



Creation from Chaos

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given on the First Sunday after the Epiphany, January 7, 2018
Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:4-11; Acts 19:1-7*

Today is the day after the Epiphany, which in case you didn't know it is one of the seven greatest feasts of the liturgical year. Epiphany means "manifestation," the manifestation of God's presence in the person of Jesus, often to unlikely characters – like the magi from the East who weren't even Jews, but who knew who Jesus was before almost anyone else. The first Sunday after the Epiphany we always celebrate the baptism of Jesus, that day at the very beginning of his public life when he went like so many others to John the Baptizer, to be baptized for repentance of sins, and in the process the heavens are torn apart and Jesus hears the voice of God saying, You are my Son, the Beloved. What I find so interesting is that God calls Jesus Beloved before Jesus does anything important. Before he teaches, heals, confronts religious authority. Before he sets his face toward Jerusalem where he knows he will lose his life. Before he does anything to prove his worth or accomplish his mission, he humbles himself and opens himself to God, who simply calls him Beloved in unmistakable and recognizable terms. On this first Sunday after the Epiphany, we celebrate the baptism of Jesus and also our own baptisms. And on this day, this day when we celebrate our baptisms, what is being made manifest is the fact that God calls Jesus Beloved, that God calls each one of us Beloved. And how is it that we experience that?

There was a man named Shawn Casselberry. He was in his twenties, and he and his wife felt called to go serve as Christians in the inner city in Chicago where they saw great poverty and need. Shawn wrote a book called *God is in the City*, and he said that when he and his wife first went to Chicago, they thought they were going there to help people. So they threw themselves into the local church and tried to

figure out what they could do to help. And the funny thing is, that week after week, and month after month, they made no headway at all. No one seemed interested in their help; Shawn tried and tried to interact with people and met polite disinterest. He and his wife began to lose heart. They even considered leaving Chicago. And then something happened.

It was summer, and no one had any air conditioning, so people were outside because even in the great heat it was actually cooler outside than in their sweltering homes. And to cool off, someone in the neighborhood got the idea to open a fire hydrant. Well pretty soon all the children of the neighborhood squealed and delighted and splashed in the water spraying out of the hydrant and making pools in the street. A lot of the adults ended up joining in. And finally Shawn Casselberry decided he had nothing left to lose, and that what he needed to do was just to enter the world of his neighbors on their terms. So he went down to the fire hydrant and got completely soaked. He surrendered himself to playing with the neighbors instead of trying to help them. And he describes this moment as his baptism. It was the moment when he acknowledged the futility of an approach that didn't work and, in the confusion and chaos of his failure, he opened himself to the love of God being made manifest through simply being in relationship with his neighbors. After that experience, he had an opportunity to speak at church, and he took the risk to share openly about his previous frustration, and that he had felt so useless, and that he had finally understood that his role was to be in community with his neighbors instead of trying to help them. And he asked their forgiveness for not seeing this before that moment. After that, he and his wife started getting a ton of invites to peoples' homes for dinner, and opportunities to be involved in the neighborhood. Suddenly he was "in." In a complete paradox, he had discovered his own limitations, and it was the people of the inner city who gave him what he needed: a sense of belonging, a sense of being beloved and valued.

Shawn experienced something beautiful and new being created out of the chaos of his pride and failure to see his neighbors as equals. This is exactly what baptism is all about, and it's what happened at the beginning of creation too: It's about the

Spirit of God hovering over the waters of chaos, the waters of the deep that Genesis 1 describes as being dark and formless and void, and the Spirit who speaks light out of the darkness. In baptism we emerge out of the water, out of the chaos and darkness of our lives as they often become when we are left to our own devices, and into the light of being called Beloved, the light of being made new. The newness is usually upside down from what we would create on our own. It's like Shawn thinking he was coming to help people and discovering that they were already gifted and empowered by God's Spirit and that if he could just join them in humble community, he and they would both be blessed. Experiencing the blessing of baptism is about taking the risk of being vulnerable and admitting our failure and limitations, and then being open to see where God meets us, often in the most unlikely characters imaginable, and calls us Beloved in spite of ourselves.

And vulnerability and humility and openness to God's love is the beginning. It's not the whole journey – but it's the place we need to start. I don't know if you saw St. Stephen's Facebook post on January 1 New Year's Day, but it said this: This year, resolve to believe that God loves you, period. We say God loves you a lot, but that message isn't meant to be just a sentimental way of saying I'm OK, you're OK, everything's OK. Everything is not OK, you and I are sometimes OK and often not, but in the midst of chaos and darkness and confusion, God meets us and loves us and turns us upside down. In our baptismal covenants, which we'll repeat together in a little bit, we are given a roadmap of the steps we take in the life of faith. Five promises we make together outline the journey: we continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, which means to gather with other followers of Jesus to learn from them and have community with them. Whenever we fall into sin we repent and return to the Lord, which just means to be honest with God about our failures and turn from our brokenness when we need to. We are called to let our words and actions demonstrate the good news of God in Christ. We are called to seek and serve Christ in everyone, and to work for justice and peace. These baptismal promises are the steps of the journey that is following Jesus, but the journey has to start somewhere. And the somewhere that the journey starts is wherever you actually are, when you can be humble and vulnerable enough to open yourself to being called God's Beloved.

God's Spirit was like a mother hovering in loving intimacy over her children in the waters of creation. God's Spirit continues to hover over us in our baptisms and wherever we go in our journeys of faith. The water of creation and the water of baptism remind us that when we are in chaos, when we are in darkness, when we have lost our way, God meets us intimately, speaks light into being, and calls us Beloved.