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**The Baptism of Our Lord**

**January 7, 2018**

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**“Without God All is Formless & Void”**

*(Genesis 1:1-4)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good” (Genesis 1:1-4).*

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...  
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

**Collect:** Father in heaven, at the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River You proclaimed Him Your beloved Son and anointed Him with the Holy Spirit. Make all who are baptized in His name faithful in their calling as Your children and inheritors with Him of everlasting life; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

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“In the beginning, God created.” In the Bible, that verb create is never used with a subject other than God. Only God can create, which means to bring something into existence from nothing. Humans make stuff, but we always need raw materials. We rearrange what God has already created. But God creates out of nothing. The universe, our galaxy, the sun, this planet . . . they didn’t come about by any natural process apart from God.

“The earth was formless and void.” I don’t remember a lot of Hebrew from seminary days, but I do remember the Hebrew for “formless and void.” It’s pronounced “tohu wa-bohu.” So it has that little rhyme to it, which makes it memorable. Second, I remember “tohu wa-bohu” because one day at the seminary the professor was handing back papers, and the guy next to me chuckled a bit, and showed me why. On the title page, the professor had written “This paper is mostly “tohu wa-bohu.” It was right there, written in Hebrew, right next to a very bad grade. His paper was “formless and void,” or as another translation says: “barren and desolate.”

Without God, this creation is “tohu wa-bohu.” Without God, our lives are “formless and void.” Without God, our faith is also barren and desolate. Without our creator’s initiative, there’s nothing, in fact, something less than nothing. But with God, the creation is filled with light and color and life. With God the creation makes sense and is interdependent. With God the creation is full of beauty and wisdom and purposeful design and intent.

Over Christmas break we watched some of the second season of “Planet Earth.” The footage is spectacular.

IMDb gives it a 9.6. I've never seen a higher review from them. And as an added bonus on these frigid days it's nice to be inserted into a lush, green and warm rainforest. Of course, it often rejoices in what evolution has taught animals to do, which in effect deifies evolution and turns it into a wise, creative and benevolent god. But just look past that, and take in the footage, and that alone can be faith-strengthening. It is the opposite of "tohu wa-bohu," and we know that's because of the work of our Creator.

"In the beginning, God. . ." The Creator precedes us; he defines who we are and what we are. If he is the creator, that makes us creatures, which makes us accountable to him. We may not like that, but that's the way it is. As creatures, we are accountable to our Creator. It's not the other way around. You do not get to define God. You do not get to decide what God should or should not do. God acts by his own counsel. From our psalm, Psalm 135, "The Lord does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, [and] in the seas."

So first, without God, there is no creation. All is formless and void. But because God is our Creator this earth is full of beautiful and diverse creatures.

Second, because God is the Creator and we are his creatures, we are accountable to him.

Third, God has made us accountable to one another. God gives our lives purpose and direction by giving us a sort of instructional manual for how we are to live with one another. It's called the Ten Commandments.

By his design we are accountable to one another in four different spheres: in the family, at work, as a citizen, and within the church.

Within the family, for example, husbands and wives are accountable to one another. But sometimes we forget about that mutual accountability, and things break down. Marriages become formless and void. Similarly, children are accountable to their parents and parents are accountable to the wider community for how they raise their children. Parents may insist it's no one else's business how they raise

their kids, even if they neglect or abuse them, but it is our business because often those same children end up being difficult to handle, in schools and society.

Within the church, pastors are accountable to God and to their members, to preach the Word and visit the sick and the like. But members are accountable too, to God but also to the pastor and to other members and to the church at large for its health and well-being. It's never just "me and Jesus." When we forget about this mutual accountability, things break down. The word isn't preached, repairs aren't made, children aren't taught, missionaries aren't sent.

Within society, government leaders are accountable to their citizens, for example to protect and serve . . . and citizens are accountable to the government, to pay taxes and obey the laws and the like. If one or the other fails, things break down and there is lawlessness, chaos and disorder . . . there's "tohu wa-bohu."

Within the sphere of work, there is mutual accountability. Employers must provide fair wages in a safe environment. Employees need to arrive on time, working diligently, be respectful. When employees forget they are accountable, and mouth off or stroll in late like they own the place, well then they have a hard time keeping a job.

Without God, the universe is formless and void. Without God and his law, our lives are formless and void. And finally, without God our faith is also "tohu wa-bohu." That is, we would never come to know the true God without the Holy Spirit working through his Word. Instead we would fashion idols for ourselves. Again, from our psalm, "The idols of the nations are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, nor is there breath in their mouths. Those who make them will be like them." That is, the idols are lifeless, and those who make them will also be lifeless in an eternal sort of way.

Without God, we have mouths, but cannot confess Jesus is Lord, because "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord' but by the Holy Spirit." Without the Holy Spirit's work in our

lives, we may have eyes, but are blind to God's handiwork in creation and write it off as the result of accident and chance. Without the Spirit, we have ears, but cannot rightly hear his Word, for "the person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness and he cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14).

Faith is God's work in us. Without God, true faith would no more exist than this world would exist. But with his Word God spoke light into existence, and with his Word he speaks the light of faith into existence as well. Paul writes, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4: 6).

We are accountable to God and to one another, but here's the rub: each of us resists being accountable . . . to God or anyone else. Why? Just like Adam and Eve we want to be like God. And we think that means not having to serve anyone or be accountable to anyone or answer to anyone. But that's not God as he reveals himself in Scripture. That's not the God who made a promise to his Old Testament people and held himself accountable to that promise, in spite of their wickedness and faithlessness. That's not the God who was born in Bethlehem in order to redeem his creation. That's not the God who answers for our sin, the One who created all people, but also redeemed all people.

Our Creator didn't owe us anything, but made himself responsible for our sin. God could have poured out his wrath on us, but instead poured out his blood for our forgiveness.

The collect from last weekend said, "O God, our Maker and Redeemer, You wonderfully created us and in the incarnation of your Son yet more wondrously restored our human nature." That is, through His forgiveness, Jesus restores us, makes peace between God and man, and gives us eternal life with him in heaven. You too have a share in that salvation. How do I know? Are you baptized? Do you

believe in Jesus as your Savior? Jesus promised, “Whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved.”

At creation, God didn’t wave a magic wand or recite any fancy incantations. Instead, he simply spoke his word, and the water and the land and the air teemed with life, diverse, beautiful, colorful purposeful life . . . the opposite of “formless and void.”

It’s the same way with Holy Baptism. It’s not a magical ceremony. No wand is waved. There are no fancy incantations. God simply speaks his Word and brings forth life (spiritual life) where before there was only that which was formless and void. As the Spirit of God hovered over the waters at creation, so too the Spirit was present when you were baptized. Where there was only darkness at creation until God said, “Let there be light”, so also there was only darkness in our hearts until God gave us the light of the knowledge of God.

Without God, everything is “tohu wa-bohu”, formless and void, barren and desolate. With God, everything is the opposite of “tohu wa-bohu.” It is full of light and color and beauty and wisdom and life. Thanks be to God! Amen.



