

## *Creating with the Spirit*

Genesis 1: 1-5

Mark 1: 4-11

We are creators. Creating is one of the things we likely enjoy the most. It gives us a sense of command, purpose, and achievement, and of course, enjoyment. If we're feeling poopy, depressed, or lethargic, then we probably need to begin creating. The material for creating something, anything, is probably close at hand. We simply need to set our minds and spirits to the task, and we can begin exploring and discovering with a project.

The work of creation comes upon us when some issue or problem confronts us. Then we know we need to find a solution. If the solution is not already known, then we need to do the exploration and discovery, which may include testing one approach and the another, trying to overcome or solve the matter at hand.

Children do such things quite naturally. They let their imaginations take them places where they're familiar and then into the unfamiliar. Even in imitation play, a child is creating for themselves what they've seen, heard, or imagined. Imitation involves interpretation and some of the results can be quite amusing to an adult. Watch some kids playing "house" as they portray their impressions of mommy and daddy. That's always interesting for an adult to witness, even more so if it's the parent.

As adults, we need to be more intentional about creating. But our creations can be quite remarkable, even surprising ourselves at their effectiveness.

Creating invites us into the sacred space that God occupied at the creation. "Formless and void," the earthly creation was writhing watery chaos, but present within that primordial churn was the Spirit of God, hovering over the waters. God's first big idea after starting off with watery earth and water-filled skies was light. God liked what God had made and called it 'good.' God's first command for light becomes a hallmark trait of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Out of the waters, light shines forth and new life is born, from the primordial waters of creation or from the transformational waters of baptism. The way for the faithful begins in such waters, a journey that encompasses a lifetime with challenges, learning, practice, and a growing understanding of God and God's true mystery. While we may garner answers in our quest for understanding the divine, each answer seems to seed five more questions. Through that lifelong excursion, the Spirit accompanies the learner and creator, opening entries to the promise that we bear, and how that promise can be realized.

Knowing that water and Spirit are together in the work of creating from the beginning, we can approach the initial character of Mark's gospel, John the Baptist. The story of Jesus' start in ministry begins in Mark and the other gospels with John the Baptist.

We believe from the gospels that Jesus is raised in Galilee, a rugged region that was a refuge for kooks and crooks, the bandits and the beset, prophets and agitators who needed a safe, out-of-the-way place to stay under the radar. In this bubbling cauldron of experiences and ideas, Jesus is raised by presumably devout parents and he follows their practice of Jewish

Torah-Law. However, we have to imagine that the young adult Jesus isn't satisfied. He can't quite put his finger on it, but there must be something more out there that would be truly inspired. A spiritual restlessness may have plagued young Jesus. His adult contacts would likely have brought him into more metropolitan locations nearby, particularly Capernaum, where he would be exposed to more ideas and experiences. Perhaps in one of these encounters, he hears talk about a man with the appearance of the ancient prophet Elijah who is in the wild region by the Jordan River. This character, John the Baptist, is baptizing followers for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus sets out to find John the Baptist.

Now *we* understand baptism in a certain sense, as a ritual with the application of water combined with a naming of the individual before God, and a concluding prayer. The act is complete and things resume as normal.

What John was doing was not an independent singular ritual act. Rather, it transformed the believer who was now prepared for the coming of the Messiah, the end of the age. With repentance for the forgiveness of sins, the believer was made clean and purified for the end-time that was coming soon.

Those who sought out John, as Jesus did, came not simply to be baptized. They came to join his faith community and await the coming of the Lord, maintaining a lifestyle that preserved them from sinfulness. That meant following the ways of the Baptist community, its faith discipline, diet, prayers, and other activities and practices. The community life taught them how to live, living together, so that they would be blessed when the Lord came to end the age. They did not get dunked and go home. Baptism readied them for participation in the life of the community of the blessed.

All of this was quite irregular, of course. That's why John was in the wilderness area of the Jordan River. He was claiming to make people ritually clean and pure. In Judaism, that was the exclusive role of the Temple and its priests following the prescribed routines mandated by the teachers and scribes of the Jewish establishment. John's ministry was completely renegade. John's ministry denied the ability of the Temple and its priests to fulfill the obligation of purification, likely because of a belief in the inherent corruption of the Temple and its leadership.

Over time, John's baptist community grew and word spread around the region. We can imagine the rebellious element in Galilee and the wags in Capernaum talking about this challenger to religious authority quite a bit. What Jesus heard must have piqued his attention, causing him to travel there, learn more, and see what John was doing.

Clearly, what John was doing was something that clicked. Jesus decided that this was the next step in his spiritual journey. He presents himself to John for baptism.

We can finally speculate that Jesus gained many of the insights that produced his wisdom and teachings from John the Baptist. Jesus was a disciple of John and probably became a leader of his own satellite community, making him Jesus the Baptist for a time. The gospel of John, chapters 3 and 4, slips and includes a couple of notations about Jesus as a

Baptist. I say the gospel of John “slipped” because all of the gospels – including the gospel of John – go to great lengths to show John deferring to Jesus as the Promised One, the Messiah.

What’s the reason for this deliberate and determined downplaying of John the Baptist? Even when the gospels were written 2 to 3 generations after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the disciples of John the Baptist were still a lively movement, having spread throughout the Mediterranean and with its promoters working in some of the same communities that early Jesus people were working. We have the encounters with Apollos recorded in Acts and 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians. Apollos was a Baptist disciple from Alexandria in Egypt who was ministering as a missionary in Greece at the same time and places as Paul and his disciples, establishing Baptist communities. It caused quite a bit of confusion as they all worked the same turf.

In this church season called Epiphany, we see Jesus first revealed in his sacred mission. Here in Mark’s gospel, the word of God that comes spectacularly with Jesus’ baptism reflects the proud parent, pleased by the choice of his Son to make a new way that would ultimately reveal a way for all of the faithful to follow.

We get the sense that Jesus was no different from any other young adult about whom a parent may be anxious, seeing their child set off to make their way in life. The presence of the Holy Spirit coming down on Jesus at his baptism is the unique sign of Jesus’ way. The life in John the Baptist’s community was as much about what to **avoid** and what **not** to do as what to do to **preserve** oneself in purity and righteousness for the coming time of tribulation and judgment. It was about gathering together and waiting faithfully.

For Jesus, once the Baptist community was beset by persecution and dispersed, he had to decide his own direction. Jesus defined a very different message. The message of his way was **what to do, how to think and act, how to regard others**. As much as it would seem John the Baptist’s community was **turned in** on itself, Jesus’ disciples were taught the opposite. They were shown how to **reach out**, go forth, and minister to others. As the baptismal waters purified and drew you into the Baptist’s community, Jesus’ baptism in the Spirit called you out, pushed you out, caring less for preserving oneself. In fact, the idea was to give oneself, even sacrificing oneself. How very different Jesus’ path would be from John the Baptist’s.

The Spirit is seen creating in both scriptures. The Spirit is always creating in myriad ways in every day, in every season, and in every life. But the Spirit is not the stable humdrum of routine. Like a child’s imagination, the Spirit has amazing range and is full of surprises, some delightful and some disturbing. The Spirit calls out the faithful to join with the Lord on the mossy path that has had few footfalls, to walk into the unfamiliar places. There is where our promise awaits fulfillment along a journey of spiritual and physical exploration and discovery. The Spirit creates with us and for us as we move faithfully in tandem with the Lord’s mission to bring healing, justice, peace, and new life to all, including ourselves.