

# *SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS*

Baptism of Jesus, January 8, 2006

*On Wonder's Way*  
Pr. Robert M. Goldstein

Texts: Genesis 1; Mark 1

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth..." –so began our Hebrew reading this morning from the opening words of the Book of Genesis.

"When God created the heavens and the earth" –what strange language to most people's ears on the streets of our city! What strange language in most halls of the scientific establishment! But I say, "These can become extraordinary words, wondrous words!"

The modern person says, "Ha! I'm scientific and educated. I do not believe in such tribal superstitions as gods and religion."

"When God created the heavens and the earth" –In some religious circles these wondrous words are trampled upon absent of wonder! Proof is what they want; proofs through a literalism that is most coarse, brutal and devoid of grace. In their minds, "When God created the heavens and the earth..." is actual history. They quote the hapless Bishop Usher, who calculated from the Bible that creation began at 9 AM October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 4004 BC. Pacific or Central time?

But this scourge of feral fundamentalism only makes our task harder to bring forth that sense of God-wonder that the sacred readings and the sacred liturgy of our assembly truly reveal. Every time Pat Robertson opens his big fat mouth to pronounce on God's will, (I'm sure much to God's surprise too), the task of reaching the educated secularist, the ideal San Franciscan, is made harder. And every time the Roman Pontiff runs away from uncomfortable truths of the modern world, that same San Franciscan won't give me the time of day. Just try walking down the street in clerical collar! It is not wonder that is revealed. It is contempt.

But for thoughtful Christians today the intellectual issues that confront them, puzzle them, confuse them, is not Usher's dating of creation, but the very existence of God, the existence of other religions and the nature of the Bible. These are major places of our pondering, even our discontent. There are more.

For thoughtful people of all faiths today, including secular faith, the issues of prejudice and injustice against humanity and the abuse of sister earth are no less important. But in the division of labor that our human limitations require of us, I will take on the

intellectual issues as my main focus in Epiphany. After all, in you, working-for-justice and advocacy-for-sister-earth are far from neglected.

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In this season of Epiphany, when God wondrously appears at the baptism of Jesus and then in his daily life, I invite you on a journey to solve our doubts and to strengthen our resolve as a people of God in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I do so believing that God will wondrously appear more and more to you, fading away your doubts and strengthening your resolve.

Wonder. What is wonder? We often begin with a question looking for a definition. But that's the first mistake to make –if we expect an answer with a sentence, or worse, a dictionary definition. (You'd be surprised to know how much poor philosophy and theology actually believes this is how philosophy and theology should first proceed). You may ask the question, "What is wonder?" And I will answer, "When God created the heavens and the earth...."

Now I am not turning into a fundy here, who thinks just verbal answers from the Bible will do the trick. But the fundy might have it partly right –not in what is said, but in *how* it is said. Unfortunately most answer almost robotically. But if one were to say, "When God created the heavens and the earth...." with an intriguing sense of wonder, then they are on the way. It's not in what your words mean, but *how* you mean them. That's on the path of wonder.

Try this one on. Wittgenstein once said, "The mystery is not *how* things exist but *that* it all exists." (Tractatus 6.44). Our science and technology discover how things work, including people and groups. This is all very vital for human understanding. But do we forget in all this feverish research and manipulation to wonder why it all exists? Not *how* it exists, but *that* it exists at all.

That's part of the logic of wonder. Let me try this way. In all the rush and demands of your lives, haven't you ever wondered *that* you found each other in this sometimes cruel yet good life?

Or, you take that baby in your arms and, instead of wondering how you're going to pay the medical bills, you behold the baby –her little fingers, her simple and totally dependent life, with worlds of discovery laying ahead out there –this on the way of wonder.

So, when Jesus presents himself to half-crazed John for baptism, receive the wonder of the text –not just he words. Jesus turns up from nowhere and is baptized by John. No one really notices him. But many years later, when they had experienced living with him, being disciplined by him in word, in deed and by his death, his baptism is recalled. Then they realized, looking back on the fragments of memories they had of him

(wonder comes that way to us), they realized God was with him –the life of a truly righteous Jew, even in death. So then his baptism is portrayed so wondrously:

*the heavens tear apart and the Spirit descends like a dove on Jesus. And a voice thunders from heaven, "You are my Beloved one; with you I am well pleased."*

Consider this. We balance our checkbooks. We pay off the mortgage. We even have matching Lexi automobiles. We drink the grand wines of life. Aesthetically we are so refined. Ethically, we have worked hard for our living and for justice, setting things right as best we can. Then soon, we're gone.

I honor the struggles and the accomplishments. For life is hard. But I am soon left in silence, utter silence. I will speak no more from my last bed either. In the silence I can only wonder. Wonder. It was in such eternal silence, that, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

But there is one more cause for wonder and joy. Jesus' baptism means that God appears now to us too. Jesus' baptism somehow embraced his whole life and his death. St. Paul saw in this figure a wondrous redemption for us all. Through our baptism God creates us anew too and stays with us. The water on your face or in the shower every morning is your baptismal reminder, your fresh start to the gift of yet another wondrous day in this wondrous world. God is with you appearing to us in the simplest of meals on the altar.

Wonder is the window to the truth of the words "When God created the heavens and the earth." "I believe in God the creator" can only be accessed through that window of wonder –otherwise they are words and dogma. We have only begun.

*Amen*

St. Francis Lutheran Church  
152 Church Street  
San Francisco, CA 94114-1111  
Phone: (415) 621-2635; Fax: (415) 621-8819  
E-mail: StFrancisSF@sbcglobal.net  
[www.st-francis-lutheran.org](http://www.st-francis-lutheran.org)