

Stephen Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

January 7, 2024

Year B, 1 Epiphany, Revised Common Lectionary

[Genesis 1:1-5](#)

[Acts 19:1-7](#)

[Mark 1:4-11](#)

[Psalm 29](#)

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One of the challenges of telling any story is knowing the right place to begin.

Some stories start with iconic opening lines. “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.” “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” The classic movie *Citizen Kane* begins at the end, with the title character on his deathbed, breathing his last word, “Rosebud.”

This morning we heard the very beginning of the first book of the Bible, named “Genesis” which literally means “beginning,” and whose first verses tell of the beginning of everything—or do they? “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the waters.” Where did the waters come from? Was there something before the beginning? Who knows? This is where the story begins.

The four gospels begin in different ways. The Gospel of John begins at the very beginning, the cosmic beginnings of the universe, very much like the book of Genesis, to tell us that Jesus was one with God from the very beginning: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The Gospels of Luke and Matthew start where we might expect a biographical story to start: with the birth. From them we get the familiar Christmas stories of angels appearing to Mary and Joseph, a child born in Bethlehem, shepherds in the fields and sages from the east.

But the gospel we hear today is from the Gospel of Mark, and it begins differently: not with an infant Jesus but with an adult one; not with a birth but with a baptism. Mark’s Gospel was probably the first one to be written. So Mark didn’t have any precedents to tell him how to write the story of Jesus. And when he sat down to write what he thought needed to be told, the place it seemed to him that the story began was here at the Jordan River, here where Jesus emerges from home and family into public life, where he hears God’s voice and is anointed by the Spirit to begin his work.

It begins with baptism. Which is true for each of us in our life in Christ. Whether it happens when we are infants or children or teens or adults, whether it happens in a river or a church or a hospital bed, whether we remember it clearly or not at all, we begin our Christian lives just as Genesis begins the creation story and Mark begins the Jesus story: at the water, with the wild and mysterious breath of God breathing the Holy Spirit into us.

Of course Jesus wasn't the first person to ever be baptized. John the Baptist, that mysterious prophet, had been attracting followers for some time before Jesus came to him. John's baptism was a sign of repentance, a sign of turning away from wrong and toward God, a pledge of a greater holiness of life. A baptism of repentance of course was the one thing Jesus didn't need. The sinless one came to identify himself with sinners, to become one of us, to go all the way in his incarnation. In the Eastern Orthodox churches they say that since Jesus was the one who needed no washing clean of sin, instead when he was baptized, his holiness sanctified all the waters of the earth. And it created a new kind of baptism too, as we heard in the quirky little story we heard today from the Acts of the Apostles, where Paul helps a group of disciples who had known only John's baptism receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit when they are baptized into the risen Jesus. In Jesus something old, a rite of ritual washing, becomes something new: the new birth into the living Body of Christ.

Beginnings. I wonder what some of the most important beginnings have been for you in your life? Your own birth, of course, a beginning none of us remembers but each of us has been through. The beginnings of conscious awareness, earliest memories. Perhaps beginnings of school, beginnings of jobs, beginnings of relationships. A move, a new beginning in a new place. A marriage or other major relationship. A commitment of some other kind, a religious profession, a commitment to a certain vocation or profession. Births of children, your own or other children who are important in your life. A coming out of the closet, perhaps, or a gender transition; a profound moment of beginning for some. A beginning of recovery from an illness or an addiction. Other, perhaps more complicated beginnings. The beginning of singleness again, perhaps, after the end of a

relationship. The beginning of life without a loved one, after a beloved has died.  
The beginning of learning to live with a new physical or mental limitation.

There are many places where we can begin the stories we tell about ourselves.

A new year is a beginning, and we are starting one, in the way our society happens to mark time, a way that is at once totally arbitrary and profoundly meaningful. Some choose to mark a new year with resolutions or new habits or goals. Next week we will celebrate our annual meeting and we as a congregation will give thanks for the year that was in 2023 and make a new beginning in ministry for 2024, with new leaders and new opportunities.

As Jesus begins his ministry today he hears God's voice affirming that he is God's beloved. That voice is for us too, who have been baptized into Jesus and made part of his Body, who belong to him. If you haven't been baptized, perhaps God is calling you today to consider the invitation to baptism. We celebrate Baptism at Easter and there will be opportunities for preparation this spring. Yet whether or not you choose to follow the Christian path, that voice is still speaking to you too, because you are God's Beloved since the moment you were created.

In each of our beginnings, from our birth into this life to our birth into eternity, God speaks to Jesus, and to us. "You are my Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

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Announcements:

- Pauly's ordination, give thanks, announce him preaching 1/14, placement
- Annual Meeting Jan 14 after 10:15 service
- Ari Castaneda recognition and prayer (leaving for college, started in August 2021 and served every month since then; Laura will continue)