

**To be a Beginner**  
**SF Swedenborgian Church -- January 12, 2003**  
**by**  
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**Genesis 1:1-5**  
**Mark 1:4-11**

Don't you just love beginnings? The start of a vacation, a new romance, the first day of school, the first gaze at your sleeping newborn, and even those of you who are not morning people have to admit – dawn is exquisite. Today's scripture readings are all about beginnings. This is the day the church year celebrates the beginning of Jesus' ministry – his baptism by John. In fact, Mark, which was the earliest gospel and the one on which Matthew and Luke were based, begins at Jesus' baptism, Mark has no stories of his birth – Matthew and Luke added them about a generation later.

These texts speak to us of beginnings in general – they tell us that God is the source of all life, that heaven opens and the Holy Spirit descends on each of us when we commit ourselves to faith, that baptism represents the spiritual renewal that comes when we turn away from our egos. These texts speak to us of specific beginnings – Jesus' anointing as both a king and a servant, and of his ministry which was both a climactic fulfillment of ancient prophecies and the beginning of a new age of heaven

and earth. The images of God's spirit creating light and darkness, and of Jesus' baptism in the waters of the Jordan are central to Swedenborgian thought. They are the poetry of regeneration, images of the initiation of the process of co-creation by which we continue to grow closer to God for all eternity. "A wind from God swept over the waters" -- this is the dawning of the knowledge that there is something awesome and powerful outside of this world and our ability to control it. It is not about how the world was created, but why. Theologian and cosmologist Thomas Berry describes our purpose on earth as "the role of enabling the earth and the universe entire to reflect on and to celebrate the deep mysteries they bear within them, in a special mode of conscious awareness." Baptism in the Jordan -- cleansed by the waters of divine truth that we have perceived, but not yet lived, we can now begin to live guided by this truth, and manifest God's awesome creative power, each in our own way. In the Swedenborgian tradition, baptism is not an event that cleanses us from sin forever and saves us then and there, it is an initiation into a creative mutual relationship with God that continues all our lives and beyond. The dove descending -- this corresponds to how our thoughts and affections come from God -- a beautiful image of how God regenerates us, through what we think about and what we love. Reflecting on our thoughts and affections, on what

motivates us – this is repentance. That word that has gathered a lot of horrible baggage over the centuries, but it comes from a Hebrew root that means “to return home.” So you don’t ever need to say “repent” again if it evokes guilt and blame, you can say “turn back from this path, and return to my spiritual home.” God leads us to our spiritual homes through what we are drawn to in our hearts and minds – especially when, our affections draw us down those less-than-divine paths where we’ve all wandered off.

So that’s the wisdom of this morning’s message – God is a God of new beginnings, we are invited to participate in the coming Heavenly Kingdom, baptism is a commission to serve the Divine. God was born on earth and baptized in fulfillment of this promise, so go forth with renewed commitment to turn away from yourself and toward God, in the knowledge that the Holy Spirit will guide you. That’s the wisdom – where’s the love?

Ah, the love. There’s one image that weaves its way throughout – in the creation of the world, at the start of Jesus’ ministry, and in our spiritual lives – the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. The word used in both Hebrew and Greek means “breath.” The Hebrew word is “ruah” -- breath, a great wind. The Greek word is “pneuma,” the root of our words pneumatic and pneumonia. They even have the same sound! Ruah. Pneuma. There is something elemental and archetypal in this. Ruah. Pneuma. Alleluia.

ooh. ahhh. God breathes us into existence. God's Word does not just explain or teach, it actively creates. The tremendous power of the Big Bang, the whole awesome mystery of the Cosmos, it's the stillness of the breath of God. In – out, light – darkness, day – night, beginnings -- endings, it's the rhythm of the breath of God. Respiration, the Inspiration of the universe.

And we breathe in the same cycles. We are connected to the rhythm of the spheres, not by our good deeds or by our faith, but by our very breath. Swedenborg, in his efforts to locate where God finites into human life found that the brain and heart are affected mainly by the action of the lungs. He said that heaven has a pulse and respiration, that the Holy Spirit literally breathes. We cannot breathe in the areas of the spiritual world that are not in harmony with our being. The states of illumination from which Swedenborg wrote were induced by breathing techniques, in which Swedenborg suspended his earthly breathing and let the breath of heaven carry him. This is how we are joined to heaven – by our breath and our heartbeat. “The whole angelic heaven,” Swedenborg writes, “both in general and in particular is in these two motions of life.” Breath and heartbeat. Ruah and the cycles it calls into being.

We connect to God deep within ourselves by breath, and we also extend outward and connect to the world by breath. We express ourselves in sighs and groans, in laughter and in song. And our words. I've never been more struck by the power of words than when I have wished to God that I could take back something I said. Maybe it's both the power of my words, and their hopeless inadequacy that has guided my spiritual path to seek God outside of words. The power of breath goes far beyond words or expressive sounds. We are linked to every other life form on the planet because we literally breathe the same air. I won't bore you with the math, but there are calculations that show that in every breath you take, you breathe 5 of the molecules in Caesar's last breath. Think about it. The air we breathe has been breathed before, and we are breathing the same molecules as Jesus and the men who nailed him to the cross, as the victims of the Trade Center bombings and Osama bin Laden. And we send these molecules out again into a world whose fabric we are a living creative part of. Molecules of our sighs and our laughter, our blessings and our curses -- they enliven other life, God knows where, God knows how, but they do, God knows.

This is love. A connection of ruah. Not an emotion or a feeling, but an awareness that all life was spoken into existence by the same creative

impulse, and that we all participate in this dynamic life force the same way – by breathing it in and sending it out. This awareness begins compassion, connection. One underlying, absolute principle of the universe is that things are drawn together to react to each other. “The people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem” John and Jesus, the Spirit and the Dove. Particles that make an atom, atoms that make a molecule, molecules that make a cell, and so forth, a person, a relationship, a family, a community, a nation, a world, stars, galaxies, universes. The principle of connection is called gravity, centrifugal force, co-valent bonding, magnetism – the processes that shape life and by which life shapes itself – the material effects of the spiritual cause we call, for lack of a better word, Love.

Another underlying, absolute principle of the universe is change. “Evening and morning...the first day.” “The heavens were torn apart.” And the world has never been the same. The cosmologist Brian Swimme says “It is in changing that life finds purpose.” Patterns emerge and disappear, and re-emerge transformed and integrated. The seemingly inert presence of a mountain shapes the clouds and the rivers around it, and in turn is changed by the weather it creates, which transforms it. Swimme calls for

us to re-vision our world not as a cosmos, but as a cosmogenesis, always becoming.

So perhaps the only repentance we need is to cultivate the awareness of our world as a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects. Perhaps the only cleansing God asks us to do to split the heavens and receive the Holy Spirit is to wash ourselves clean of the idea that we are unto ourselves alone, that others are separate from us, and that our world's condition is fixed. Returning to our spiritual home starts with the first step. Just take a deep and centering breath, and God leads you. Goethe once said, "Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness, concerning all acts of initiation and creation. The moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. A whole stream of events issues from the decision. Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Begin it now." Rilke says, "If the angel deigns to come, it will be because you have convinced her, not by your tears, but by your humble resolve to be always beginning; to be a beginner."

Let us set our sails to God's wind and begin to continue. Amen.