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January 7, 2018 – The Baptism of Our Lord

***Genesis 1:1-5 New International Version (NIV)***

*The Beginning*

<sup>1</sup> In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. <sup>2</sup> Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

<sup>3</sup> And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. <sup>4</sup> God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. <sup>5</sup> God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

I always think creation is fascinating. Without the description we have here in Genesis, none of us would know anything about it. God isn't a part of creation, he stands outside. You can picture him like one of the Italian masters, he stands there in front of a blank canvas. Many times the master sculptors and painters would stare at the canvas or the block of marble for a long time. It wasn't an issue of the artist's version of writer's block. They knew what they were going to do, but they needed to have the entire picture in mind before they began. Every detail needed to be there. The subject and what she is doing. Is she sitting or standing? Is she looking toward the viewer or perhaps out a window? What is she wearing? What will the light and shadows look like around her? Everything must be perfect because any mistakes will be costly or even impossible to fix.

So God looks down at this empty canvas. He studies it for a while. He thinks through every detail it will have. And then, in one deft motion he picks up his brush and makes a single stroke. Light! Where before there was only a blank emptiness, now there is something. Something marvelous, something glorious, something that perfectly shows off God's artistic skill.

God looks at this one, single stroke, this white, shining space in the darkness and he calls it good. The darkness before wasn't really bad, it was just incomplete. It needed to lead to something. In the visual arts, the use of light and dark are vital. Your eye naturally moves from darkness to light. A good painting will lead your eyes through the dark, shadowed things to have you focus on what is light. We have a print at home by Ed Riojas, who did our panels at the front. It's a picture of Jesus calming the storm. There's a big sailboat out on the water. A few disciples are peeking up over the side in terror and bewilderment as dark, black storm clouds

completely encircle the boat. But, standing in the middle of the boat, Jesus is there, halo of light around his head. He has his arms outstretched as if pushing the clouds away, leaving the boat drifting under clear, blue sky.

Certainly there will be more details in this picture. God will paint water and land, the sun, moon, and stars, plants, and animals, and then like a master he will sculpt a man and a woman and everything will be perfect. But all of that will come later. For now there is simply light and darkness. Unfortunately everything that comes later colors what God does here. Light and darkness. Darkness becomes associated with sin and the need to hide what we do where no one can see it. Darkness becomes associated with death, the quiet stillness of the grave where light has no purpose because no eyes are there to see it.

It's unfortunate because darkness isn't intended to be bad. Darkness too is a good gift from God that goes with sleep, also a good gift. But now it's a source of fear, what unknown terrors lurk in the dark? Now darkness means death. Now darkness is a place to hide in our sin. Now darkness is a thing to avoid at all costs.

Sadly, darkness itself isn't bad, but all of the things associated with it now are things to avoid. Sin rejects the way God painted his masterpiece. Sin the subject of the picture telling the painter he painted it wrong. Sin means the subject is trying to redraw the painting his own way. The only outcome of that is death. It is God's masterpiece. Trying to change his work simply means he will remove you from it to keep his painting intact.

Now with sin in the world we are all disordered. We seek out light and dark for all the wrong reasons. We avoid light when we sin, but we avoid darkness because we think it's something to fear. What started out looking like a Rembrandt or a da Vinci now looks more like a Picasso. Everything is jumbled and disordered. Nothing looks the way it should. We have made a terrible mess of things and the only real solution is for God to start over with a blank canvas. He starts his painting over, crafting it perfect and new again, but without all of the strange and destructive things we've brought into it.

That's the most terrifying of all. We're terrified everything we do is going to end in darkness. We're worried about ending up in the grave, in the dark, and never coming out again. It's not hard to imagine Jesus' thoughts as he enters the garden of Gethsemane, kneeling down to pray as the sunlight fades from the sky. He knows he is entering the darkness. He knows that soon that's where he'll be. As he hangs there on the cross, his hands, his feet, his head, all

throbbing and bloody, he's exhausted and he's been robbed of every shred of dignity one might have as they approach their death. There is nowhere else to go now, but into the dark. He gives up his spirit and the sky turns black. The darkness comes and the world trembles.

It's not hard to imagine his thoughts because we have them too. The approaching darkness is there waiting for each of us and we are terrified. We avoid it at all costs. As much as we might imagine Jesus' thoughts in the garden, we'd end up getting it wrong. Jesus doesn't want to suffer, not if he doesn't have to, but Jesus isn't afraid of the dark. Jesus dies and the world turns to darkness. His body is taken down and he's sealed in the tomb. Perfect darkness. Perfect silence. Everything quiet and motionless, just like the time before creation. It is as if the Father has blotted his Son out of the painting, covered him over with black paint. Darkness means death, and death has come to the Son of God.

Darkness covers the land, shrouding everything in shadow. And then, early, early in the morning, before dawn, God draws his paintbrush and makes a single perfect stroke. "And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light." The tomb rolls back and the light that pours forth makes the morning sun look dim by comparison, blinding light such as the world had never seen before. The risen, glorified Son of God steps forth and banishes the darkness. "And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness."

We find this text coming so quickly in the year in part because St. Mark doesn't give us much of anything in Jesus' early life. He starts right out with John the Baptist and Jesus' baptism. At the same time, we find this text in the Epiphany season. The light that shines in the darkness has entered into the world. The Father has begun the brushstroke that brings light into the world. The light shone in the dark night sky and led the magi from the east.

But now there is Jesus' baptism. St. Paul says to be baptized is to be buried with Christ, dead and buried in the dark, silent tomb with him. No movement. No light. Just death and all of the evil things that hide in the dark. Death wasn't part of God's creation. God did not create death, we brought it. But now that death is necessary. As we lie in that dark tomb with Christ, the Father is blotting us out of the sinful world. He blots us out of the world that will suffer the condemnation for sin.

It's sad and unfortunate that such a thing happens, but it is necessary. By being there in the tomb, in the dark, with Christ in his death, we find ourselves also a part of his resurrection, the light and color come back as we are freshly painted on to God's new canvas, his new

creation, and all of the dark stains of sin are left behind. Baptism washes us off in darkness so we can be painted again in light.

Here and now we alternately fear and seek out darkness for all of the wrong reasons. Sin and death plague us and the shadows of evil creep through the land. In baptism, darkness is given a new purpose. Just like in a masterpiece, the darkness is there to lead you to the light. You naturally travel from one to the next and everything is put into perspective. When darkness has served its purpose, the subject of the painting stands up, light shining all around him and he pushes the darkness away.

Baptism is where it all begins. Christ comes into the world, a point of light in a dark world. Christ is baptized and his ministry begins. He walks through the world and the light follows him. A world covered in the shadow of death and the darkness of hidden sin tries to resist him but it can't. Christ walks around and light and color follow him. Christ pushes back the darkness. Christ shows what the world could be like, what the world will be like. To come to him is to move through the darkness and into the light. It is to move from sin to purity, death to life, old and broken world to new and perfect one.

Now to look at baptism is to look to the death and resurrection of Christ. To look into the water of the baptismal font is to look at the beginnings of the new painting God is creating, a painting that has us in it already. In your baptism, you die with Christ and rise with him. You walk with him through darkness and death to light and life. The darkness is no longer something to fear for the Father sent his Son into the world to lead you through it. He looked into the sin darkened world and said, "Let there be light." And there was light. And God saw that the light of Christ was good. And God separated your light from your darkness.

Now we follow Christ. We each follow him to the tomb as our time here ends. We know the darkness awaits us and our body will rest there for a time, just as his did. But he rose again, and we will too. We will rise up and as we do, we will be greeted by the morning sun whose rays have banished the darkness of death. The Son of God in his glory will welcome us as God continues painting his masterpiece, full of life and light, with us enjoying the wonders of his artistry forever.