

## The God Who Begins Things

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,  
The earth was a formless void  
And darkness covered the face of the deep...  
Then God said, "Let there be light." And there was light.  
And God saw the light was good.

What words! Wondrous, marvelous words, aren't they. Joyous words. What would we do without them. For these words are fundamental to our faith; giving us the very ground of our faith, assuring us that our universe, our unimaginably vast universe, with its billions and billions of stars, its multiple galaxies, its planets and its moons, stars dying and birthing, and the whole of it expanding, so that the creation remains unfinished, ever stretching itself beyond itself, out, ever out, and all this, all this, is the work of God, the ongoing, good work of God, so that — and what good news this is — (so that) this universe, our home, is not some accidental, incomprehensible, meaningless explosion of super-hot, mindless elements flying outward without rhyme or reason, but, rather, all this is purposeful, all this is good, good because grounded in God's creative love, in God's intention, a long, slow process moving towards the existence of life, towards beings who have a soul, a soul open to God, open to goodness, a soul moved by goodness.

I say these are wondrous, marvelous, joyous words, and I say that because they respond to what we cry for, what our mind cries for, what our soul, our spirit, our heart, cries for: for these biblical words speak to our deepest existential worries, they speak to our ultimate questions, the questions that come to us in the dark of the night, those troubling questions that are like life and death to us, questions that sometimes drive us crazy: why is there something and not nothing, what is the origin of life, its meaning, does life have a point, a purpose, is there a reason for our existence, is there something reality wants us to live towards ... and what is our end, is it really nothing? do the lights, finally, just go out, as if nothing ever was, so it will be as if we never were ... or is there more, something more, and what can that something be. What questions these are! What are we to do with them. Do we just put them in the freezer and leave them there ... thinking, they're just mysteries and we have no way of answering them. Of course, we read scripture, we've all read scripture. And when we read it, we are reading stories, sayings, beliefs, writings, some of which come from a culture three thousand years old, none of which come from a culture less than two thousand years old, all those writings, then, come well before what we think of as the modern scientific understanding of life and the universe that inform the culture we live in, that inform our understanding, our way of thinking. So we

have a problem. For the basic assumption, in those two to three thousand year old cultures, was that reality consists of God and the world. The reality of God was simply taken for granted, it wasn't an issue; the only issues being, how many gods are there, what is the nature of those gods, what is the meaning and purpose of life, what kind of life is life after death, those kind of issues. The great, good news of scripture is not that God exists, for that was taken for granted (there's even a psalm that tells us that "only a fool doesn't believe in God"). The good news of scripture is the assurance that God alone created the world, that God is good, just, loving, merciful, trustworthy, that existence is good, meaningful, has a purpose. And now we have the ever developing knowledge of modern science, particularly from Darwin's time in the mid nineteenth century; and that development has been like an ever increasing powerful earthquake shaking down the grantedness of the reality of God, bringing in its wake a host of thoughts questioning some of our dearest held faith convictions. We people of faith today find ourselves living our faith in the midst of that earthquake: so we know how hard it can be, for so many of us, to take God's existence and the assurances of faith for granted. To have faith today, to penetrate into the mystery of the origin and end of existence, the purpose of existence, requires of us a special effort, an effort that takes us deep down into ourselves, into the inwardness of our being, into our longings and yearnings, into our fears and uncertainties, into all the changes and uncertainties in our life. It can be a painful dive, a dive we take as a suffering spirit, in the desert of our lives, where we find ourselves standing alone before God, crying desperately to find out: who am I, what am I here for, why do the things that happen to me, happen to me, what do I believe, what do I not believe, what am I to do with the rest of my life. When we so stand before God, finding God as our Lord; and maybe, if we're fortunate, even feeling, sensing, imaging God, then we know, then we have our assurance, that God is not simply there at the beginning, giving us light and life, but God is there at all beginnings, always creating, always there for us, at our beginning, giving light and light to us; that God is there at the beginning of every moment of our life, waiting for those moments when we are ready. willing, to open ourselves to God, to God's light, to new life, even if new in only in the smallest of ways. For as the creation, God's creation, is never done, ever changing, ever expanding, always stretching beyond itself, so it is with us; God is never done with us, God is always stretching us beyond ourselves, drawing us, pulling us, into fuller life, greater life, more loving, just, caring, forgiving life. There's an intriguing word the philosopher, Whitehead, uses to talk about God's power, the way God relates to us, is present to us. That word is ... lure. God's power, Whitehead says, takes the form of a lure, an ever present lure, leaving us free to decide, but working to draw us forward, luring us towards the best relevant healing, creative way of being and acting in our ever morally ambiguous, always unfinished world, a world full of good, but always riddled with evil, for we human beings, free as we

are, never seem to be able to stop ourselves from inflicting grievous harm upon each other. We say we love peace, yet we always find a reason, sometimes a good one, to deal out death and destruction.

So, now I need to take a breath. We all need to take a breath. For this kind of thinking lands us right into today's gospel reading: the baptism of Jesus Christ. For here we are at another beginning, another of God's beginnings. For scripture is full of stories of God's new beginnings: the story of Noah and the flood, the story of Abraham and Sarah, of Moses and Israel, of Saul and David, and now of Jesus Christ and the church. This time it's a messianic beginning, and what a beginning it is. For the spirit that drives Jesus, the one that he has opened himself to, the one that now inhabits him, that is incarnate in him, is the same spirit that was there at the beginning, the spirit of creativity, God's creative love bringing light and life to the world, so that we confess Jesus as the messiah, as the Christ, God's agent: for God's creative power has extended itself into Jesus, beginning at his baptism, and extending throughout his life: in his words, in his acts, right into his death. Christ's death, surely the lowest point of his life, and yet Christ's death, so cruel, so humiliating, and yet that death illuminates the meaning and redemptive power of Christ's life. For in that death, we find divine love leaping to a new level. For the cross reveals the depth of God's love, God's compassion for us, a compassion plunging so deep as to become suffering love, love that suffers out of compassion for the suffering of another, and that is love at its deepest point, so deep that we experience it as healing, for that is God's love suffering for us, the love of Being Itself suffering for us. It's amazing. Wondrous. And out of that healing, as the Book of Acts tells us, comes the church, a newly created community, a new beginning, a community open to the spirit of Christ, a community committed to the spirit of Christ. Sisters and brothers in Christ, it is our good fortune to participate in this community, a community dedicated to love, to outgoing love, so that we care for each other, so that we care for those outside us. I don't think we can ever tire of giving thanks to God, to God's grace, for giving us the faith, this uplifting, life-giving faith, to follow, as best we can, this way of Christ, this way of healing and peace.

With all our heart, then ...

Thanks be To God.

Thanks be to Christ.

Amen.