

“A Brooding Spirit”
Epiphany: Baptism of Our Lord B
Mark 1:4-11

Pastor Bruce K Modahl
Grace Lutheran Church
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In Jesus' Name.

On some Wednesday afternoons in December and January, I gather with five 3rd grade cub scouts to work on their lessons for the “God and Me” award. The Scout leader gives order to our chaos, just like in the account of creation in our first reading this morning. She provides the structure that gives me the opportunity to teach these 8-year-old boys. The first lesson is on creation. In the activity I most enjoy the workbook has a single squiggle in the middle of the page. I tell them, “Put your imagination to work and beginning with the squiggle in the middle of the page to design a pet for yourselves. It can be an animal that is known or one you make up.” Their eyes get wide as if to say, “Really, we get to do this.” They always make things up, fantastical and often fearsome combinations of fish and mammal, reptile and fowl, not the sort of things a parent would want wandering the house as a pet. I compliment them on their creativity and their imagination and ask, “Did you model your creation on animals you already know about?” “Oh, yes,” they say, and they go on to describe what they saw on which Discovery program or cartoon show or read about. “Let’s think about God’s creation,” I say. “God didn’t have anything to serve as a model. There were not yet any fish or birds or reptiles or animals in the field. God made it all up from scratch. What an imagination God has. There is no creation like God’s creation.”

The Bible makes the same point, not with a classroom exercise but with a single word. There are a variety of words to choose from to say someone is creating something. One could chose among words like made, fashioned, shaped, or formed. The same is true in Hebrew, the language in which the Old Testament was written. The word the author used, however, is used in the Bible only of God’s creative work. The word is bara. In Genesis 1 the author uses it to describe God creating the cosmos. In Isaiah 65 God says, “I am about to create a new heaven and

a new earth.” In Psalm 51, David implores, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” There is no creation like God’s creation and no creator like God.

At the beginning of this creation the text describes a wind from God. That word in Hebrew is ruach and it also means breath or spirit. Each word gives us a different picture. In our text we picture a wind from God sweeping over the dark and formless void. How do you picture that – a squiggle in the middle of the page? What is a dark and formless void? One commentator describes it as a tangible nothingness. The word combination is an oxymoron, but one like darkness visible, the title William Styron gave to his book in which he recounts his bouts with depression. The difference would be there was nothing visible about this tangible nothingness. It is chaos or the abyss over which a wind from God swept. That gives us one picture.

Try another of those words. A breath from God blew over the dark and formless void. Is that a gentler image? Try this one. The Spirit of God swept over it. The word translated swept in our text is more often rendered as hovered or brooded. The Spirit of God brooded over the formless void. This gives us a different picture altogether. It transports us from primeval chaos to the farmyard or forest. The Spirit of God, pictured as a bird, a dove perhaps, broods over what is at first a void, an empty nest, filled then with the promise of life, and then newly hatched chicks, which soon become fledglings. They are her brood and she broods over them. The Spirit of God brooded over the formless void. Darkness covered the face of the deep. The first thing God bred was light. The Spirit, as God’s breath, carried God the Father’s Word into the formless void and God created light.

Jesus is the light of the world. The Spirit, the breath/wind of God carried God the Father’s Word into Mary’s womb and the Word became flesh. And here he comes, as we read in the Gospel, the light of the world to be baptized by John in the Jordan. God’s Spirit brooded over the waters of the Jordan. When the Spirit broods we know some new creation is about to take place. But what new creation will come from those waters? People are coming out to John for

baptism in the Jordan River confessing their sins. The baptism is to wash away their sins. The Spirit of God broods over this water. Could this be the brooding that is ruminating and sorrowful? The Spirit of God broods over the sins of the people. Consider then the nature of the water into which Jesus steps. It runs thick with the filth from all those who have stepped into it before him. Jesus walks into its depths not to add his own sin to the runoff. He has none. He walks into the sin-soaked water in order to attract all that sin to himself as iron filings to a magnet. Sin weighs him down as sin does us. Later, in a conversation with James and John, Jesus will refer to his impending suffering and death as a baptism. He takes our sin to his grave.

The Spirit of God descended upon Jesus. The Spirit of God descended upon him like a mother dove upon her fledgling. We know what happened when the Spirit of God descended upon Gideon and Deborah. Cycles of war and oppression came to an end. The Spirit of God descended upon Isaiah's Servant and the exiles came home to a new beginning. The Spirit of God came upon Mary bringing the promise of an everlasting kingdom of peace. As Jesus rises from the water, the Spirit of God descends upon him announcing to us the beginning of the fulfillment of that basket full of promises we have collected from throughout the Old Testament. Jesus saw the heavens torn open, Mark tells us. Mark would have us remember what happens at the moment of Jesus' death. The curtain in the temple is torn in two. The barrier between God and us is no more. We hear the voice of God saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." It is an Epiphany.

Winter may be a long season, but since the first snow fell we have zipped through two seasons of the church year, Advent and Christmas, and have now entered a third, Epiphany. The word means revelation or showing forth. During Epiphany God is not showing forth so much as showing off. God the Father shows off the Son. It is what parents do, intentionally or not. Last Sunday, a young mother sang the Entrance Hymn, "What Child Is This?" while looking at the baby in her arms. She knew the song from memory from singing it for so many years in the

Children's Christmas Eve services when she was a student here. It was a wonderful showing off that took my breath away as I walked up the aisle. God the Father outdoes us parents. He puts a star in the sky to show off to the cosmos. The best we earthly fathers can do is to put up a plywood stork in the front yard to show off to the neighborhood. God the Father cracks open the heavens to announce in our hearing who this young man is and his pleasure in him. All we can do is beam with joy in the presence of our children.

The even better news is we get in on God's good pleasure over the Son. The Spirit of God broods over this baptism water. The Spirit, the wind/breath of God carries the Word from God the Father to this water into which we come. From it we are newly bred as Jesus' brothers and sisters, joined to him in his dying and rising. God adopts us into the family. We are God's brood. He says of us, "You are my sons and daughters, the beloved; with you I am well pleased."

This good news calls for some kind of response. We have eight Bach Cantata Vesper services a year bringing our choir together with orchestra and soloists in a service that ends always with a stirring hymn sung by congregation and choir. Almost as soon as the last note has ended I turn to the congregation to say, "Go in peace and serve the Lord." I do it in part to preempt the urge to applaud. Every month someone will come to me and say, "How can we not applaud? Our hearts are full; our souls stirred; we are filled with emotion. It calls for some response." On a scrap of paper in one of my books I discovered a note I wrote about a boy of 9 or ten who was taken by his parents to a Christmastide performance of Handel's Messiah. Unfortunately I did not make note of the source of this account. The family sat in the front row of the balcony. When the last note of the Hallelujah Chorus had sounded, in that brief interval before the applause began, the boy called out, "Play ball." Obviously his parents had taken him to the ball park more than the concert hall. But he knew some response was called for, something was beginning not ending. The problem with applause it seals our role as spectator and choir as performer. Play ball is more like the response called for from us. Only, rather than calling out

“Play ball,” our response is “Go in peace and serve the Lord.” “Thanks be to God.” And out of that service be prepared to be surprised at what God’s Spirit will breed.