

“The Stage Has Been Set”  
Genesis 1:1-5  
Baptism of the Lord, 2012

As the house lights go down, a man in a hat with a pipe in his mouth carries a bench onto a bare stage. Only the barest of props indicates a house, gardens, a street; just a table and three chairs to stand for a kitchen. A blank wall serves as the horizon of the New Hampshire town. Before the action gets underway, the Stage Manager offers the audience several homely words of introduction for Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*.

By contrast, our story in Genesis does not bother with a preamble or prologue. The opening of Genesis is not stage setting, it is the story itself! It is the story of God’s activity. And as we learned in the Bible in 90 Days, the lead character in the whole story is here from the beginning...In the beginning as it were.

The other day, one of our members asked what or how was God created. I said God has always been. God is. Our as many have started this text before: “In the beginning, God.” No doubt my answer frustrated, for most of us with our modern trained ears, it is a bit like the chicken and egg syndrome, we think there can be a solution to the question. And we search mightily for it. But the solution sounds as a conundrum.

Yet when we watch this scene play out on the stage we begin to notice that this magisterial creation exalts humankind, even if it frustrates. The story, the main character, all move toward us. Creation moves from the cosmic to the mundane, becoming ever more beautiful and various. By the time God gets around to creating humankind +on the sixth day”

we are presented as God’s crowning work of art. The vast universe, with galaxies and black holes, and nebulae, finds a small but final fulfillment in us. In the midst of such majesty, the Psalmist would ask, “What are we that God is mindful of us?”

I have a great app on my phone. It is called “Night Sky.” It works by pointing my phone at the sky and with its GPS unit, tells me what stars, planets, and systems I’m looking at. Last week, over a beautiful Pacific ocean I was able to sound quite wise as someone looked at the bright light near the moon and said “look the North Star.” Having already checked, I replied, “No, it is Venus!”

We have always looked up and marveled at the vastness we see. Another example from *Our Town*: near the end of act 1, as Rebecca Gibbs mentions a letter that a friend got from her minister, addressed to “Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover’s Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God.”

Genesis offers us a radically different perspective, one that looks in the other direction – essentially, from the mind of God down to Grover’s Corners.

And that brings us to today, baptism. Today we commemorate the Baptism of the Lord, the start of Jesus’ earthly ministry. It is the moment, when God, who looked over the creation and proclaimed it good, looked over the Son and proclaimed “This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.”

It is also a time to commemorate baptism in general, the genesis of the Christian life, and our own baptism in particular. For in baptism, God once again proclaims we are not too small to notice.

Scripture shows us the beginning as all water: watery deeps, dark and formless, a flood. God calls for light to illuminate this waste. Here then, creation is not really *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) but redemptive. The floods represent anything that threatens to upend, frustrate, and drown life. Or as they say in the country, "God willing and the creeks don't rise." Waters have their own capricious ways of changing landscapes and can bring terror, for they are random and mindless. In the redemption story of Genesis, God installs a vault called the sky to keep the chaos at bay.

But there is an essential difference between Genesis and the Gospels. No vault separates Christians from the random waters of chaos, baptism insures no one against disaster.

Nelson County, VA saw this watery reality first hand on the night of August 19-20 1969, the night Hurricane Camille reformed over the county and dropped 31 inches of rain in six hours on an already saturated landscape.

That evening, as the rains began to intensify, and the Tye river began to swell, Lee Ponton grew worried. His home was less than twenty yards from the banks of the Tye. With four children and a wife in a wheelchair, Mr. Ponton thought he better evacuate to higher ground. So one by one he moved his children across a small field between

homes to the Raines home. Not 100 years away from the Ponton home, but fully 6 feet higher, it was thought safe. However after he got the last of his children across the open area, the waters had begun to swirl and rush through the area. His wife in the chair, Mr. Ponton was not going to get his wife out, so they headed for the upstairs to get as high as possible and wait out the night.

Meantime, in the Raines where the four Ponton children had joined the Raines' and their four children, the water was coming on strong. The Raines decided they needed to leave. All 10 people piled in the family station wagon and headed out of Massies Mill on Rt. 56. The car only made it about 100 yards before it stalled in the rushing water. The group got out of the car, and holding hands, ten across, children in the middle, Mr. & Mrs. Raines on either side, the group started their way back to the house. Moving as best they could against the rising current that had turned a state route into the temporary course of the Tye River.

The waters were too much. And the random, mindless power of the watery chaos was once again displayed. The whole party was swept away. Two children from each family found themselves washed up into trees, one of them a mile away. Those four survived. Mr. & Mrs. Raines, and two children from each family, died in the flood. 6 died 4 survived, they were all in the same place, at the same time, and it was all so random.

The next morning folks discovered that while water got into the Raines home, the home was intact, the second floor was dry. The same for Mr. & Mrs.

Ponton. They survived a terrifying night in darkness, listening to rushing water and crashing timbers, but their home survived. Not so the church next door, and the home next to the Raines, nothing was left of either save for the concrete slabs upon which they were built. To this day they are weed-choked memorials of a bucolic village that was scarred forever by chaotic waters.

So then the tie between the vault of Genesis, and the watery chaos that can still swirl around us is baptism. As Lawrence Wood notes, at baptism we are asked to submit to the primordial waters and a figurative death. It is a second birth, a second, “in the beginning...” It is here that we proclaim to die, is to die in Christ; and that is life. For those who have been baptized, death and life have been re-created even as chaotic waters of all sorts may still flood around us. Cosmic in size as the waters that challenge, even engulf us may be, it is the particular, you and me, that finds redemption from the waters, in God.

Thornton Wilder and his brother Amos were raised by devout parents. Their maternal grandfather had been a pastor. Baptized in such a family atmosphere, Amos Wilder became a theologian. During WWII he published a volume of poetry called *The Healing of the Waters*. The title was a reference to 2 kings 2:21 in which Elisha heals waters in a bowl. Wilder’s homage to those fighting the chaos of his day, fascism, says this:

*These on the crumbling levees match  
themselves/ with the infuriate flood.  
These beneath the waves toil at the  
primeval sea-walls  
Whose courses were laid against chaos,*

*These repair the moles erected of old  
against the ravening deep.  
These descend where the nethermost  
piers of history are building,  
And place their lives if need be at the  
foundation of  
All the ages of glory to come.  
To start the play Genesis is to see that  
the house lights do not go down, but  
come up; struggles are all around us, and  
we share them as God’s co-creators. It is  
God, however, who brings the healing of  
the waters. In the beginning, God.*