isn't just an either/or situation because some people believe something in between. And still others - who aren't Christians, I hope - believe that God and creation is a fairy tale and a myth with no basis in fact.

One day a group of scientists met and decided that mankind had come a long way and no longer needed God. So they picked one scientist to go and tell God that they were done with Him. The scientist walked up to God and said, *"God, we've decided that we no longer need You. We're to the point that we can clone people and do many miraculous things, so why don't You just retire?"* God listened very patiently to the man and then said, *"Very well, but first, how about this: Let's have a Man-making contest."* To which the scientist replied, *"Okay, great!"* But God added, *"Now, we're going to do this just like I did back in the old days with Adam."*

The scientist said, *"Sure, no problem"* and bent down and grabbed himself a handful of dirt.

God looked at him and said, *"No, no, no - You create your own dirt!"*

Now, I'm not going to stand up here and tell you which version of the creation story is

correct - for two reasons. First, because I really don't know. And second, because I don't think it matters that much. The things that matter are believing that God created the universe and loves that creation - including you. That Jesus died for your sins, and that you are forgiven and saved - not in how long it took to create the universe.

But because I don't think it matters that much, that doesn't mean that I think that the creation story is unnecessary or irrelevant. On the contrary, I think that there are several important ideas that you can get from the creation story - regardless of where you come down on the controversial aspects of it.

What are some of these ideas? The creation story makes the point that God is the one who creates. Humans can't create: they can form or make, but not create. The repeated refrain, "*And God saw that it was good*" after each act of creation emphasizes that creation is good and is approved by God. And the story confirms that God's spirit - the Holy Spirit - was present at the creation of the world.

Just as today's Old Testament scripture is the story of a new beginning, so the New Testament scripture reading is the story of another new beginning of a different sort. It is Mark's story of the baptism of Jesus and it is the first story in Mark's Gospel. The Gospel of Mark, the oldest of the four Gospel accounts, doesn't have any stories about the birth or childhood of Jesus. The stories of Jesus's birth, the Annunciation of Mary, the shepherds in the field, and the gifts of the Magi that we have been reading and hearing and celebrating for the last month, are nowhere to be found in Mark's Gospel. If all we had was Mark's Gospel, we wouldn't have much to talk about at Christmas.

Mark begins his Gospel with the story of John the Baptizer baptizing Jesus in the River Jordan. To Mark, that is the start of the story of Jesus's ministry. The story is very similar to accounts in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and most biblical scholars believe that Matthew and Luke used Mark's account as a basis for *their* accounts.

The verse that catches my attention in Mark's depiction of Jesus's baptism is the tenth verse ¹⁰*And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.* This verse caught my attention because it reminds me of the similar passage in the creation account from Genesis.

Just as God's spirit was present at the creation of the world, so God's spirit was present at the baptism of Jesus. That means that God is involved at every level with the world and the people in it, even to the point of identifying fully with us through the incarnation of Jesus. God's spirit is present with Jesus, and so as Jesus identifies fully with humanity in baptism - so God identifies fully with Jesus as God identified with the world in creation.

It is worth noting that in Mark's gospel the spirit descends like a dove. Although the Genesis account does not mention a dove, the verbs used to describe the action of the spirit are - hover, move, brood - all of which are reminiscent of a bird. In many paintings of the Annunciation, the Holy Spirit is shown in the form of a dove whispering into Mary's ear.

The image of a dove also appears as the one who brought the olive branch to Noah after the flood, and in the Jewish traditions where doves above the water signify the presence of God. The book of Acts describes the Holy Spirit descending on the apostles at Pentecost in the form of a wind and tongues of fire resting over the apostles' heads. So in addition to being depicted as a bird, the Holy Spirit is sometimes symbolized by a flame of fire. That is where the inspiration for the red flame in the United Methodist logo comes from.

In today's scripture reading from Acts we read Paul speaking in verse two: *²He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."* Then in verse six it says: *⁶When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.*

The two things that I find in common in all of today's scripture readings are the ideas of God's Holy Spirit being with us, and of new beginnings.

We just ended a year last Sunday and began a new year. 2005 was a year that many people would like to forget. If you were caught up in the tsunami in southeast Asia, or the hurricanes in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, or the earthquake in Pakistan - you probably would like to forget 2005 - that is if you survived those natural disasters at all. Those people, and many others like them are looking for a new beginning.

A middle-aged woman had a heart attack and was taken to the hospital. While on the operating table she had a near death experience. Seeing God she asked, *"Is my time up?"* God said, *"No you have another 43 years, 2 months and 8 days to live."* Upon hearing this, the woman decided to stay in the hospital and have a face lift, liposuction and a tummy tuck. She even had someone change her hair color. Since she had so much more time to live, she figured she might as well make the most of it. She was released from the hospital but while crossing the street on her way home, she was killed by a car. Arriving in front of God, she demanded, *"I thought you said I had another 43 years?! Why didn't you pull me out of the path of that car?"*

God replied, *"I didn't recognize you."*

Like the woman, so many people are hoping for a new beginning. On the other hand, many people are holding on to the old year - holding on to what they have now. Many people are comfortable with what they have now, and don't want to give it up. I know how that feels because I was that way.

Fifteen years ago I was happily married to a wonderful woman, had two beautiful daughters, a great job, and a nice house in a nice neighborhood. I was content and wanted things to stay the way that they were. But that was before my wife was diagnosed with cancer. Even as she suffered through surgeries, hospital stays, radiation treatments, and chemotherapy, I kept holding on to what I had, hoping for things to stay the way they had been.

But that wasn't to be. My wife died from the cancer, and the comfortable lives that my daughters and I were used to came to an end. The pain and disruption we went through is something we will never forget. But just like the sun coming up in the morning, or the start of a new year, we all experienced a new beginning.

My wife's new beginning meant her shedding her diseased body and leaving behind the pain and suffering that went with it. And my daughters and I had a new beginning also. Now I again have a wonderful wife. And in addition to my two beautiful daughters, I have a great step-son. And with them came three grandchildren. I have a nice house in a nice neighborhood, and a great job.

The Holy Spirit was there with me in my new beginning. In the last 15 years I have renewed my faith in God and that has led me to church again. The Holy Spirit has stayed with me as I have come to St. Paul to be with all of you. For me the new beginning has been accompanied by the Holy Spirit the whole way.

I found a quote in a Guideposts magazine from Reverend Joel Osteen. He is the senior pastor at the Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, and author of the book *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential*. He says "You can't do anything about what is gone, but you can do something about what is left."

As hard as it can be to part with the comfortable aspects of the old year, the new year has come - and with the new year comes new beginnings. I am confident that whatever the new year brings, God's Holy Spirit will be there with us.

Amen