

## "Holy Chaos"

In Webster's, "chaos" is defined as "complete disorder and confusion". The state of chaos is something that we are all familiar with. Some people handle chaos better than others or, maybe it would be better said that, some people can put up with more disorder and confusion before they consider a situation chaotic. The word "chaos" does not appear anywhere in the Bible. I found this out when I looked in my concordance – the precursor to Googling something. Yet the idea of chaos is a prevalent theme throughout the Old and New Testaments. We are told that, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth from a formless void. Yet most scholars describe it as God creating order out of chaos.

In Exodus 15, right after they saw Pharaoh and the Egyptian army destroyed in the Red Sea, Israel was experiencing some confusion and disorder. They wondered aloud if they would not have been better off if they had remained as slaves and complained because the water was bitter at Marah. But God brought order and harmony when He showed Moses a piece of wood that he was to cast into the waters. The waters became sweet. Order out of chaos.

During the period of Judges, Israel experienced a lot of chaos in the form of foreign armies. But God used Gideon, Jephthah, Deborah and others to bring about peace and order once again. The Israelites lived in constant chaos during the time of the Kings and prophets because they refused to live as covenant people. Yet even when the Israelites were exiled because of their sins, God created order by allowing them to come home to Jerusalem.

And look at the chaos that Jesus was *born* into. Mary and Joseph, forced to participate in a census by the government. Pregnant Mary riding presumably on a donkey from Nazareth to

Bethlehem. When there was no room in the proverbial inn, Mary delivered her first born child in a cave with no one but animals to encourage her and her husband. And when her son was born, their lives were threatened and they had to flee to Egypt for two years, according to the Gospel of Matthew. Chaos from the beginning of Jesus' life. Yet God had a plan for order with the child born in a manger.

Once Jesus began his ministry, he faced storms threatening to swamp his boat, people constantly wanting to touch him to be healed and Pharisees wanting to trip him up so they could discredit his claims to be the Son of Man. Just to name a few of the chaotic stories surrounding his life as the savior. All of which led to the cross. And talk about chaos. Listen to one description of the crucifixion by an African American preacher, as recorded by Tony Campolo in his book Let Me Tell You a Story.

“It was Friday and my Jesus was dead on a tree. Mary was cryin' her eyes out. The disciples were runnin' like sheep without a shepherd. Pilate thought he had washed his hands of the lot of trouble. The Pharisees were struttin' around laughin' and pokin' each other in the ribs. They thought they were in charge.” We can only imagine how lost and lonely and completely devastated the followers of Jesus felt on the day of his crucifixion in the midst of such circumstances. CHAOS!

Now, if someone had never read or studied the Bible, they might think this would be the end of the Biblical disorder and confusion. What could be more bewildering than seeing your Lord executed? But then we come to today's story in the book of Acts. Luke tells us that Jews from many nations had come to Jerusalem for the Pentecost event, called then the Feast of Weeks. This festival of thanksgiving for harvested crops always occurred 50 days after Passover. But some of the followers of Christ had gathered together, perhaps to ponder the last

words that Christ uttered to them before ascending to the Father. You see, Jesus had charged them to preach repentance and forgiveness to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. And he had instructed them to stay in the city until they had been clothed with power from on high.

And while those followers of Christ stood ready to worship, we read that tongues of flame and a mighty wind descended on the disciples of Jesus. Try to picture yourself in that room and think about how you would have felt and reacted. Surely YOU would feel amazed and perplexed if you began speaking a language you had never learned before. And even if you realized that Jesus' promise had come true and the power was coming from the Holy Spirit, I imagine anyone would have called that moment chaotic.

And what about those watching? What did *they* think was happening? Luke tells us that those who witnessed this paranormal event assumed that the Jews had been drinking early in the day. Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that if she had been watching as the "divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them" and rested on each of the eleven, that she might have shouted, "YOUR HAIR'S ON FIRE!" And so the chaos continues.

Consequently the question arises - if God is all powerful, all knowing and ever present, why did God allow this chaos in the first place? Why didn't God just make everything orderly? Well, friends – God did. God created a beautiful world, including humankind, which God proclaimed was very good. But loving us as God does, God did not create us as puppets to perform on the stage. God gave us a REAL world with REAL decisions to make and REAL problems to confront us so that we could choose obedience and love. So the problem in the world does not lie with God, but with you and me. And that is the long story short about where all this chaos came from.

But our God is a God of grace. And the truth is that when God saw that we are unable to choose goodness and righteousness ALL OF THE TIME, God did not just create *order* out of chaos. The Good News is that our God creates BEAUTY out of chaos.

God took what was nothing and didn't just make something. God made beauty – majestic mountains, the crystal clear blue of the Caribbean Sea. Hummingbirds and azaleas. White tigers and hedgehogs. Freckled girls and shooting stars and so much more! Have you ever thought about how kind God was in making Creation just the way He did? God could have made the whole world gray and we would never have known the difference. But God gave us color – red tongues of fire and hot pink Gerber daisies and rainbows and clown fish and more.

God took the chaos of the manger and created beauty when he became flesh and dwelt among us so that everyone who believes will have a living example of how to speak and react and live. God took the rejections of the Jews of their own Messiah and turned it into salvation for the Gentiles. And since Gentiles in both Greek and Hebrew means "nations", this was God turning the chaos of misunderstanding and disbelief into the beauty of God's inclusive love for all.

And the crucifixion? Well, God created beauty out of that chaos too. When Mary and the other disciples were weeping and the Phairsees thought they had won, they just didn't know that Easter Sunday was coming! But you and I know that out of the chaos of Good Friday, God brought about the salvation for humankind, including yours and mine.

And then there is the Pentecost event recorded in Acts. Whatever the reaction of those present that day, it is clear that the disciples' lives were COMPLETELY changed – so great was the power of the Spirit that they felt. Before they were lost, afraid and confused. But after

receiving the promised Holy Spirit, they were confident teachers and healers and preachers. Luke tells us that the number of believers grew from 120 to 3000 in one day and that the believers were empowered to go out and fulfill the great commission of Christ. So as is God's pattern, God created, not only order out of chaos, but beauty by giving us the birth of the church and enabling the Gospel to be shared in every language so that one day every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord!

Now why does all of this matter to us? What does all of this order out of chaos have to do with the Presbyterian Church or the upstate of South Carolina or even the world? Well, the truth is friends that we STILL live in a chaotic world. The richest nation in the world spends millions of dollars on the Presidential Campaign while 1 in 6 Americans go to bed hungry every night. Chaos! A 5 year old girl fatally shot herself this week with a gun she found under her grandmother's pillow. Chaos!

A state of emergency was declared in 15 Oklahoma counties this week due to tornadoes. A mentally ill man went on a stabbing spree in a mall. A nine year old girl was kidnapped from school by her uncle. Chaos! Chaos! Chaos! And while my theology does not allow me to think that God caused this chaos, my faith reassures me that God will USE this chaos to create beauty.

We may not see this beauty right away. We may not even recognize it. But perhaps there will be an increased awareness about mental illness or gun safety that will come to the forefront. Knowing Americans as we do, I am sure we will see an outpouring of compassion and support for the victims of the tornados and prayers and love for those whose children have experienced tragedy. Friends, the gift of God's word shows us that God can turn our stumbles and fumbles and outright sinfulness that brings on all this chaos into, not only order, but beauty. And to that we can only say, "Thanks be to God!"

Now, I have a confession to make. And it concerns this congregation. In the past, I have always dreaded worshiping in a church that "passes the peace". When I would get to a particular church to lead or participate in worship and see it listed in the bulletin, I would think to myself, "Oh no. They have Holy Chaos here!" Because that is always what it was to me. Chaos! Passing the peace is SUPPOSED to be about one acknowledging the grace they received in the assurance of pardon and the passing that grace, that peace on. But what usually happens is people milling around, disrupting the ORDER of good Presbyterian worship the way it should be. And in my mind, I vowed that, if I was ever in CHARGE of worship – I mean if I was ever the minister in a church – there would be NO HOLY CHAOS!

When I came to Nazareth, I was chagrined to see it in the bulletin and thought I would ease the congregation into gradually leaving it out. And then, along about March, a strange thing happened. I began to look forward to Darcy and A.J coming up on the chancel to hug me. I began to cherish the opportunity to welcome a visitor or say hello to a friend who might have come to worship with us or hug someone whom I had not seen all week.

You see, God turned what was, in my mind, Holy Chaos into a time of utter joy and a thing of beauty. THAT GOD!!!

So the Pentecost story is told, not just for our understanding of how the Holy Spirit entered the world and is present with us this very moment. Not just to help us have a path to trace of how the Gospel spread throughout the whole world. The Pentecost story is to be added to the long list of chaotic events that remind us that God turns chaos into Holy Chaos so that God's world will continue to be filled with beautiful people, places and things. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.