

Genesis 1:1-5

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 God swept 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 he called Night.

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

Acts 19:1-7

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism." Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied--altogether there were about twelve of them.

Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." 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, he 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; with you I am well pleased."

We are people who live in urban areas. Our lives are ordered by the behaviours of our society. There are social norms. Here, we are adjusting to new ways of living with one another, trying to keep each other safe by wearing masks and maintaining distance. To live together, we need to also keep distance.

It all feels pretty strange when we have been used to other ways of living together for so long, but we cannot 'go back'. We are embarking on some 'new normals'. We do these things because if we don't we risk chaos, disorder, raging illness and, for some, death. The risks of 'breaking the rules' are ones that could lead to the suffering and death of others, so we commit ourselves to be vigilant and work on modelling excellent life-affirming and life-protecting behaviours. Together – we can hold off the chaos and embrace an order that is about caring for one another and all those whom God loves!

The beginning story – the first day of Creation in Genesis – tells of the chaos – the formless void of pre-creation. We hear how the wind from God – the RUAKH – the *energy* or *breath* of God – swept over the waters – to bring about order through creation.



If you spend any time watching David Attenborough documentaries, you become aware of the extraordinary ordering to be found in ecology. Ecosystems are complex and full of wonder. They are layered with order, upon order, upon order. When we look at the wilds – the wilderness – we see the complexity as too much for us to even comprehend, so much so, we often think of wilderness as chaos, without order. Yet, there are laws of nature – there is ordering – we simply don't always understand or recognise it – and we rarely think about how God's fingers are on the ordering of creation!

By the time the prophets Malachi and Isaiah are talking about One who will prepare the way in the wilderness, Jews had come to understand the wilderness as any region outside the control of a 'city' or outside the influence of an ordered society. By going to live in the wilderness, John had removed himself both from his kin and from the established Jewish social system. He went to the wilderness to become an 'outsider', no longer bound to the

behavioural expectations of the Jewish society under Roman occupation. To travel in the wilderness was considered deviant behaviour, because in communal subsistence societies, each person had a primary responsibility to the community. Travelling usually meant deserting your responsibilities. When people came from both Jerusalem and from the Judean countryside, they were intentionally leaving the acceptable boundaries of society to seek teaching about God from someone they considered to be a Holy Man – a Prophet.

John tells them of One who is yet to come, who is more powerful, but rather than simply telling them that, John helps them to prepare. He baptizes them with water as a symbol of repentance, of turning from the ways of the world (the social disorder), back towards God – the God of Creation – the God of Abraham and Moses and Elijah...

Now, I've seen film depictions of the story, but they often seem to add information that isn't in the text...

When Jesus comes to John, he has left his family, his kinship network, his place at home, in order to come out into the wilderness. They don't come with him. He has turned from the expectations and order (or disorder) of the society to seek God's order – God's Way. He submits himself to being baptized, or dipped, getting ready for God's work.

What happens next is the amazing bit – Jesus has a spiritual experience.

And just as he was coming up out of the water, he 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; with you I am well pleased."

There is nothing in Mark to suggest that others were present at Jesus' Baptism – no-one else says anything. Yet, such is the importance of this, the descent of the Spirit like a dove and the announcement of Jesus' Divine kin relationship, if there were witnesses, you would expect Mark to say so.

Leaving out the testimony of others is a particular kind of story-telling device – Mark intends the readers, the hearers of the story, to act as the witnesses. It is at this point [right at the beginning of the Gospel] that we are meant to consider the question: Do we believe Jesus to be the Son of God, the Beloved, the One in whom God is well-pleased?

The bit that the lectionary leaves out this week gives us a clue. The opening verse of Mark tells us of the intent of his writing:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Mark is sharing with us what he understands as good news – that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. This Introduction or Prologue story about the Baptism is to set the scene for us. The rest of Mark will include stories and questions for us to consider. At no other point will Mark tell us what to believe. He will instead tell the story of Jesus and how other people reacted to him. We will hear what they say about him. And the original ending of the Gospel will end with the crucifixion and leave the question for us to answer.

It was only in much later editions that an extra ending to Mark was added, where the Centurian proclaims, 'Surely, this was the Son of God!'

One of the other Gospel writers, Luke, tells the story of Paul talking to some Ephesians. They had been baptized, but it was into John's baptism of repentance, a baptism of preparation and recommitment to God – a baptism that called them to wait for God to show up. Paul responds by baptizing them in the name of Jesus and the Holy Spirit came upon them, which was evidenced in the signs of the Spirit working in their lives.

Different Baptisms in the Bible? It can feel confusing.

Today, among Christians, there are different practises of baptism and different theological explanations. Some focus more on the person coming forward in repentance and others focus on the work of the Spirit.

For the Uniting Church, coming from a broad range of traditions, robust discussion about Baptism, and the desire to impose different traditions on each other, almost split the fledgling movement within the first few months of its life. Differences of opinions about Baptism raged during the first four National Assembly meetings, which are only held every three years. There is a fabulous summary article by the late Rev Dr Robert Bos who later helped develop the Belonging Kit, which was for discipling new Believers and preparing them for Baptism. Conversations about Baptism dominated the church's life for over a decade! It coincided with major ecumenical advances, of which the UCA was an active and driving force, that led to shared recognition of Baptism among many denominations, including: catholic, orthodox, reformed, presbyterian, Methodist, evangelical and uniting.

Eventually, the UCA's Assembly standing Committee came out with two key rulings for our own pastoral practice:

(i) that 'the Uniting Church will baptise those who confess the Christian faith, and children who are presented for Baptism and for whose instruction and nourishment in the faith the church takes responsibility' (Basis of Union, para. 7);

(ii) that Baptism is unrepeatable.(19)

When it says in the Basis of Union - 'the Uniting Church will baptise those who confess the Christian faith' – it is clearly talking about Believers' baptism. The Believer is able to testify to their face and come forward voluntarily to participate in the Sacrament of Baptism. It is a form of saying – God calls me and I accept God's grace.

The second part of the Basis of Union says - 'and children who are presented for Baptism and for whose instruction and nourishment in the faith the church takes responsibility' – notice – this does not say 'any children', nor does it say 'the children of Believers'. It says that the church will baptise those children for whom it takes discipling responsibility. That is why decisions about Baptism are the responsibility of the Church Council, not the Minister alone.

When a Baptism takes place in the UCA, the gathered Congregation must commit to taking responsibility for the instruction and nourishment in the faith. We make that vow to God, not just to the person being baptised.

So, what is it with baptising both confessing Believers and those who are yet to be able to understand faith?

I had a new understanding when I went on a Walk to Emmaus Discipleship weekend and thought about a Wesleyan understanding of GRACE. In the program there are five talks about God's grace:

- Prevenient Grace
- Justifying Grace
- Obstacles to Grace
- Means of Grace
- Sanctifying Grace

Together, these five aspects make up the God's grace story.

PRE-VENIENT means before coming. It refers to the grace God already has for us before we come to realise it, before we can name it and before we can make any move to accept it. God's grace is already there. God's grace comes first.

JUST-IF-I refers to the way in which we justify something. When we confess the faith, we are testifying to God's work of grace, restoring justice into our lives.

OBSTACLES to Grace was Wesley's term for sin.

Sin has several aspects. It includes:

1. The things we do wrong
2. The things we fail to do that are right AND
3. Anything that gets in the way – that acts as an obstacle – to our receiving the blessings of God

In this definition, SIN is not just about us being in the wrong, but also when things *feel* wrong or when wrong *has been done to us* – when we suffer from injustice or when we simply cannot live into a full life in grace.

The MEANS of Grace are the Sacraments... Baptism and Communion – and also the other means of spiritual nourishment, like prayer and fellowship.

SANCTIFYING Grace is that ongoing work of grace that the Holy Spirit continues to do in our lives.

Baptism testifies to the whole grace story... whichever point we are at in the spiritual journey – Baptism is not just about a moment on our journey, but the whole intention God has for us. We reaffirm Baptism every time we say the words of a creed or every time we hold a commissioning or ordination or reaffirmation of faith or confirmation of faith. Even when not every word or phrase of a creed or affirmation makes sense to me, I participate in the bigger story that is about God, not just about me or where I am up to today.

The stories of Baptism we read in the Bible are our stories. We are part of them and they are part of us. We tell the stories because they are our family stories. In the telling of the stories and the remembering of our Baptisms, we are saying – This is the good news - we are the recipients of God's grace!

We begin to hear the voice of God, saying to us:

You are my Beloved Children, made so through Jesus Christ,
and with you I am and will be well pleased!