

1Epiphany2024B

When God Began
By the Rev. Salying Wong

Advent—our liturgical new year. January 1st—Gregorian “Western” new year, based on the movement of the sun. Lunar new year—based on the moon and the new year in many parts of Asia. Other lunar new years: Nowruz—Persian new year. Muharram—Islamic new year. Diwali—Hindu festival of lights, a celebration of freshness. Rosh Hashanah—Jewish new year. With all these new years, I was curious about how the Hmong calculated their new year. I asked my Hmong friend, and she told me the elders gathered to decide on a date that is most convenient for the families to gather, sometime in the Spring, and that is the new year. I was so used to calendars that I had a hard time understanding that for the Hmong the new year wasn’t a calculation based on the celestial bodies—neither the sun nor the moon—but based on human relationships. It didn’t matter what the date was; what mattered was being together.

In our world, there are so many opportunities to start anew. How do you respond to the opportunity to start anew? What sort of beginnings do you have that don’t involve a calendar? Do you find hope in a new day, a new perspective?

On this first Sunday after the Epiphany, our scriptures speak of beginnings. First, we hear from Genesis the familiar words, “In the beginning...” Even here, we are beginning to think in a new way. Biblical scholars are changing the way we translate these first three words of the bible. Many now prefer this translation of the Hebrew, *bereshit bara elohim*, as “When God began...” How does the difference strike you? “In the beginning...” vs. “When God began...”

Do you prefer the old translation? When I hear, “In the beginning,” I think of one beginning. I think maybe before the beginning, there was nothing. This phrase,

then, “In the beginning,” sounds grand, as grand as the Big Bang. There is truth in this. There was a Big Bang.

On the other hand, was there only one Big Bang? When I hear the translation as, “When God began,” I think there was something happening before this moment when God began. I feel like I’m entering the middle of a story, maybe just as the story is getting good, just as something exciting is about to happen. Maybe God is doing something different now. It makes some sense in the reading of Genesis. We hear that before God began, the earth was a “formless void.” That’s the going translation of the Hebrew *tohu v’ vohu*. It is the only time this phrase occurs in the bible, so we don’t really know what it means. But, it does seem that whatever the “formless void” was, it was filled with water and the Spirit hovered over it.

How long was the Spirit hovering over the formless void and the water before God began? I think about the way the earth formed. I think about how at one time the land we now live on—the whole continent—was all sand dunes for millions and millions of years. Imagine if you sat watching a movie for millions and millions of years and all you saw was sand dunes. Would you think that anything different can happen? And yet, that’s what happened when in the midst of this monotony, an earthquake happened and suddenly the land began to change. And change it did—a new creation.

I think about other things, like how the sea was at one time full of prokaryotic cells, life forms as small as bacteria—for millions and millions of years. All you could expect were tiny, tiny lifeforms. And then some mitochondria entered another cell and started having a symbiotic relationship with it. The host cell would give the mitochondria “food” and the mitochondria would, in turn, give the host energy. This was a eukaryotic revolution, without which all the amazing diversity of life we have today wouldn’t be possible. When God began...after millions and millions of years, God began a new thing when we thought the world was old.

What then is possible for us, for our spiritual lives, if God can do this with the world? Can God begin a new thing for you, even now, even when you might be convinced that you know what to expect from life?

Consider the scene from our Gospel reading. In the midst of Israel's long history, with guidance of the prophets of old, God began to do a new thing. John came preaching and the hearts of the people of Judea and Jerusalem were ignited with a yearning for repentance, for renewal. That's really what repentance means—to put on a new mind. What did they long for that would renew them? How about you? When was the last time you wished to have your mind changed?

Those who were baptized by John found had their hearts awakened. They were prepared, like soil is prepared by tilling. They were ready, this time for Jesus, who brought something extraordinary to their now awakened hearts: another baptism, a baptism of the Holy Spirit. This was different. Those who surrendered to this baptism would continue to pray for the time that God would begin again, to renew the face of the earth, to renew our hearts. They would be formed into a people of perpetual hope. They would be a people who when someone says to them, "I found that God could renew my life," they would say, "Of course. Our God is a God who begins again and again.'

We are at the beginning, a beginning, another beginning. God begins again. Out of this eternal love, more ancient than the universe, older than evolution, God wishes to give you refreshment, renewal, healing and hope. Be not afraid of age; be not discouraged by failure; all fixity is illusion; God can do a new thing.