LET’S START AT THE VERY BEGINNING

Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:9-11

Pleasant Hill

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“Let’s start at the very beginning!” For most of you that will bring a song to mind, right? For most of you, it conjures an image of Maria and the Von Trapp children, all clad in their play clothes made of curtains, learning to sing for the very first time.

Remember they had never been allowed to sing, by their all-business, military father, and in comes Maria, bringing sunshine, and laughter, and play clothes, and music! Of course, they don’t know the first thing about singing, so she has to start…At the very beginning!

Here we are at the very beginning of a new year, 2018. There’s something exciting about turning the page of a new calendar, saying goodbye to the old year and anticipating all that might be ahead in the new year. There’s something exciting, I think, about all the blank spaces on my calendar. Though to be honest, already my pages aren’t completely blank. Already my calendar’s filling up with meetings and workshops and appointments and…. And before we get too far down the road with plans and obligations and what not…

Let’s start at the very beginning. Let’s go back to where it all started. Let’s start *this year* the way the author of Genesis decided to start the story of the world. As we turn the page on the calendar, I invite you to turn the pages all the way back, all the way back to the very beginning. What does this story have to do with what will happen this year? How does where I am in my story fit into this bigger story? What do we learn from Genesis that shapes how we live out this day and this year? Let’s start at the very beginning…

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,

While a wind from Godswept over the face of the waters.

Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.

And God saw that the light was good;

And God separated the light from the darkness.

God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night.

And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Sometimes in our lives things get complicated. Sometimes things get confusing, overwhelming, difficult. We might turn the calendar page and wonder, is this the year things are going to get worked out? What, wonderful, miraculous things will this year hold? What dreadful, catastrophic things might occur this year? Before we get too far down the road, let’s go back to the very beginning.

The beginning of Jesus’ story, in the Gospel of Mark, and the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, is **Baptism**. Lots and lots of miraculous and catastrophic and blessed things would happen in Jesus’ earthly life, but Mark wants us to know it all **starts with Baptism.** As we anticipate a year of God-only-knows-what, with all the blessings and complications of life, let us each go back to the very beginning and consider our own baptisms, as we hear this good news:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee

And was baptized by John in the Jordan.

And just as he was coming up out of the water,

Jesus saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.

And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved;[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+1%3A9-11&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-24224a)]

I am very pleased with you.”

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Maria was on to something, in her little ditty about Do-Re-Mi. I play the piano, and play well enough to be able to sit down and play some things, and then sometimes, partway into a song, my fingers start to get all tied up. Sometimes I’m going along just fine and then the music suddenly starts to get harder, trickier, more challenging – and I go back to the very beginning. I literally go back to Do-Re-Mi. I stop and I back up and I check the key signature and I play a few scales. We’re in the Key of D Flat Major. Which black keys is that? Do re me fa so la ti, okay! B, E, A, D, and G! Okay *all* the black keys – let’s try this again and after a few run-throughs of the scale, it’s like there’s a reset. My fingers just fall into place.

Concert pianists do this. They play their scales. Over and over and over. You would think by the time they can play Rachmaninov’s 2nd Piano Concerto they wouldn’t need Do Re Mi, but they come back to the basics, again and again. They never stray far from the basic building blocks of Do Re Mi.

Baptism is for us our scales. Our starting place. Our building blocks – our foundation. It’s where we start, but more than that, it’s where we come back to again and again. You could just start with it and leave it behind and never think about it again and still be baptized. Many of us don’t even remember being baptized – it’s a story someone told us, that we *were* baptized, so not even a memory. Just something that happened *to* us a long time ago. But there’s something in it for us that is foundational, that we need to re-visit and keep central – even if we don’t actually remember the event itself.

It’s said that Martin Luther, every morning, before he even got out of bed, would trace the sign of the cross on his forehead and say, “I am baptized.” Why? What did it mean to him to start his day with the understanding that he was a baptized child of God? What difference would it make in my day if I started with this understanding?

Just like when I’m playing a song and my fingers get all tied up and I go back to the very beginning and remember my Do Re Mi’s, when our lives get all tangled up, and we get overwhelmed and overwrought, there’s something to going back to the very beginning and remembering, “I am baptized.”

If I asked you to write down a word or a phrase that sums up for you what it means to be baptized, I wonder what you would write. Think for a minute about what is essential about baptism, if you were explaining baptism, what word or phrase comes to mind?

Repentance, Cleansing/Washing, Inclusion, Covenant/Promise, Child of God, Family of God, Sealed, Holy Spirit, Grace, Beginning, Called by God, Named.

All of these things we see in Jesus’ story today. Jesus is Called by God. He is gifted by God. He is known by God, known by name. He is claimed by God, as God’s own child. Jesus hasn’t even done anything impressive yet, and yet God expresses delight over him, God’s unconditional love for him. In this act God sets him apart and blesses him, and “tears open the heavens” to show up and be with him. In Scripture “the heavens” isn’t far away, up in the clouds. “The heavens,” as scripture talks about, is a place very nearby. It’s the spiritual realm that is right here, right nearby, but *unseen.* That’s where God lives, not far away up on a throne, watching us from a distance. But just right here with us, as near as your breath, but unseen. And at his baptism, Jesus sees that-which-separates- the-visible-from-the-invisible split open. It says, “Jesus saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit of God descending on him.”

We don’t *see* the Holy Spirit, at our baptism. There is no physical dove that descends. But the unseen Spirit of God comes upon us at our baptism, just as really, and stays with us.

And the words Jesus heard are for us as well. “You, my child, [insert your name here], are a child of the covenant. You are my child, whom I dearly love. I am well- pleased with you.” That’s our Do-Re-Mi. When everything else in our world comes apart we come back to this basic foundation: I am a child of the covenant. I am -- just as I am -- pleasing to God.//

What if you learned your scales wrong? What if growing up you always heard Ti Fa Re, instead of Do Re Mi? What if instead of orderly, pleasing Do Re Mi, your building block sounds more like someone angrily banging on the keys going Clunk, Cronk, Blatt? And when things go all haywire in your life, you have nothing to come back to but Crunk, Clonk Blatt?

What I mean is, what if someone told you at the very start that you’re all wrong? A mistake? A messup? A joke? What if someone ignored you and forgot to notice what a marvelous miracle you are? And then what if life goes all haywire… and you come back to the very beginning, to building blocks that instead of saying, “I am loved and loveable,” say, “I’m a terrible person. I’m not worthy.”

This is the good news of baptism. The words of our baptism are for you and can never be taken away from you or negated by anything that anyone else says. Trace the sign of the cross on your forehead and say, “I am baptized,” and know: Christ claims me. Christ loves me. Christ died for me and is raised for me and lives in me. The Spirit is with me and seals me as God’s beloved child forever. Will you trace the sign of the cross on your forehead and say it with me, “I am baptized.”

A few years ago I had the opportunity to stand in these very waters from today’s story, in the Jordan River where Jesus was baptized. I was on a trip with a group of pastor friends of mine, and our leader, totally unplanned and unannounced, took it upon himself to come to each of us, individually, reach down into the water and get a handful of grace and splash it on our heads, inviting each of us to remember, “Joy, you are a child of God, God’s own beloved, sealed in his covenant forever.” It was really cool – to me.

For one of us it was – life-changing. Life-changing to hear those words because, as she shared later, she had never in her life been told that *she* was a child of God. She was floored. She was simply stunned. She had shared previously with us about her experience of growing up in an abusive household where she was sexually abused as a child, and how she struggled in so many ways to come to terms with her own value, her own worth as a person. This moment, this simple, powerful statement – “Barbara, you are God’s beloved child” – was life-changing for her. From the outside, she’s a great preacher, a pastor with a beautiful heart, a workaholic. On the inside she always carried the confusion, the dissonance, the “bang, clatter, clang” of a life that made no sense – until she was brought back to the very beginning, to Do Re Mi, to the good news of her baptism, that she **is** God’s own beloved child, sealed in his covenant forever. It didn’t “fix” her or suddenly heal her – she’s still in therapy of course. But now, underlying the confusion and mess of her life is a new foundation: I am God’s beloved child… just as I am.

Friends, these are confusing times. Overwhelming times. Our lives get complicated and over busy and struggle to make sense.

Friends at Pleasant Hill, these are uncertain times, I know, as you begin this journey of what’s next without Pastor Dave? So many, many things I want to say to you about faith and trust and discernment and vision – so many sermons I’d like to preach. But this is the word for today. No matter what lies ahead, no matter what highs or lows or in-betweens, we face it with this as our constant and abiding foundation:

I am baptized --

I am a child of the covenant,

sealed in the Spirit,

a beloved member of God’s own family,

today and forever.

Amen.