

Covenant Word

In the Beginning...Chaos

Genesis 1:1 – 2:4; Psalm 8; Matthew 28:16-20

*A Message by
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Allan and I got engaged in Grant Park in downtown Chicago. After the proposal, which he made sure to get out of the way early in the day, we spent the rest of the day site-seeing. One of those sites was Chicago's museum of art. I'm sure it had some lovely paintings, but truthfully I have no idea. I was delirious with joy and love and blinded by the sparkly new diamond taking up residence on my left hand. An art museum is an awesome place to go after getting a diamond ring. It's the light. The museum lighting had my ring sparkling like crazy! I was enamored with Allan and in love with the ring.

The light in a museum is designed to reveal the deepest hues and strokes and textures of the masterpieces that hang on the walls.

The light in a museum may also reveal that many artists would frequently reuse a canvas or panel, including Pablo Picasso. Often a piece was reworked because an artist couldn't afford to purchase new materials. When Picasso reworked his paintings, he most often did so directly over earlier images, neither using a "clean" side nor completely wiping out the previous abandoned attempt. Early in his career, financial constraints were certainly part of his motivation for reusing supports, but Picasso reworked paintings throughout his lifetime. His reworking was not necessarily done because he was frugal, but for Picasso the initial subject, the shape or form on the canvas, often revealed itself in a different guise as he worked on it or returned to it, thus serving as new inspiration. Picasso was known to say, "What comes out in the end is the result of the discarded finds."

Picasso often left visual clues on the surfaces of his paintings to suggest a hidden image

underneath – as in one of his famous works of 1903. The arched forms of a stadium in its early state evolved into the plumes of the horses' headdresses in the next, and the head of the leading horse became the contour of the man's head and shoulders in the final composition he named, *The Tragedy*. (Fascinating title for a masterpiece, right?) He left clues on the surface that would draw the viewer's attention to the metamorphosis of a work of art.

It leaves one to wonder about his other works and those of other famous artists – What masterpieces lay beneath the final composition? What had been there in the beginning?

Genesis is a book of Beginnings.

From the Hopi to the Babylonians, from Aztecs to Aboriginals, from the Vikings in Europe to the Han in China to the Yoruba in Africa to the ancient Hebrews of the Middle East – for ages, human tribes have told powerful creation narratives to convey their best answers to key questions like these:

Why are we here? Why is the world the way it is?

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What is our purpose? What is a good life? What matters? What dangers should we guard against? What treasures should we seek?

All around us, things are happening, unfolding, ending, and beginning, dying, and being born. Our ancient ancestors tried to name and discern what was going on in their primeval worlds. What they gleaned in wisdom and knowledge was shared to future generations through stories. These narratives, though strange and alien, have power in our own lives as we allow their ancient wisdom to mix with our own. As descendants of Abraham and Sarah, we naturally turn to the first creation story of the ancient Hebrews (McLaren).

The structure of the narrative is so symmetrical. There is a rhythm to the rhetoric; a pattern to the poetry. Like that's part of what's important about the story. Not just that it happened. Not



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just Who made it happen. But how it happened with careful design, with order and deliberation, layer upon layer. The design of the world was not autonomous or accidental but grounded in the will of God. This is what we are to understand from the poetic way the story is told (Brueggemann).

This Creator is not a bland and boring Artist. Brian McLaren writes, "Big bangs aren't boring." Neither are dinosaurs. Coral reefs aren't boring. Elephants...hummingbirds... not boring. Evolution, magnetism and gravity are not boring. God's creation is so amazingly, wonderfully, fascinatingly designed. God, the three-in-one, is not boring either. The creation is a reflection of its amazing, wonderful, and fascinating Creator.

"In the beginning..." On this, the first few pages of the Bible and the best thinking of today's scientists agree: it all began "in the beginning." People of Faith believe it all began in the Presence of God, God the Son, and God the Spirit. In the beginning – a burst, a light, a bang – energy and matter; time and sound, heavens and earth came into being.

Eugene Peterson describes this earth's beginning coming from 'a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness.' (Have you noticed that preachers like to describe things in threes?)

The soggy void of Genesis is simply called the Deep, or watery abyss.

This is an ancient way of describing chaos. Unpredictability. Confusion. Mayhem. Then...the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. The Ruah. The very

But before there was a created order, there was a created chaos over which the Spirit hovered, contemplating its dark and perfect beauty. What else could it be but beautiful if created by God?

"breath" of God gliding across that deep, watery abyss.

You see, that's the first painting on the canvas. The first layer of creation that is revealed in this narrative is followed quickly by the poetic description of God bringing order to this dark, unruly deep, creating something remarkable. Perhaps too quickly we jump to God bringing order.

Because the first thing God created was not order. God brought order, but the first thing he created was chaos. We rightly believe that in disobeying God, Adam and Eve unleashed another chaos into the created order. But before there was a created order, there was a created chaos over which the Spirit hovered, contemplating its dark and perfect beauty.

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Chaos, it seems, is not itself an enemy of the Good. It appears instead to be something divine and spiritual, yet without form. Perhaps like Spirit herself. (Galli).

That's what I hope we will redefine today in our hearts and minds. That chaos is a gateway for God to create. And perhaps the chaos that disrupts and disarms us on a daily basis could be transformed by that hovering Spirit – who whispers us forward. She reshapes the chaos into something new and beautiful to be created in our own lives. The question is: "What comes out in the end" – and will we name it *Tragedy*?

Look inward for a moment. Name the chaos that currently disarms and disrupts... What if that chaos took on a positive charge? Or a negative one? We're talking about that stuff that keeps us up at night. It's the excitement, worries and confusion over the future or the past.

It's a comment someone made that now has you questioning the relationship.

It's an honest conversation that reveals what you've known, but has never been said out loud.

It's the reminder that things are not what they used to be.

It's the revelation that time waits for no one.

Could we play around with what chaos looks like with a positive spin?

Roller coaster rides. Sky diving. A standing crowd at a concert that won't sit down. The grand-finale of a fireworks show. The pop of a pistol at the start of a marathon. Forty-five campers loading up in our back parking lot for Camp BCOC! Complete chaos, but so positively charged!

Chaos takes the form of our everyday madness and our grave concerns. When it is negatively charged, chaos takes the form of war and threats of war. Loss, sudden or slow. It looks like acts of violence or hate or ignorance. It may be in the form of a verdict or termination. Chaos, to me, sounds like buzz words that have no real meaning and

sound-bytes meant to confuse – that misrepresent the truth, or the person, or the cause.

It is ugliness and shame. Hateful speech and harmful weapons. Chaos reigns in the life of the abused, the addict, the outcast. Chaos is fraught with potential.

And yet Spirit hovers... and hovers... waiting to see if we will surrender the canvas to be repainted... waiting to see if we will repent... waiting to see if we will accept the invitation to be re-created.

Whatever seems unknown, unhinged, chaotic, or crazy could have potential and possibility. Chaos is not, and never will be the last word.

In this Genesis story, possibility overflowed into actuality as God spoke the “original joyful invitation: Let it be!” Let the heavens be! Let the earth be! Let the sun, moon, and stars be! The utterance of God is more invitation than command. God doesn’t demand, but gives permission for all of it to be here, to be alive. God’s call for creation to come into being is not coercive but evocative. It invites but does not compel. It hopes rather than requires.

God’s invitation to let creation unfold comes from an unrelenting Love. A love that can’t help but create. Fill in any verb! A love that can’t help but go, call, send.

And then, like an artist who takes a step back to view the whole painting, in verse 31, God looks upon all that God has made and says it is very good. This goodness defines a unity in creation that is both aesthetic and ethical. The world is to be beautiful and dutiful. God doesn’t call the world to be chaotic, fragmented, or in conflict. In the beginning, God evokes from the chaos what God wills – a world that is both robust and delicate, strong and vulnerable.

Walter Brueggemann says the creation is not an object like one built by a carpenter – solid, finished, polished and unchanging. But he calls it a vulnerable partner whose life is impacted by the voice of one who cares in tender but firm ways.

For the romance between Creator and creation is far more wonderful and profound than we can even understand. We are designed along with all creation to be courted and compelled by our Creator into a loving and mutual

relationship. Not manipulated. Not coerced. Wooed into living the life God has called us to live.

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When we give voice to the Genesis poem, it is like retelling your love story or a birth story. In the telling and hearing, it is itself a line of defense against the press of chaos. Reliving and retelling the beginning reminds you where it all started and the commitment you had to live into God’s dreams. It is a way of experiencing the good order of life in the face of the disorder (Brueggemann). This is why we value scripture read aloud in worship. We retell the love stories of Creator and creation believing this makes a difference.

We are living in a time when so many decisions and actions and speech demonstrate indifference to our Creator – even a disbelief that God is still hovering and still creating. So the words of Jesus, words of the Great commish*, have more to say today than perhaps we realize. Much more is at stake with the assertion of “I am with you always” than any cliché we might fall back on in the middle of a chaotic moment. What if we could remember this promise? “I am with you always” which assures that there is no where we can go, not even the darkest corners of our minds, where Jesus hasn’t already gone. There is nowhere that the Light can’t find us.

In the beginning of 2017, we celebrated Epiphany Sunday here on January 15. We were a little late due to a snowfall that prevented us from gathering on January 8. On that Sunday, we read the scripture, John 1, another “in the beginning” story. In the beginning was the Word... Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. Epiphany declares that the living Word shines a Light in the darkness.

That Sunday morning, three children processed into the sanctuary literally bringing in the Word and the light for the candles on the communion table. In the beginning of worship that Sunday, these were a symbol of hope. You may remember that at the conclusion of worship, Pastor Sarah told us all that these three children, Logan, Avery and Addison, had witnessed a loss up close and personal right after Christmas. Two of their peers at school had lost their mom in a sudden and strange way. She had a rare heart disease from which she died in her sleep. Chaos.

They carried in the Light and Word that day to remind us that God’s Spirit hovers ‘round us faithfully in all circumstances. In the beginning. In the middle. In the end. I am with you always.

What if we could remember this promise? “I am with you always” which assures that there is no where we can go, not even the darkest corners of our minds, where Jesus hasn’t already gone. There is nowhere that the Light can’t find us.

The two children from that family, a brother and sister, joined us two weeks ago for Camp BCOC. All of us kids and adults had a chance to show love, play, have fun, create something new together in the space of a weekend retreat. Along with God's Spirit, we added some paint to one another's canvases that weekend. Those two sweet children are working on masterpieces for sure.

All around us things are happening, unfolding, ending and beginning, dying and being born. Like all creation we are also robust and delicate, strong and susceptible.

When we offer the canvas of our lives to God, we are entering into that vulnerable partnership that God instituted way back in the beginning.

Here is the chaos of my life... deep, void, abysmal. Uncertain. Unruly as it may be. This is my canvas. In the end, there may always be clues on the surface of the chaos that has been, but in the end, I don't want to name it *Tragedy*. Instead, let us create something and call it *Good*. May it be so.

*Matthew 28:16-20 has been called the Great Commission by many evangelical Christians.

Sources included :
Walter Brueggemann's commentary on Genesis, Interpretation series
Brian McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking*.
Mark Galli's 2009 article, "Chaos Theology," Christianity Today.
Karoline Lewis's column at WorkingPreacher.com for lectionary texts, June 11, 2017.