

The First Day

In the name of God's beloved Son, dear friends in Christ: I'm sure you've heard this quote before: "Today is the first day of the rest of your life". It's a saying that became popular in the late sixties and seventies, and in gift stores where they sell trinkets and artsy knickknacks you can still find it written on plaques that you can hang up on your wall. The origin of the statement is attributed to several people, but mostly to a man named Charles Dederich who founded an organization designed to help alcoholics and drug addicts overcome their dependencies and turn their lives around. And so whether he said it first or just borrowed it from another source, it's easy to see why he used it in the context of helping his clients. "Today is the first day of the rest of your life" conveys a message of hope. It says whatever happened yesterday is in the past. You can't change it. You can't go back in time and undo the things that you did. You can only live in the present and, hopefully learning from your past mistakes, not make them again. Today is a new start.

And what a difference a first day can make. We see this in the reading from Genesis: the account of what God did on *the first day*. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." There's a whole lot more in that statement than you might think. What it describes is God's creation of the space time continuum. God is pure spirit. He is not subject to time or three space – by which I mean up and down, this way and that [horizontally], and back and forth [toward me and away]. So, what he did on the first day was to create all that: empty space and time itself. The beginning is when the clock starts. There is no time or space before the beginning. There is only God who exists beyond time and space.

Oh, and into this otherwise blank canvas of time and space that he's created, God places just one physical object: the earth. From here on out, this is the center of his attention. Good thing too, because it needs his attention. The earth he initially creates is a mess: dark, chaotic, void, lifeless, entirely submerged beneath murky waters. It needs help. And God gives it. First he draws near to it with his Holy Spirit, the Spirit who broods over the inchoate earth like a bird sitting on eggs in a nest. And then God speaks for the first time. In Hebrew the words are literally "Be light." It's like, "Turn it on", "Start shining". And there is light.

But what is this light? Where's it coming from? God hasn't yet created the sun or stars, the physical sources of light in the universe. So the source of this light must be God himself. It's the brightness of his glory that sheds light on the earth as it spins on its axis, one side face towards him, the Day; and one side facing away from him, the Night. And one complete rotation of Night and Day together are the first day – the first day that ends on a much brighter note than it began. We've moved from the darkness into the light – and we keep on moving from darkness to the light in all the first days of the rest of earth's existence that follow.

And speaking of first days, our Gospel reading describes the first day of our Lord's public ministry. With the single exception of the account we heard last week of twelve year old Jesus sitting with the teachers in the temple, we've heard nothing about him from the time of his birth until now. It's like he's been hidden away in the dark. Ah, but now he steps into the light, taking center stage, as it were, of all places, where John is baptizing.

John is enjoying his day in the sun. He is at this point a major celebrity. Huge crowds are flocking to hear his hellfire and brimstone preaching. Under his blistering attack against the

sin in their lives, people tremble with holy fear on account of God's wrath. Confessing their many sins, they receive from John a baptism of repentance by which their sins are washed away. And John encourages them and bolsters their budding faith by proclaiming the coming One who is mightier than he, who stands among them, and who is soon to be revealed.

And revealed he is on this day, the first day of his ministry in what is his first official act, which is being baptized with sinners. He begins his divine mission to redeem humankind from sin by identifying himself with sin – even though he has no sin of his own. He places himself in the water of baptism not to have his sins washed away, but rather to take the sins of others – all others – on himself. This is what earns for him the approval of his Father. For the first time as a man he hears the Father's voice audibly: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

But his first baptism on the first day of his public ministry points us ahead to his second baptism on the last day of his ministry. Then having received to himself the sins of all humankind, he alone would pay sin's terrible price. Then he would not experience the Father's loving approval, but his righteous anger and rejection. Then he would not hear the Father's comforting voice, but stone cold silence when he asked in agonized despair, "Why have you forsaken me?" Then after a day of darkness his lifeless broken body would be placed in a dark tomb.

Fortunately for us the movement in God's story is always from darkness to light. And so it was early on the first day of the week, the first day of the new creation, as the day began to break, the dark tomb in which he lay was discovered to be empty. The beloved *Son* had risen. Let there be Light, the Light of the world who shines in the darkness.

And who shines on and in us in our darkness. When? Today. Always today: the first day of the rest of your life. And like the original first day, each first day begins in darkness as you consider your sins of the day before. You can't go back and prevent them from happening. You can only repent of them and remember your own baptism – your baptism by which you were united with Christ Jesus in his death; buried by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, you too might walk in newness of life.

This is the Christian life, each first day moving from darkness to light until we arrive at the final first day: the day that never ends. May our gracious God and Father be pleased to keep us faithful and bring us to that day. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!