

## “Near and Far”

Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:4-11; Psalm 29 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – January 7, 2024

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might know the glory  
of your majesty and the intimacy of your compassion. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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As I was trying to think of how to present the good news to you today, reflecting on what these passages tell us about God and how they play off one another, something important occurred to me. There is likely an assumption that if someone wants to understand a religion, they might ask about the tradition's fundamental or basic beliefs. And I suppose you could do that with Christianity. But I realized this morning that you would get at the heart of Christianity a lot faster if you looked, not for the fundamental beliefs of our faith, but its central wonders. Because the thing I want you to hear today, while it could be seen as a belief, is so much more powerful if we understand it as one of the central wonders of Christianity. And that is this: The Eternal and Glorious Creator of the Heavens and the Earth... loves us. And by “us” I don't mean generic humanity; I mean you and me, each of us and all of us, in our individual particularity.

It's astonishing, isn't it? And yes, you could call it a belief, except that it's kind of hard to believe sometimes. It doesn't exactly fit into just a brain; it doesn't quite make sense. The scale of it is disorienting maybe. So I think it's a better fit to call it a “central wonder of the faith” – something that we hold deep inside our hearts, but

lightly and reverently, trusting that we can rely on it, even if we can't entirely comprehend it.

Our scripture lessons today, in conversation with one another, offer a wonderful reminder of this central wonder. You might think, given that this is the first Sunday of the year, that we should start at the very beginning, which is, after all, a "very good place to start." But let's work backwards instead and return to Genesis 1 at the end. Let's start with Psalm 29. You could call this a natural disaster psalm. It's got earthquakes, floods, thunder and lightning, and wind storms. Scary stuff. And perhaps our first impulse is to dismiss it as pre-scientific and not the way things really work, as we now know in our enlightened age. Because that is true. But to set it aside because the science is wrong would deprive us of the spiritual truths that can still be present here.

We have all experienced how weather can be a salient and helpful metaphor for understanding our lives. We go through seasons and storms. We have sunny days, even sometimes when the sky is cloudy. The world can seem threatening and confusing, and we describe it as a "gathering storm." Do we blame these ups and downs on God, as this psalm seems to do? Not necessarily, but that's not the point. The point is the sense of scale; the seeming truth that the universe is big and full of powerful forces, and we are tiny and easily tossed about. If we're honest, sometimes we do wonder if it's God that is causing the storms in our lives, even if we don't technically "believe" in that.

At the very least, when our lives are wracked by high winds and earth-shaking tragedy, God can seem very far away. Maybe God is just on a throne, somewhere in the stars, watching us with a distant sort of interest. Sometimes we wonder. But a God who is only the Eternal and Glorious Creator of the Heavens and the Earth is not the God of Jesus. So let us turn to our second story, the account of Jesus' baptism from the gospel of Mark.

Mark, as you know, is the shortest gospel, and that's often because he doesn't include much of the conversation and conjecture about motives that the other gospels do. Mark skips straight to the action. There is no banter here about whether it makes sense for John to baptize Jesus; he just does it. The important thing is that voice. And the descent of that dove. The Holy Spirit arrives, proclaiming, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." You are my Beloved Child; I am so pleased with you." And yes, I'm saying it to you now.

Certainly, there are reasons to consider Jesus singular, special, set apart and, well, divine. But there are arguments within this very passage that show us how these words apply to us as well. John had been telling everyone that when Jesus came, he would baptize us with the Holy Spirit. And indeed, the Holy Spirit showed up at Jesus' baptism, making a dramatic entrance. And she's still here! You and I aren't baptized with John's baptism. We are baptized into Christ, which means the Holy Spirit is still proclaiming the belovedness of God's children, every time it happens. You are God's Beloved Child; God is so pleased with your existence.

Even in the midst of the storm, when the birds have taken refuge in their nests, and the waters are more threatening than cleansing – even when God seems a universe away – that Eternal and Glorious Creator God is telling you how loved you are. You, specifically you – with all your strengths and weaknesses and weirdnesses and struggle – you are called Beloved Child. What a wonder! What an astonishing wonder.

Now, before we start to jump to unhelpful conclusions about simplistic distinctions between the Old Testament (as represented by Psalm 29) and the New Testament (as represented by Mark 1), let's go back to the very beginning, a very good place to tie things together. Because if we do, we can see that the astounding scale of this contrast between the vastness and power of God in Psalm 29 and the intimate compassion of God in Mark 1 has been baked in from the start. Those first five verses, as we know, are just the beginning of the story of creation. And what we see here is each “day” including two steps: God's creation and God's recognition of the goodness of what has been created. This is not God complimenting Godself for doing a good job. No, it's more like God looking at the Day and the Night – or later the Earth and the Seas and the fruit trees and the sea monsters – and saying, “You are beloved; with you I am well pleased.” It's been there since the beginning. The creation and the love. They are inseparable, for, entwined together, they are the essence of God. This is the central wonder of our faith. Creation is not about power, but about love. The Creator of the Universe loves us.

If we are to practice a religion with central wonders rather than fundamental beliefs, we need to recognize that we also need different questions. When faced with the astonishing truth that the Creator of the Universe loves us, the question is not “do you believe this?” but “how then shall I live?” What is our response to being the Beloved Child of the Eternal and Glorious God of All Time and Space? How then shall we live?

It will, of course, require balancing our attention across a broad scale of concern. If you are beloved of God, the intimate God of Jesus, you must not minimize or diminish your own struggles. They are real. They matter. Your pain and difficulty – no matter how trivial they may seem compared to other problems – matter to God. God walks alongside us in all our struggles, knowing how hard it sometimes is for us to keep our eyes on the light in the midst of the storm.

But if we are to honor the love we receive from the Creator of the Universe, we must also be willing to lift our eyes and allow our hearts and minds and lives to be stretched open a little wider, to share that love with a broader swath of creation. How shall we live in response to the love of God? By recognizing our communion with all creation and living in ways that continually open us up to the depth and breadth of God’s love. We are God’s beloved. May God bless all creation with peace!  
Hallelujah and Amen.