

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, Virginia
January 8, 2012
Baptism of the Lord Sunday

Mark 1:4–11
Genesis 1:1–5

FIRST WORD

The origins of the universe (it doesn't get much bigger than that) and our role within what God is doing—a God of justice and a God of mercy, a creative parent dealing with a chaotic child—and in the midst of all of that, there is order, there is calm, all because the Spirit of God sweeps across the waters.

To be honest, the bulk of the *Bible* is not about God's good creation. The bulk of the *Bible* goes basically in three directions. It talks about God's nature or character; it talks about God's people, first Israel and now Jesus' disciples along with Israel; and it talks about the covenant relationship between God and God's people. The bulk of the *Bible* really does center on these three themes. It's pretty easy to see it in the Old Testament, but I believe it's there in all of scripture. If we were to fast-forward to Chapter 12 of Genesis, we would pick up the theme quickly—God calling Abraham, promising an eternal relationship with him, God sealing that promise with the promise of land. Israel is representative of God's people.

God's promise to Israel, that's where the *Bible* tends to go, but in Genesis something very different is taking place—at least in these first eleven chapters. It's more than ground work, it's more than a prologue, it's the essence of who we are. Here we have the unexpected—God creating the universe by simply speaking. To be sure, there are a lot of ancient theories and myths about how the world came to be. But this story isn't myth. This is about who God is and what God is about in our lives. God speaks and it happens. God sees what happens and pronounces it good. God may supplement or fine tune what has just happened, but it is still good. And then God names what happens—evening and morning. And God puts a time stamp on what He has done—the first day.

This is a marvelous pattern that we can see throughout all of the creation story—a pattern that describes our Creator. Walter Brueggemann says it simply, "This is the Creator creating creation." Walter Brueggemann is really, really big; but he uses such a simple description: *the Creator creating creation*—the pattern that is poetry and hymn at once.

In fact we are still at the beginning of the year, so we can lay claim to our connection to ancient Israel's worship. For every new year, they would turn to this story as they

celebrated God's goodness in temple time. And when there was a temple, God was always recognized as the origin of the universe. It was always emphasized that God was that beginning because what we believe about creation probably has more impact on how we live than we have been willing to admit. For those who heard this story, you would have to imagine yourself being in a foreign land, and you would hear a story about creation being about order, about the infancy of the universe coming into being because of who God is. Remember, you have been taken from your homeland by a conquering people and army. And they are hearing your explanation of how creation began, and how God acts as very different from their own.

You have this wonderful story—explanation—but your Babylonian captors have a very different story. Their explanation is that everything in creation had its own god—rocks, water, air—and that the way we got the world today is that the gods did battle with one another and sometimes they won and sometimes they lost. And so when the god of the sea lost, there was dry land. That's very different from Genesis. The Babylonians and the world today still tend toward a much more violent explanation for the way life is. And you are there, you are powerless over your own future, and you are bold enough to say, "In contrast to all of your multiple gods, we worship one God, a living God, the God who created all the things you are trying to worship. When our God speaks, his word becomes a reality."

Israel says after God orders creation, we are privileged to live into the pattern. Remember, six days of creation and then the Sabbath—because God is not only about contrasts, God is about complementary contrast. Light and darkness, sea and dry land, plants and animals, male and female, the divine and the human—yes, and even work and rest. It's as if Israel is saying to a very hostile culture: "Look at how we live and you will see how God is. You will see our God in our patterns of life."

It's pretty amazing and awe-inspiring that the first words God speaks are "Let there be light." What are the ways our church can offer these first words of a living God to people who have not heard them or have heard a very different story? What will our communication, our words, say to our neighbors? What do we have to offer, not to just those who come in the door, but those who live next door, those who live around us, those who may never come to the church? Will it be hope? In this world so frightened, will it be rest and peace? Will light overcome darkness?

In spite of our circumstances, no matter where we live, no matter what we think has power over us, this beautiful story of our *Creator creating creation* invites us in to focus on the new creation—the creation God is bringing into existence even now, the new creation made possible by One who was baptized, crucified, and risen from the dead.

Yes, it's the resurrection of One who comes and lives our lives, guides our deaths, and rises again. And in that resurrection, coming out of that dark tomb, is the Light of the world. You see, God spoke, "This is my beloved, in whom I am well pleased." And again there was light.

So what will our congregation's first words be in the new year? We literally stand on the threshold of our *New Beginnings* as God's people. Could it be something as simple as "Let there be light," and then we let God be in charge of that light, more in charge than we are? I think, *let there be light* is more than enough creative power for all the tasks that lie ahead of us. When God began creation, he had us in mind—our lives, today. We have always been a part of what God was planning. And that Light will never be overcome. Amen.