

1st Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B
Baptism of Our Lord
Jan. 17, 2018
St. James, Wheat Ridge

By the Rev. Becky Jones

The *Washington Post* this week
ran what is just about the scariest headline I've ever seen:
"Bomb cyclone blasting east coast
before polar vortex uncorks tremendous cold"

I've heard of polar vortexes, but bomb cyclones?
Who knew that was even a thing?
But it is.
It's a strange and frightening weather phenomenon.
A bomb cyclone occurs
through the equally scary-sounding process of "bombogenesis."

Bombogenesis is said to occur
when a storm's central barometric pressure
drops dramatically in a very short time.
The lower the pressure gets, the more powerful the storm.

Now, I'm not a meteorologist,
but the way I understand storms are born is like this:
The air above the water serves as a kind of weight,
like a blanket,
pressing down on the ocean, keeping it still.

But when that pressure is lifted,
when that heavy air rises,
it leaves an area of low pressure on the surface.
This low pressure area in turn
sucks in the air from surrounding areas
where the pressure is greater,
because air is no different from humans in that respect.
Everything prefers low pressure to high pressure.

So that air starts flowing in
and it starts to spin, faster and faster,
like a twirling ice skater who pulls in her arms,
which leads to even higher wind speeds.
And the water below gets caught up in the frenzy,
and all of a sudden that still, calm, glassy ocean
becomes a roiling, terrifying cauldron.
Scares me to death just to think about!
Some days I'm pretty glad Denver is
more than 800 miles from the nearest ocean!

When these storms develop out in the mid-Atlantic,
they can intensify very, very quickly,
with a ferocity we never see from storms that develop over land.

They're already comparing this week's bomb cyclone,
which they're calling Winter Storm Grayson,
to other historic cataclysmic winter storms.

It's in the same league
with some of the most horrendous winter storms ever recorded.

Winter Storm Grayson caused Boston to flood with the highest tides
ever recorded in that city.
Cape Cod was inundated.
It left snow as far south as Tallahassee,
and in Miami,
frozen iguanas were reported falling from trees.
This caps a week of brutal cold that has left at least 17 people dead.

Our weather has been crazy. Chaotic. Frightening.
But you know, any kind of weather story involving water
has a kind of power and risk and drama.
Water has a lot of spiritual meaning to us.
The human imagination is consumed with images of water.

If, in my description of how storms are born,
you heard echoes of the first chapter of Genesis,
about a wind from God sweeping over the deep,
stilling the waters,

creating order out of chaos,
you would not be alone.

Then there is our beautiful image of baptism
in this morning's Gospel lesson.
Now, when we think of Jesus's baptism in the Jordan River,
chances are we're not thinking about
nightmarish scenes of violent water.
In our mind's eye, it's a nice scene,
John dipping Jesus beneath the waters,
and Jesus hearing the voice of God up above
claiming him as God's beloved Son.
Then there's the Holy Spirit
coming down like a sweet dove,
hovering above,
much as it may have hovered over the primordial world of Genesis.
This is no bomb cyclone we're talking about.
This is the Good Shepherd leading us beside still waters.

But look a little more closely at the text,
and our comfortable assumptions start to get shaken.
For example, that sky doesn't just open up.
No, it's "torn apart."
Talk about your strange and frightening weather phenomena!
Can you imagine what a torn apart sky would look and feel like?
I'm thinking bombogenesis.

This is a significant detail.
That's a violent verb that Mark uses
to describe what happens to the sky.
He uses that same verb just one other time,
to describe the temple curtain being torn apart when Jesus died.
Some have speculated that Mark used that particular violent verb
in order to point out God's invasion of a sinful world.

So that's one way God visited the earth,
through skies ripped open,
and that helps us to see Jesus
as filled with the power of God's Spirit
to do what he was called to do.

But God reached out in gentler ways, too.
A voice came from heaven saying
“You are my Son, the Beloved.
With you I am well pleased.”

God spoke, and something changed.
Just as God spoke in Genesis and brought light into being.
God spoke at the Jordan River,
and brought something else into being.
If Jesus didn't have a full understanding of who he was before this,
he certainly knows now.
Now he knows that he is God's son, the Beloved,
the light of the world.

In Matthew's account of this,
that voice speaks of Jesus in the Third Person,
“This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”
We don't know, but the implication in Matthew
is that other people could hear the voice too.
But in Mark, the message is in second person,
and seems to be addressed to Jesus alone.
It is a whisper into Jesus's ear,
the “still, small voice”
that only those who are especially attuned to God
can ever hope to hear.

What does God's voice sound like in your imagination?
Is God's voice loud and booming from the heavens?
Or so soft and quiet that we must quieten ourselves
and wait to hear it?

I don't know.
I can't answer that
any more than I can explain how God can speak things into being.
All I know for sure is that God is speaking still.
God continues to speak to a world that is chaotic and stormy.
God continues to speak to individuals
whose lives are chaotic and stormy.

In fact, God has spoken to each and every one of us,
the same words, more or less,
that were spoken to Jesus on the day of his baptism.
On the day we were baptized,
God claimed each of us as children of God,
and God was infinitely pleased by our baptism,
the moment at which we were marked at Christ's own forever.

Storm Grayson has passed.
It left a huge mess, but as with all storms,
eventually they are stilled,
and the cleanup and repairs to a battered coast can begin.

But our lessons today remind us
that the Spirit of God still broods and blows over our own little lives
just as it does over all creation and history.

The Spirit of God forms the formless.
God breathes spirit into matter.
God creates purpose, order and meaning out of the chaos.
God fills the empty void with beauty and goodness.
God turns darkness into light, night into day,
the evening into a new morning.
God calls those things that don't exist into existence.

That's what the Spirit did in creation,
and that's what it does in our redemption.
Despite the chaos and darkness around us,
we are called to remember that creation is good and beautiful,
and we are God's beloved children.
That's because the Spirit of God broods and hovers over us all
like a tender mother.

Amen.