

Mark 1:4-11
St. Andrew's, Nogales

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Our creation story from the book of Genesis begins "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. And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

Water, wind, which is spirit or breath, and light. These are the elements that our tradition tells us God brings together at the beginning of creation. God's powerful voice speaks the light into being at the very beginning of creation. And what a voice it is, the kind of voice our Psalm describes, the voice of God roaring over the waters of creation, the voice of God that splits the flames of fire, the voice of God which shakes the trees, and the wilderness, and even the mountains!

And then in today's story from the gospel of Mark we hear of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptizer at the River Jordan. As Jesus comes up out of the water into the light God's Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descends from the heavens and a voice, God's oh so powerful voice, comes from heaven saying "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

Water, and the wind of God's Holy Spirit descending like a dove, and light come together once again at Jesus' baptism.

And in our story from the book of the Acts of the Apostles we hear of Paul's encounter with some disciples in the city of Ephesus, in what is now Turkey. He asks them if they had received the Holy Spirit. But these disciples say they have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit. When Paul asks them about their baptism, they say John has baptized them.

Paul tells them that John baptized with a baptism of repentance, telling all those he baptized about the coming of Jesus. So Paul baptizes these disciples in the name of Jesus, and, we are told, when he lays his hands on them, the Holy Spirit comes upon them.

These disciples are baptized both by water through John and by the Holy Spirit through Paul. And we celebrate that early Christian tradition still

today: we who are baptized into the Christian faith are baptized with both water and the spirit.

The baptism by water is the baptism of repentance, and the baptism by spirit is the baptism of new life in the spirit.

Repentance is not a one-time thing. We all know that, don't we? We so often fall short and need to ask forgiveness again and again.

But repentance at its best is an attitude about how to live one's life, not a life of carrying a burden of guilt, but a life of moving forward. I like the phrase 'To walk in repentance' because it speaks of moving forward. We can move forward in repentance and learn to live in the spirit.

Our baptismal covenant, which we will soon say together this morning, is a question and answer version of the Apostles' Creed. But notice there are some additional questions that follow the creed.

These questions are designed to lead us into the path of 'walking in repentance'.

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

And our answer to each of these questions is, say it together, "I will, with God's help."

When I moved to Portland, Oregon, in 1984 I started searching for a church to join. I had never been to an Episcopal Church, but visited St. Stephen's in downtown Portland one Sunday morning as an interpreter for

an Episcopal Bishop from Central America. Having worked in several countries in Central and South America, and having fought for respect for human rights in Latin America I knew the moment we said the Baptismal Covenant together that morning that I had found my church home.

Our baptism service is one of the most beautiful and moving in the Book of Common Prayer. And the Bishop's or priest's prayer over the candidates is the prayer that I love the best:

Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon these your servants the forgiveness of sin, and have raised them to the new life of grace. Sustain them, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works. Amen.

What if we prayed this prayer for ourselves each and every day? I've recently stuck a copy on my laptop so that I see it when I open it up. Here's the slightly edited version:

Heavenly Father, I thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon me the forgiveness of sin, and have raised me to the new life of grace. Sustain me, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give me an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works. Amen.

At the turn of the New Year it is a custom in our culture to make New Year's resolutions. This is also a good time of year for Christians to examine our hearts. What if one of our resolutions was to pray this prayer every day. How might it change our lives? How might it change the lives of those around us? How might it change the world?

And perhaps, one day, we will be able to hear God's voice saying to us, as God is always saying to us, "You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased."

Amen.