

Taming the Chaos
Genesis 1:1-2:4a
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Northminster Presbyterian Church
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The people are terrified. Life has been tossed asunder; a powerful storm threatens from the East; and when it blows through, people are displaced, a civilization is in tatters.

No, I'm not talking about two weeks ago in Houston or this week across the western Atlantic and Caribbean. I'm talking about the first decade of the 6th century B.C. The place is Judah, the tattered remnant of the once great kingdom of Israel. The Storm is Nebuchadnezzar, the leader of the Babylonian Empire who enacts the great Babylonian exile. The people of God, who believed that God resided in the temple, not only see that temple destroyed, but they see themselves stripped from the land God supposedly gave to their ancestors, and they are dragged kicking and screaming into the center of the greatest empire since Egypt. There they encounter a people who have conquered them, worshipping Gods for whom war is a contest among the Gods of the various nations and peoples. And their Gods — the Babylonian Gods — are, in the minds of the people, preening with victory.

No one is sure if the exile was the first time the Hebrews had heard the story, the Babylonian/Sumerian creation story we have come to call the Enuma Elish. It had been written in the 12th century BCE. And in it the universe was created in the midst of chaos, enveloped in darkness. The first thing created in the narrative was the light and a rigid dome separates the heavens; and the dry lands and the waters are separated, and later the sun, moon and stars are created. And still later human kind is created and, at the end, there is divine rest.

Sound familiar? But there is something dramatically different between the Enuma Elish and Genesis 1. In the Babylonian story creation is the result of a battle among the Gods. A God battles a Goddess; the Gods fight and war with one another bringing about creation. And in the end it is not one God who rests, but many.

Many scholars now believe that a group of writers we now call the Priestly writers and editors, writing sometime during or after the exile, wrote what Jessica and I read a little while ago. The other creation story, the one that starts at Genesis 2:4b, is believed to be of longer standing in Hebrew tradition.

So what are we to make of this rewritten creation story with its repetitive passages that make it sound like it was meant to be read responsively with the people joining in lustily on "And God saw that it was Good." Is it just some fairy story, some cribbed notes version of a stolen epic. Not at all. I want to suggest that it may well be the great theological gift to the church of the Priestly writers because it speaks boldly of a God, one God, who doesn't create out of violence and war and a contest among the Gods, but who speaks the universe into being.

It's remarkable when you think about it — that words become a world; that word is made flesh. Okay, wait a minute. The Word becomes flesh? Does that sound familiar to anyone? "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." It's the opening line of the Gospel of John. Today we begin year four in the Narrative Lectionary Cycle of preaching texts. This is the Year of John. How fitting that John's year begins with the other "In the Beginning."

John was the last gospel written, composed, we believe, in the chaotic period of the early church when there weren't 2000 years of tradition about who Jesus was and how Christians are supposed to live and what we are supposed to believe. It was written in a time of great chaos in the faith. And so, is it any wonder that, in an effort to make some meaning and order, the author of John returns to this — by then 25 generations or so old — creation story?

I don't know why on earth we would want to take a fresh look at a story of God's actions born out of chaos. Why on earth indeed — One 100 billion dollar plus hurricane recovery effort across Houston and east Texas; at various points this week three hurricanes churning Atlantic waters at the same time; at this very moment, a category four storm is bearing down on Florida after decimating island nations across the Caribbean; the worst Mexico-area earthquake in 100 years; California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Montana are on fire with air quality so bad all outdoor activities were cancelled in the Idaho public schools this week. The worst monsoon season in generations in the upper Indian Ocean region has left more than 1000 dead, hundreds of thousands homeless and more than 43 million people's living situation made perilous by threats to crops, water supplies and infrastructure. Huge ice structures have collapsed in the Antarctic, the Arctic ice cap is in peril and the threats are not merely from the weather. In our own land, almost 800,000 today are living in fear that the only life they have known has been snatched away from them with the stroke of a President's pen. A third of the world away, a 30-something megalomaniac plays with his nukes and missiles like a toddler tossing around his new toys. And it would be an understatement to suggest that unstable and unpredictable leaders fill far too many halls of power.

I ask again, why on earth would we want to look at a story about how God tamed the chaos — with words? In Hebrew the term is "Tohu wa-Bohu." It's a phrase that is hard to translate directly to English but it's how things were in the ancient creation narrative in the moment before Genesis has Yahweh saying, "Let there be light." The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible translates it "dark and formless void" but I prefer another equally correct translation of these two words that don't appear together anywhere else in scripture: "chaos and desolation." That's the translation that resonates the most with me.

Into the chaos and desolation, God speaks. And what do the Priestly writers record God saying?

- Let there be light.
- Let there be a dome to create a space for life.
- Let there be waters and dry land to make way for a diversity of life.
- Earth, do what I created you for: Bring forth plant life.

- Let there be an order to time so that life has some predictability: The sun rises, the sun sets, the stars traverse across the sky in patterns that set years and seasons apart.
- Waters, do what I created you for: Bring forth life.
- Life, renew yourself.
- Earth, do what I created you for: Bring forth animal life.
- And finally: Let us make humankind.

God speaks and what is required for life is separated from the chaos; is given some sense of order and structure. God speaks and empowers creation to do what it was created for. Everything is given a purpose, including humanity. God speaks and we are created in the divine image — not divine but in the divine image.

The first creation story is a love story. The Divine Imagination gives voice to hopes and dreams for a place where life can exist, where a natural order can exist, where humanity not only can exist, but develop the skills and competencies to be the caretaker of all that has been spoken into being.

Yes, there are still storms. Yes, some of those creatures will devour other creatures. Yes, the place we call home is only one of billions and billions of planets in the universe, and our planet, solar system and galaxy are spinning wildly through the cosmos at speeds we can't fathom with God only knows what in our path. But the chaos is enough at bay that we can see and know all that we have been given. We can cherish creation and tread more softly upon it once we are aware of our responsibility for it.

But so what? Other than appreciation, why does this story speak to us in the midst of the chaos of this day? Perhaps it's an invitation to listen again for God's language of creativity and compassion. God speaks words that prepare a place. God speaks words that empower creation to bring forth life — to do what it has been made to do. God speaks words that recognize and celebrate and, indeed, make possible the greatest diversity on the planet — the 8.7 million species of creatures on land, in the seas and in the air, and the 391,000 species of plants on the earth.

And if that is how God speaks, how God brings life, how can our words become creative actions that prepare a place for others and ourselves to live in peace and harmony? How can our words become empowering actions that allow ours and others' gifts to blossom and grow in a way that feeds the world? How can our words become actions that empower others to discover and live into their callings as beloved children of God, beloved family members to us? How can our words celebrate and witness to, and even harness the wondrous power of human diversity, celebrating not just the things that make us similar, but those things that make us unique?

I suppose we can begin to answer these questions as Christians by remembering what I was talking about a few minutes ago, what John will be talking about all of next spring — the Word made flesh. If we would speak and act in God's language of creation, empowerment, diversity, in God's language of love, we need look no further than the life and ministry of God made flesh — the Word made flesh — Jesus Christ. That's why we

don't just celebrate Jesus as a great teacher or philosopher, though he was those things. He was this flesh-creating, life-celebrating, way-making, gift-empowering speech of God made flesh.

Did God create the world in seven chronological, 24-hour days? After considering the depth of what the Priestly writers were trying to say about God with their version of this ancient story of beginnings, it's almost an insulting question. The first creation story is not concerned with the mechanics of creation but with its purpose. This story doesn't care that you can't physically have light until you have a source of light (and they are thus created out of order). This story cares that God's response to shadows and chaos and desolation is to cast light into the darkness with a word, to cast out fear.

Tomorrow morning, we will awaken in a world where there will be more desolation than there was the day before. And we have a choice. We can join the band of finger pointers and naysayers and pessimists and pundits and talk ourselves purple about how wrong it all is and who is to blame, or we can join our voices with the voice that echoes across time — from the moment of the first atom, the first star, the first plane, the first life form — the voice that says: Let all that is create space for life to flourish. And like that voice, let our loving, life-celebrating words shape our world, our actions, our work. So that the powerless know there is a place for them at the table of human dignity, even if it means giving up some of our legroom. So that the rejected find welcome and a place where their uniqueness is celebrated as part of God's creative gifts for the world.

So that in the ways we encounter the self-hating and self-condemning of the world, they have a mirror of beloved-ness held up to them so joyfully that they can see and claim it for themselves. So that those who find themselves in the midst of oppressive systems feel the lightening of the load as we take up their fates and link their freedom and peace with our own.

Let us join the God who speaks life with language of our own; join the God who creates with new life and new creative energy born of gratitude and awe. And surely, in time, we will see that it is good.