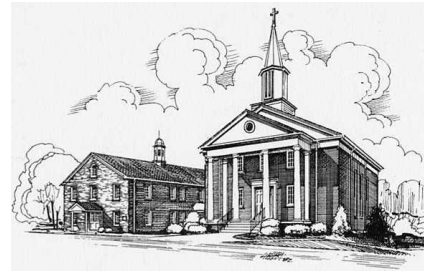


*The Lessons Appointed for Use on the*  
**First Sunday after the Epiphany**



**The Baptism of our Lord**

**Year B**

**RCL**

Genesis 1:1-5

Psalm 29

Mark 1:4-11

**The Collect**

Father in heaven, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

**Genesis 1:1-5**

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 face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

**Psalm 29 Page 620, BCP**

*Afferte Domino*

- 1 Ascribe to the LORD, you gods,  
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
- 2 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his Name;  
worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.
- 3 The voice of the LORD is upon the waters;  
the God of glory thunders;  
the LORD is upon the mighty waters.
- 4 The voice of the LORD is a powerful voice;  
the voice of the LORD is a voice of splendor.
- 5 The voice of the LORD breaks the cedar trees;  
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon;
- 6 He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,  
and Mount Hermon like a young wild ox.
- 7 The voice of the LORD splits the flames of fire;  
the voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;  
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
- 8 The voice of the LORD makes the oak trees writhe  
and strips the forests bare.
- 9 And in the temple of the LORD  
all are crying, "Glory!"
- 10 The LORD sits enthroned above the flood;  
the LORD sits enthroned as King for evermore.
- 11 The LORD shall give strength to his people;  
the LORD shall give his people the blessing of peace.

**Mark 1:4-11**

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And 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. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He 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. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

## SERMON

A few years ago, I was eating a lonely lunch at a local restaurant. A man of my age or a bit older joined me. He was packing a pistol, and I found that odd. I carried a pistol my entire professional life, but my experience with law enforcement in this area demonstrates to me that you are orders of magnitude more likely to be struck down by the flu than you are to get in a gunfight in Ashland, Kentucky. Huntington, maybe. Ashland, not so much. Yet, an awful lot of people don't get the flu shot and some people carry pistols. Odd, don't you think? Anyway, as we talked, and I shared with him my experience, he got more and more agitated. Clearly, he was hearing my words as an attack on his understanding of what the world is like. He got mad and left. I have that effect on people sometimes.

We don't often (or ever!) talk about our "Big Story", the narrative that each of us carries around with which we try to make sense of the world around us. Watching Vivie hammer together her narrative of how the world works has been one of the most illuminating and instructive things I've ever done. Mommy can say, "No", and that means "Don't do that", but if Vivie says, "No!" Mommy gets all clouded up and we have to go to time out. How do you understand that sort of thing? That's the purpose of the narrative she is constructing – a way to understand this world with all its contradictions. Clearly, the man I was speaking with in the restaurant had constructed a narrative radically different than my own, and to hear me disagree made him anxious. So...what is our narrative?

Our Old Testament passage is from the first of the two

creation stories in the Book of Genesis. Hear it again:

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 face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

This narrative starts out with a formless void – a morally neutral ground. A wind from God swept languidly over the waters – again a peaceful, non-threatening description – almost a description of life within the womb! Then, for reasons not explained, God decided to create light and when He did so, He judged it good. Creation was a beneficial, good act, bringing into being a beneficial, good earth. I don’t know why I have al-



ways breezed through that passage looking for “the good stuff” to preach about. There's the good stuff, right there!

I wondered what other narratives might have been current at the same time the Genesis account was first written so I did a little digging. When do we think Genesis was first set down? Remember, Moses came down from the mountain with two tables of stone, not two tables of stone and a King James Version tucked under his arm. To what period of history can we date Genesis, and what other narratives might then have then been current?

Best guess is that Genesis, though later edited, was first set down in the Sixth Century b.c.e. in Babylon during the Exile, so to answer our question, we have to ask, “How did the Babylonians see things?” To my sur-

prise, I found that the Babylonians had an entirely different narrative, related in the story *Enuma Elish*. It's a fascinating contrast and went something like this:

**In the beginning, ... Apsu, the father god, and Tiamat, the mother god, give birth to the gods. But the frolicking of the younger gods makes so much noise that the elder gods resolve to kill them so they can sleep. The younger gods uncover the plot before the elder gods put it into action, and kill Apsu. His wife Tiamat, the Dragon of Chaos, pledges revenge. Terrified by Tiamat, the rebel gods turn for salvation to their youngest member, Marduk.**

**He negotiates a steep price: if he succeeds, he must be given chief and undisputed power in the assembly of the gods. Having extorted this promise, he catches Tiamat in a net, drives an evil wind down her throat, shoots an arrow that bursts her distended belly and pierces her heart. He then splits her skull with a club and scatters her blood in out-of-the-way places. He stretches out her corpse**

**full-length, and from it creates the cosmos.<sup>1</sup>**

For the Babylonians, evil precedes good. The gods are murderous demons. The world is a threatening place, one which will gobble you up unless you are constantly on your guard. In the Biblical narrative, Creation was an act of peace. Good precedes evil. God is beneficial and loving. We are his well-loved children, not an annoyance to be killed.

During my conversation in the restaurant, from which narrative was I speaking? From which narrative was the other man speaking? What is the dominant narrative of our time? Isn't it something like, "The Dragon of Chaos is upon the world and will tear it to pieces unless we are vigilant and prepared with merciless and overwhelming force"?

---

<sup>1</sup> Wink, Walter (2010-02-19). *The Powers That Be (Theology for a New Millennium)*. Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

## PLUNK YOUR MAGIC TWANGER, RONNIE. HIT THE CD

Did you see the movie, *Jaws*? Do you remember how Brody killed the shark? He threw an oxygen bottle down its throat, then shot the bottle, causing it to explode just as Marduk killed Tiamat. Does that not set the hair on the back of your neck on end? Does that not horrify you? What are we, in the church, to proclaim but the narrative of God's loving sovereignty? But what if everyone we speak to, indeed, many of the people we meet in our churches, are so committed to fighting the Dragon of Chaos that it becomes impossible for them to hear the message we are to bring, the message of Jesus Christ? Hear the account from Matthew of Jesus' arrest:

Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and

struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, ‘Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?’<sup>2</sup>

Jesus knows what is going to happen and what is going to happen is beyond your capacity to imagine.

There is nothing in our narrative that informs us how to approach something as outrageous as a crucifixion. It’s one thing to take a prisoner into the desert and behead him. It is an order of magnitude more offensive to think of nailing a man to a cross so that he dies in agony over a long period of time. Jesus is reminding His followers that He **COULD** escape. He **COULD** embrace the

---

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 26:47-54 NRSV

Babylonian narrative and slay the Dragon of Chaos, but that this is the wrong narrative. That is the narrative that lies at the heart of every last bad thing history reports. How have we gotten ourselves so divorced from the message of Jesus that we are no longer aware that we have done so?

This is the exact place in this week's sermon where I annoy you in the same way I annoyed the fellow in the restaurant when I challenged his narrative. This is the place where I pose questions to you which may never have been asked of you before in a church. This week, in Paris, there was an armed attack on a newspaper. Twelve people were killed in cold blood. There is NOTHING I can say in defense of those who did these things. Except to ask, "Are we certain we are behaving differently?"

The misguided and thoroughly corrupted people who did these awful things shouted “Allah Akbar” or “God is Great” imagining that they had struck a great blow in God's favor. They are Babylonian to their core. Their world is threatened by the forces of evil and chaos, which they identify with us, and that fear and that narrative grants permission to them to do awful acts in response. Are we certain we are so very different? What is our response to awful acts? Whose narrative governs our response, the one of Jesus or the one of the Dragon of Chaos?

The difference between a church and a social club is that the church is divinely inspired to bring the narrative of God into the world. Such a course has nothing to do with good people or bad people. It has to do with bringing to a world besotted by the narrative of the Dragon

of Chaos the Good News that God has given us dominion over His Creation, and He only expects us to behave decently with it. We live in a potential paradise if we can just tame the Dragons within ourselves which lead us to see no alternative but to answer violence with violence, death with death, murder with murder. It sometimes seems to me that the only thing we need in order to enter the legions of evil is a superficially credible reason to do so.

This week, I have an exercise for you. I want you to ask yourselves what your narrative tells you about the sort of outcome for individuals like those involved in the attacks in Paris which would give you a feeling of justice done, a righteous outcome? Then, when you have that best-possible outcome clearly in mind, ask yourself how it compares to the narrative we embrace



as Christians. What is your personal narrative?

AMEN

## BENEDICTION

The ancient Babylonian story is with us yet, and for many, many people, it represents the ideal of manly behavior. My great-great-great-great-great grandparents came to Wyoming County, Virginia to hack a living from the wilderness. When we tell the story of our pioneer ancestors, is it the story of Captain Ralph Stewart's mastery of the wilderness that we tell, or the story of his wife, Mary Ann Elliot Stewart, who did the same things he did, but while constantly pregnant, giving birth to 13 children? Do we focus on his mastering of the wilderness, or upon her act of repeated creation, bringing forth new life, hope and faith in the Creation?

The story *Enuma Elish* teaches that creation itself is evil, violent and deadly and that evil must be held at bay by overwhelming force. The story of the Bible

teaches that God created a world which is both good and nurturing and we need only refrain from injecting evil into it. You cannot live in both stories simultaneously. Those called to Christ must make an election, and live a life consistent with that decision for our baptism is a covenant with God. Evil that is seen as only external to yourself, only a quality of the other, is toxic. It will destroy your soul if you let the first whiff of it in.

I am struck by the similarity between the self-righteous hatred expressed over outrages such as that in Paris and the attitudes of the criminal defendants I prosecuted over 25 years in the office of Commonwealth's Attorney for Kentucky's 32nd Judicial Circuit. Both the criminals I prosecuted and those breathing death and destruction in the name of justice fancy that they are entitled to express their outrage in violence and death. As

a friend in the defense bar put it, they wish a legal path to vengeance. Those who would dare to use God's word as permission to inflict death and to live lives of hatred have read without understanding. Those who quote God's word without understanding must suffer, ultimately, the consequence of such arrogance.

---

*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.*

The Bible texts of the Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel lessons are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Church of Christ in the USA, and used by permission.

The Collects, Psalms and Canticles are from the Book of Common Prayer, 1979.

Sermon Copyright © 2015 J. Stewart Schneider

---