



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Epiphany 1, Year B
January 7, 2017

[RCL] Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning of God's creation, Scripture records that "darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." The word translated *wind* here is the Hebrew word *ruach*, which can ambiguously refer to wind, breath, or Spirit. *Swept* is from the Hebrew *rabaf*, meaning "to hover," like a bird brooding or hovering over her young. God's *breath* hovers, and God's *word* speaks light and matter into being. In the beginning, the Father, the Spirit, and the Word cooperate to create the world in wisdom, and it was good! The Church would later come to recognize an *epiphany*—a revelation—of God the Holy Trinity in this passage. As God speaks light and matter into being from formlessness and void, we catch a glimpse both of who God is in himself and what his plan is.

- The first verse of Genesis could also be translated, "In the beginning, when God *began* to create the heavens and the earth..." How might this affect your understanding of this passage?

Psalm 29

In the beginning of Psalm 29, God's people are called to acknowledge God's glory and strength—the weighty significance of his presence and the all-encompassing domain of his power. This God is powerful, beautiful, creative, and frankly, dangerous! "The voice of the Lord breaks the cedar trees; the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon," and "the Lord makes the oak trees writhe." The Lord "sits enthroned above the flood," that is, he is the eternal King who reigns from heaven, enthroned above the "upper waters" over the dome of the sky. This same God has given to his people his own personal Name (which the Psalmist here uses liberally), and has placed his personal address in their geographical midst. The God who has done all this will surely also give his people strength and peace. These are amazing privileges! The only proper response to this unasked-for favor from the Almighty Creator God is to rush to his temple, confess him for who he truly is in the presence of his people, and "worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness." In so doing, we as the Church become the sign of his beautiful and sanctifying presence to the world.

- How could your reflection upon the Lord's glory and strength affect your worship?
- What does it mean to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness? How is holiness beautiful?

Acts 19:1-7

John's vocation was to prepare the people for Christ, and in so doing, he summarizes and fulfills the whole old covenant, a purpose of which was to point forward to Jesus. John's preaching and baptizing "prepare the way of the Lord" and "gives knowledge of salvation to [God's] people by the forgiveness of their sins." John was not that light of which he preached, but he was testifying to that light, the "dawn from on high [that] shall break upon us." Still, John's baptism prepared the people by calling them to repentance—a full change of life in light of the coming one, "whose sandal strap [John was] not worthy to untie," who would come to judge the whole world and deliver his people from the hands of their enemies. But it is baptism in the name of Jesus that delivers what John only anticipated: God's promises (Jeremiah 31:30-34, Ezekiel 36:25-27, Joel 2:28) to make a new covenant where the people will be given a new heart with which to love and obey him, and where he would pour out his prophetic Spirit upon all flesh.

- Some Christians are sometimes accused of living as though they "have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit," or that there is little evidence of the Spirit's renewing, creative and sanctifying presence in their lives, even though they were baptized into the name of the Trinity. How might we draw nearer as a Church and as individuals to the fullness of life in the Spirit given to us in our baptism?

Mark 1:4-11

This scene of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan by John draws our attention back to the very beginning of Holy Scripture, where God, his Spirit, and his Word were present upon the face of the primordial deep, and creation began. As Jesus arises from the waters, the heavens are "torn open" so that we might see for a moment what lies beyond the veil. We see the Spirit descending *like a dove* upon him, and the voice of the Father approving Jesus as his beloved son. Here again is an *epiphany*, mysteriously suggesting the divine identity of Jesus the man.

Even as Jesus humbly and fully identified with the people of Israel who were baptized (so to speak) in the Red Sea, who were once captive in Egypt and presently captive to sin, he is revealed as Israel's mighty God. When we are baptized into the name of the Trinity, we fully identify with Jesus, even as he fully identified with us and our human condition, and everything the voice of the Father declared about Jesus becomes true of us as his adopted sons and daughters. We receive his holy and life-giving Spirit and become part of Jesus' glorified Body and are freed from our former captivity to sin and death. In this scene is revealed the fulfillment of the purpose of God's work of creation.

- What do we most need to hear the voice of the Lord saying to us to live into the fullness of God's purposes for us?
- Read Genesis 22:1-2. How might this passage help us understand today's Gospel lesson?

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