

It Begins Like This

Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:4-11

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Brian Russo

When I was a child, I used to sit in my Social Studies class and listen to the lecture and think, why can't any of this happen during my lifetime? After all, it would only make my life more interesting, and as a bonus, accelerate time that much faster to get out of that Social Studies class.

And so as a child I reasoned like a child, and I dared to dream to one day live *in* History. During interesting times.

Well what a misguided, immature and terrible idea that turned out to be, judging by this most recent history we have all been forced to live through.

Like many of you, I have stayed up later than normal these past nights. My sleep has been interrupted, my thoughts intruded, my good nature trampled upon. I think it was Thursday, though it could have been Wednesday -- who really knows, both days seemed like one extended nightmare -- that I thought to distract myself with one of TNT's more favorite movie reruns: *The Fellowship of the Ring*. If you know the movies, or the books by Tolkien, you already know that it wasn't much of a distraction at all, rather it was more like watching a parallel existence of our own reality playing out not in our Capitol but in the fantasy lands of Middle Earth.

At one latter point in the movie, when the Fellowship finds themselves in the Mines of Moria, Frodo Baggins whispers sadly to Gandalf, saying: "I wish none of this had happened..."

To which Gandalf sympathetically responds: "So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

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Listen, I wish none of this had happened. That we could have heeded all of the warning signs. But, what has happened has happened. And it's been happening, quite frankly, now for a while. Let's not kid ourselves. This past week wasn't exactly new. State government buildings have been breached; children have been locked in cages; the environment has been assaulted; corruption has run rampant; Bibles have been used as props, and blood has been spilled in our streets before it stained our Capitol steps. And all of this has happened in this our appointed time. And make no mistake, this is our time. To decide what we must now do.

We can't *Midnight in Paris* it back to a different age or wish it all away now that we are here. *In interesting* times. Nor can we simply forget it and just move on, as one Senator recently said, blind to history, into tomorrow and the future. No what has happened has happened and it has happened on our watch. And there's very little forgiving that.

So what we choose to do now, now that it's all been laid so bare, is perhaps our last chance to get it right. It will be the stuff of future Social Studies books. It will be remembered by generations to come, by your kids and grandkids. They will ask you: what was it like back then, where were you, what did you say, what did you do, and what did you say and do afterwards when you heard about it.

When you knew what was going on. And make no mistake, our responses to these questions will be judged. As they should be.

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The Babylonian account, the Enuma Elish, from which most of our account of Creation was informed, depicts a cosmic battle where chaos has to be warred with, and darkness vanquished, in order for life to follow. Likewise, in Genesis, God has to first tame that darkness so that Light can emerge and the first day be done.

In both accounts, what had existed before could no longer remain. History had to be changed. But the only way that could happen was by first naming the dark chaotic forces at play, reckoning with them, and working, if not battling, for them to be separated and silenced.

And just the same it now must begin like this for us. On our first day going forward from here and from now on.

So let's name it. Besides all the horrible things you witnessed on Wednesday, I know you saw something else. I know you saw it. You're not stupid. I know you saw the very evil that is an affront to a God who created everyone in the same likeness. I know you saw racism and our privilege on ugly, ugly display. How could you miss it? Especially in comparison to what we all saw happen this past summer.

So how about this, going forward, better yet, how about right now, let's like the Christians we say we are decide to repent. How about we just admit that in some way this is who we are and who, since the beginning, we have been. Let's finally acknowledge our sinfulness. Our sickness. Our depravity as a people, as a nation, as a race.

We just waltzed in. Had the gates opened for us. While they got beaten and killed with their hands up in the air and even in some cases their children watching.

Oh we're not going to pretend any longer, are we, that what I'm saying isn't true? That there isn't some culpability? Some accountability that we share? Come on! We need to be better than this. And for those who aren't willing to admit that. For shame. For shame.

Yes, I am upset. Yes, I'm angry. Because I'm so, so tired of this. And it's okay if you are too. It's Biblical.

Friends, we have to wrestle with our demons. This darkness. We must do battle with it. Tame it. Because, if we don't, we won't ever see a new day, not in 2021, in 2022, not in 20-when-ever.

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Fittingly, our gospel text from Mark this day begins in an already occurring event. Not with a long preamble. A genealogy. Or a supernatural birth. But with baptisms being done in the wilderness. This is the first story that the first written gospel gives us. The first narrative that Mark wants us to remember. The first action that will shape the rest of history. And lest we be remiss to forget,

baptism, as administered by John in the River Jordan, was for those who sought true change. A new version of themselves. A repentance of sin, and a desire to live apart from it.

And so here, in this ongoing event of contrition, Jesus the Son of God chooses to first appear on the scene and be made publicly known. Here! At the rivers of baptism and repentance. And not to bloviate or pontificate thereafter. But to join in.

This is why I so love Mark, and of course Jesus, but also the art on our cover for today's bulletin. The weird UFO-like depiction of Heaven notwithstanding, de Gelder positions Jesus as one among others. He is not the only one in focus. He is not pictured alone with a dove descending from the sky. Rather, in this darkly lit setting, among this long line of observers, there in their midst, Jesus yields and exemplifies that even God's own son is not above humility. Jesus, like the rest, goes down to the river. Jesus like the rest, stands in line. Jesus like the rest, performs an act of repentance. Jesus like the rest turns his back to whatever he was doing before, and turns his face towards everything that he must do and be next, and in doing so changes history. ...If he who was sinless could do this, why aren't we who are sinful doing this?

My friends, the message for today couldn't be any more simple: What will you decide to do with the time that has been given us?

Again I say, repent. Repent. It's not the sermon I wanted to preach in 2021, and it's not the word I wanted to keep saying on repeat. But it must begin like this. It has to. It's the only way the story can rightly play out. For today we are called to not only remember Jesus' baptism, but our own, doing so in a way where we publicly live it out again and again. Which means dying to who we were, and rising to who we should be. Ambassadors of peace. But also people of courage, who speak truth to power, and right to wrong.

Simply saying then that we're sorry, or being sad about what's happening, or being disappointed in who we or others have been, will not get it done. It's not good enough.

It's time we do something more. It's time we do something more impressive than that. I said a couple months ago in a sermon *The Dawn Chorus* that we were nearly out of time. Well, we're there. And so we better start praying with our feet and becoming participants in a narrative worth our future generation's retelling.

Friends, if we must live *in* history, in these troubling times, why don't we for a change stop with all the manufactured drama and the cautious tip-toeing around the real issues.

And how about instead we author a different story that begins something like this: Once there was a nation that became more fair and just and right. And less male and no longer supremely white. And really, just plain nice. To all. For all.

Where light blinds the darkness.

Where love deafens the hate.

Where truth tramples the lies.

Where what is holy and beautiful marks the days of all our time.

So let it be, so let it be. Amen.