

“The Spirit Like a Dove”
Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:4-11

There are all sorts of beginnings.

One of the most beautiful is the one we read about earlier, the beginning of all beginnings, told about in the book of beginnings, Genesis, when God created the heavens and the earth and the wind or the spirit (the same word in Hebrew) swept over the waters,
over the formless void, the chaos,
when God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. That was some beginning!

Our beginnings are usually not quite so dramatic, but are smaller, quieter.
We begin a new diet, a new book, a new job.
Or we begin a new year as we did just recently.

Last week I was trying, in vain as it turned out,
to explain to our three-year-old grandson Stedman
that some people took the opportunity at the start of a new year
to make a new year’s resolution, something that they wanted to do more of,
like exercise, let’s say.
He decided he wanted to go the water park more often this year!

Sometimes we think we are beginning one thing and it turns out that we are beginning something else. Last week at the hospital I ran into someone I know who was there visiting his wife. That same day they had planned to leave for Florida in their motor home. They were all packed and ready to go. But his wife slipped on some ice and broke her hip. That day was to be the beginning of a trip. Instead it became the beginning of convalescence.

When did the story of Jesus begin? We just celebrated his birth. So maybe it began then. That is what Matthew and Luke tell us is the beginning of the story. Then if you read the fourth Gospel, John, he says it all began long before that, at the very beginning. And using language reminiscent of Genesis he says: “In the beginning was the Word...” and so on.

But today we are reading from Mark, our oldest Gospel, and in this Gospel the story of Jesus begins with his baptism in the Jordan by John the Baptizer. If we would have read the first three verses of that opening passage we would have heard these words:
“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

In Mark’s Gospel the whole story of Jesus begins with this very important event in the life of Jesus, his baptism. For Mark everything that came before that was non-consequential. But once Jesus was baptized, you might say, all heaven broke loose.

Something happened at that baptism that set the tone for the rest of Jesus’ life and ministry. Mark says it this way:
“...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.”

Today we are not baptizing anyone. Instead we are ordaining two of our members to the office of elder and deacon, and we are installing others to those offices, some for a first, some for a second term. And this represents a beginning as well. We begin a new year in the life of the church with some new people stepping up to fill some very important roles.
We, as Presbyterians, take these roles seriously. We ask the candidates for ordination and

installation to affirm their faith and to make some promises.

And in a way it is like the baptism that Jesus experienced. As Mark tells it, it is not clear whether only Jesus saw the Spirit descending upon him and heard the voice from heaven or whether others saw and heard also. In one of the other Gospels it says that the people thought they heard thunder. I doubt if anyone here this morning will see anything unusual or hear a voice other than that of mine or of the other participants. If anyone does see something flying around the sanctuary, ascending or descending, I'd put my money on it being a bat rather than a dove.

But on the other hand, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear, we may sense something going on that is more than the sum of the words and the actions that we will perform shortly. There is always that element of the Spirit, the same one who swept or hovered over the face of the waters in creation; the same one who descended as a dove at Jesus' baptism. "There are different gifts, but it is the same Spirit who gives them."

Those of you who have stood where these candidates for ordination and installation will stand this morning know that a lot of what they are in for is sometimes rather tedious. They are in for balancing budgets, hearing reports, attending meetings, fulfilling assignments, making things happen, dealing with issues that come up. Sometimes, frankly, it can be rather dull and pedantic. As Linda said the other day: "I'm drowning in sea of details."

At other times it can be rather chaotic. Having just come through the very busy Christmas season I can say that the chaos can become overwhelming. Do we have enough candles for everyone for the early service? Who's ringing the bell for the late service? When do the lights get turned out? Whose opening up? Are all the ushers in place? Who's the acolyte? What about readers?

Right in the midst of trying to finish up putting the two Christmas Eve services together a couple of weeks ago, with the deadline looming, I got a call from someone not from the church who needed someone to talk to. I said that I didn't have much time but would try to squeeze it in. As it turned out, it was one of those times when by the grace of God, maybe the Spirit hovered and swept through and made a difference. I got a note later on that seemed to indicate that it was something like that.

To our new officers I want to say this morning that what you are called to do is more than just the duties of office -- visiting shut-ins, ushering, serving on a committee, dealing with finances or building repairs, planning worship services, or whatever they may be. That is certainly part of what you are called to do. But always remember to keep one eye opened and one ear attuned for the Spirit, the unexpected voice from heaven, the dove descending upon our routines and schedules and baptizing and transforming them.