

Creation and Re-Creation

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The First Sunday after the Epiphany

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"And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." – Matthew 3:16-17

A few years ago, the reading group in the church where I was then pastoring read Sinclair Lewis's novel *It Can't Happen Here*. Published in 1935, the book is a warning about the fragility of democracy and the danger of American fascism at a time when Europe was being consumed by it under Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini.

Lewis knew of what he wrote. His wife, the journalist Dorothy Thompson, was the first American correspondent expelled from Nazi Germany, in 1934, for reporting on the growing violence against minorities. And Lewis recognized, even then, how easily people can be drawn to charismatic leaders who promise greatness while trading in fear, propaganda, and lies—violence disguised as patriotism and cruelty marketed as virtue.

The novel's fictional demagogue, Senator Buzz Windrip, modeled loosely on Huey Long, rides a wave of resentment into the presidency. Once in power, he unleashes paramilitary violence against minorities, political opponents, and journalists—anyone who threatens the narrative. The title itself came from a comforting illusion Americans told themselves as Europe unraveled in the 1930s: *It can't happen here*.

On January 6, 2021, we were reminded—again—that it can happen here.

Millions of people, in this country and around the world, watched in stunned disbelief as a mob—incited by the rhetoric of the President of the United States—assaulted the democratic process itself. On the basis of claims unsupported by any credible evidence, the president urged his followers to stop the certification of an election he falsely claimed was stolen from him. And those armed insurrectionists nearly succeeded.

The chief executive of the world's oldest democracy incited violence to undermine democracy. Images we never expected to see in America became our shared reality.

It is into moments like that that today's gospel speaks—not with easy reassurance, but with the hard and necessary word of repentance.

In the verses immediately preceding what Madelaine read for us, we would have heard, as we've heard many times, John's preaching of repentance. John the Baptizer proclaimed in the wilderness the message that drew Jesus to the Jordan River. It was a message of repentance.

Christians have long puzzled over why Jesus—called sinless by Paul and the writer of Hebrews—would submit to a baptism of repentance. Of what did Jesus need to repent?

Perhaps nothing, as we commonly think of what is worthy of repentance. Perhaps we're asking the wrong question. Perhaps we're confused about what repentance actually means.

Too often we reduce repentance to moral housekeeping: stopping bad behavior, avoiding obvious wrongdoing. But biblically speaking, repentance is something deeper and more demanding.

Repentance, as the Bible understands the term, is a sustained, searching, and honest examination of one's life in the light of God's love for all of creation—and then a willingness to be turned **by** that light **toward** that light.

Repentance is not merely turning away from what is bad, but is also and essentially a turning toward what is good—toward that which is more faithful, more loving, and more life-giving. The Hebrew word *teshuvah* is based on the root meaning “to turn back” or “to return,” and the Greek word *metanoia* literally means “to go beyond or through one’s mind” to a different place, a new understanding, a different way of relating to the world. Biblical repentance is re-orientation.

Seen this way, Jesus’ baptism marks not repentance from sin, but repentance from a former way of life. It signals a turning—from the good life he had lived as a carpenter’s son, to the more demanding, vulnerable, and public life he sensed God calling him to, of proclaiming God’s reign of peace with non-violent justice. The turn is not from bad to good, but rather from good to better. He signaled that turn by being baptized by John.

That is the pattern of repentance and baptism for Jesus, and for us.

And repentance begins with honesty—the refusal to settle for the comforting illusion that “good enough” is sufficient. There is much goodness in all of us, including those who vote differently than we do, who hold different views on race, gender, sexuality, money, the environment, or the use of force. None of us is served by demonizing those with whom we disagree.

We are all complicit in the politics of demonization, and that is among the first sins from which good people—including good, progressive Americans like us—need to repent.

America is filled with good people who need to become better people, across every political and ideological line. Repentance is not a partisan demand; it is a human one. It is an invitation to allow the Holy Spirit to do what water does in baptism: to wash, to dislodge, to lift away, to unsettle, to refresh, to restore—in short, to re-create.

That work is especially difficult in a political climate like ours, which is why I have urged you not to embrace the *Zeitgeist* of our age and become functional atheists by letting politics replace religion—or become heretics by letting politics corrupt religion. Christianity has no partisan color. The gospel is not red, blue, or purple. It is light—Epiphany light, the light of the star, the light by which we can finally see all our colors clearly, honestly, and humbly.

America's desperate need for repentance does not arise simply from who holds power, nor only from acts of violence or extremism. Our need for repentance arises from our shared addiction to self-righteousness—the conviction that our own perspective is so correct that it no longer requires listening, compromise, or humility. And we on the left are no less self-righteous than those on the right with whom we disagree.

When I baptize someone on behalf of the church universal and in a particular church building, I conclude the rite by sprinkling the congregation with water from the baptismal font, using a palm branch from Palm Sunday. I do that to remind all of you of your own baptism—not as a past event—"dunked and done"---but as a present reality. Baptism is not a one-time cleansing; it is an ongoing consent and commitment to be created and re-created by the Holy Spirit, moment by moment, hour by hour, day by day, year in and year out our whole life long.

In that respect, baptism is like creation: it's not something that happened long, long ago; it's something that continues to happen right now, right here, unfolding us into new realities if we will open our eyes and hearts and minds to what is actually happening. Creation always implies re-creation as well. And even though we don't repeat the rite of baptism, baptism is repeated every time we rise with the dawn of a new day and recommit ourselves to the way of Jesus. That's what John meant, I think, when he told the crowds coming to him for baptism, "I baptize you with water . . . but the one who comes after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. . . ."

That is the good news of the gospel: you do not have to remain as you are. You do not have to continue along the current trajectory of your life. Your past does not have to determine your future. Like Moses at the burning bush, you can turn aside to see the wonders God has placed around you and within you. I can't tell you what they are; only the Holy Spirit can do that with your cooperation. As Doris Akers wrote in her wonderful gospel hymn, "There are blessings you cannot receive till you know him in his fullness and believe."

And believe does not mean thinking certain thoughts about Jesus; it means trusting with your life the way of Jesus as the Spirit reveals that way to you, **and** walking that path, every minute of every day, your whole life long. And when you stray from that path—into the good things of this life as well as the bad—believing in Jesus—that is, following Jesus with our whole lives—means getting back on that path for real—with your actions and not just with your confession on Sunday morning. As I've said to every congregation to whom I've ever preached: Christianity is not complicated, it's just hard. Or, as the English Catholic writer G. K. Chesterton put it, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried."

The Latin pagan poet Virgil is supposed to have said, "They can because they think they can." Christianity says something different. Christianity says, "You can be better than you think." You can be, as Paul says, a new creation in Christ. Just as the Spirit moved over the waters at creation and brought forth a most wondrous thing, that same Spirit is still moving—still calling order out of chaos, still shaping something beautiful and true out of what is broken, and still knitting up the raveled sleeves of our sometimes tattered lives.

I want to end with a word of hope.

The psychologist Steven Pinker has argued, with substantial evidence, that over the long arc of human history violence has declined. The twentieth century was horrific, and there have been terrible reversals, but broadly speaking, humanity has made moral progress. One need only consider slavery—once nearly universal, now universally condemned—to see that change, however fragile, is possible.

Progress, Pinker argues, depends on listening to what he calls “the better angels of our nature.” The Christian faith would say a similar thing a little differently: progress depends on repentance—on the willingness of ordinary people to turn, again and again, toward a better way.

That turning always begins with one person. One honest assessment. One small decision to allow God’s Spirit to do new work.

The choice before us is rarely between good and evil. More often, it is between good and better. We will never escape our sinful nature entirely. As Luther wryly observed about the waters of baptism, “My old sinful self is a mighty good swimmer.” But perfection is not the goal. Faithfulness is.

Do not let the perfect become the enemy of the good. With God’s help, we can become better.

The only way forward is forward, where the Spirit is waiting for us. So let us repent by turning. Let us turn and re-turn and turn yet again. Let us return in our daily mindfulness to the waters of baptism—Jesus’ and our own. Let us allow the Spirit who hovered over the deep “out there” to hover over the deep “in here” to re-create us yet again.

And then, renewed, let us look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith—and be on our way.

We sing together our closing hymn, number 463, “How Firm a Foundation,” vv. 1, 2, and 5.