First Sunday after the Epiphany—Year B
Genesis 1:1-5
Psalm 29
Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:4-11

We've turned the corner into **2018**. It felt like it came faster than usual. The *Christmas season* is always 12 days, but when the calendar falls like it did this year, we only get *one Sunday in the Christmas season* before we are catapulted into the *season after the Epiphany* and another stretch of *ordinary time*. *Ordinary time*—it sounds so dull, so grey, so cold and windy, so winter in Boone. With all the festivities behind us, all the holiday gatherings and tidings of comfort and joy now past, January can hit us like a ton of bricks. We move back into our routines, and all the challenges that we were confronting *at the end of 2017*, well, they're all *waiting for us in 2018*.

Our **Lord** has had a bit of a rocky ride to come to today, as well. It's not like it's been all sweetness and light for him **since he left the manger**. He and his family became **political refugees** in a **foreign land** evading a **brutal dictator** that only wanted to see him dead, **eventually returning home to Nazareth** for his growing up years. He moved through an **adolescence** that gave his parents fits, always **seeking wisdom with a fierce independence**.

He came into **adulthood** in **the age of empire**, watching **leaders** of every stripe—*political, economic, religious*—spend most of their energy **looking out for their own interests**. He watched **a people hungry for something different**, something *more*, something of *God*, willing to **trek out into the Judean wilderness to his strange cousin John** to make **a new beginning**. Those people felt a **bondage** of sorts—the path they were on, it just wasn't working. They were **seeking forgiveness** from all the ways that they had **missed the mark**—and **forgiveness** is just another way of talking about **release**. They were willing to **change their minds** and find **a new way forward, a new purpose**. Jesus was *a man of his time*, and **he was seeking**, too, no different than all those seekers who went out to John, no different than you and me.

*And what about us on this **first Sunday in January**, on this **first Sunday after the Epiphany**?* What are we *seeking*? In what ways have we been *missing the mark*? In what ways have we been *all bound up*? From what are we *seeking release*? What forces are bandying us about that make us *yearn for something different, something deeper, something more true*? What *change of mind, change of purpose* is pushing us along to ***head out into the wilderness*** and *submit* ourselves to *the baptism of that wild man wearing camel's hair*?

It is no accident that immediately after **adoring the babe in a manger**, we make a ***turn to baptism***. It would be easy to get lost in the *glory* and *beauty* and *quiet of that holy night*, and **forget *why* God entered our flesh to begin with**—to come into **solidarity** with the **whole human experience** and to **make it whole**—to **bind up** the **brokenhearted**, to **proclaim release** to the **captive** and **recovery of sight** to **blind**, to **proclaim the year of the Lord's favor**, to **show us**—from the inside, out—how to ***let our divine light shine out***, *even* in the **darkness**, *even* in the **formless void**.

On *Christmas Eve*, I alluded to a poem by Howard Thurman called *The Work of Christmas*. It is good for us to hear Thurman's words now.

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.

We will **renew our baptismal vows** in just a few minutes. Those **five vows** will remind us of *"the work"* that is ahead of us in this new year. And *ordinary time* reminds us that we do this work in the nitty, gritty stuff of our *ordinary lives*.

And Howard Thurman would remind us that it's not only about *"the work,"* but it is also about **joy**—*"making music in the heart."* Thurman *knows* what *Jesus reveals* today.

Before we can do *"the work of Christmas,"* we must **go down into the waters** with a *yearning* to find *release* from the ways we *miss the mark* and a *willingness* to *move in a new direction*. But once we are **in those waters**, we have to **be open** to the fact that **something much more expansive** is afoot. Before we can get to *"the work"* that is ahead of us, we have to be **willing** to **witness the heavens being torn apart and the Spirit descending upon us**; we have to **understand** that **God** is **not content to stay holed up and remote**, but **wants** to **come crashing through all the realms** to **light upon us** and **open our ears** to take in this **divine proclamation—"You are my Son, you are my Daughter, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."**

At this point in his life, *Jesus has done nothing to earn this divine favor*; **this divine delight** is ***prior*** to **any** of his **actions**, ***prior*** to **any** of the **amazing work he will do**. In fact, it is the **necessary starting place**, the **wellspring**, the **source** that will **sustain** *all that he will do* and *say* and *be* from this point forward. Before we can get to *"the work of Christmas,"* we have to **let these gracious waters flow over us**. We have to **drink deep** of the **truth** that **we are God's Beloved, and in us, God is so well pleased**. This is *not the prize we earn through good behavior*; **this is the proclamation of *who we are* simply *because we are***. **God loves us** because **we are the apple of God's eye**; when **God looks at us**, **God only sees God *returning* the divine gaze**—and **God is crazy in love with what God sees**.

If we *don't* drink from this **well**, we *don't* have a *shot* at *moving* in a *new direction in 2018*, be it our *own resolutions*, or *"the work of Christmas"* that Howard Thurman describes. **But if we can drink in God's delight in us**, we will have *everything we need* to do *"the work"* ahead, *starting* with *"making music in our heart."*

An *ordinary act* in the **Jordan River** that lots of people engaged in **turned out to be an *extraordinary experience* for Jesus** that **transformed** *how* he **embodied his divine presence** for the rest of his days. *This first Sunday of ordinary time* holds the **potential** to be just as **transformative** *for us*.

So, gather all of your *new year's resolve* and **head on down into those waters**, fully *aware* of your **limitations**, *yearning* for **release**, *eager* for a **change in direction**, and then, *wait*, *watch*, *look* for **the tearing open** that *reminds* us that **the realms are not separate**, there is *no here* and *there*, but **Divine Presence is everywhere**, and that **Presence** is *eager* to **infuse all of creation** with its **light**, *eager* to **light upon us**, and then, *listen*, with *every fiber of your being*—**you are God's beloved; and with you, God is well pleased**.

Drink that into every last cell of your *body*, and your *mind*, and your *spirit*, and your *heart*. And with *that "music in your heart,"* set about to do *"the work of Christmas."* Amen.

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