

“The One Who Brings Order to Chaos is With You”

based on Mark 4:35-41, Genesis 1:1, Isaiah 45:18-23 and Psalm 107:23-32

Delivered on June 20, 2021, at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

On Friday morning, we had friends visiting and we took them to the beach in Brigantine. The weather was a little chilly, but Harrison wasted no time running to the water. As the wind blew in, the waves crested three and four feet high. Unafraid, Harrison ran into each consecutive wave, letting them push him back. At times he went under the water, but every time he rose up again. He turned around and ran back into the next wave. It seemed like each time he returned to the water, the smile on his face grew bigger and bigger. It seemed like he could have kept doing it for hours and hours, if we let him.

As his father, I stood there nearby, trying to firmly plant myself in the water near him. I thought about how confident he was, how comfortable in the wind and the waves. For the last couple of months, he has been taking swimming lessons in Galloway. Even though he still has not yet crossed even a calm pool without help, he seems to have gained the confidence of Olympian Michael Phelps. He's fearless.

Now, while I wanted to be a proud dad, the truth is if you have stood at the water's edge, you know the feeling I had when the ground beneath me was eroding under my feet, and each crashing wave represented chaos that I could not control. And each time Harrison went under water, I feared a great fear over one thought, the thought of losing him. In my stomach, I felt, an empty void, a nothingness.

Today's scriptures, present for us these very concepts – chaos and nothingness. Throughout the bible, literally from the very first page, these two concepts, have been represented in the image of open water, in the wind and waves. The open water is a danger because there is no stability, no order, and the depth has the ability to devour and swallow a person. It was known for this, taking human made ships filled with cargo and crews of experienced sailors, and sending back scraps of wood with nothing else.

In Genesis 1, as God was creating all things, there was first chaos and nothingness, and darkness over the abyss, when God's Holy Spirit brooded over the water. I love the imagery in this opening verse, that I think we often miss in translation. The words *'tohu w'bohu'* have a poetic quality apart from their rhyming in Hebrew, but in the picture that they paint for us.

The first part, *'tohu'* is a state of disorder, a wildness, or as I translated it, chaos. Often, it is translated as formless, but this misses some of its power that this state of chaos has. The second word, *'bohu,'* is only used with *'tohu'* and is a void. It is the nothingness, that early writers connected with bowels, as in the nothingness left when even waste is expelled. This is not, as Isaiah said, what God created. God's creation is meant to be lived in. It is meant to be the dry land, a place of order and life, made for humanity.

During the seasons of Epiphany and Lent, as we went through the gospel of Mark, I kept connecting it to what is known as second Isaiah, or the middle part of Isaiah, chapters 40 to 55.

This is Isaiah's account of the new Exodus from Babylon to Judah. It is a return to the promised land by God's own direct deliverance. Yet, it is also a prophecy of God's ultimate deliverance, a third and final exodus. This one is led by the suffering servant, who is the arm of God, and yet is killed, only to seemingly rise again. I believe Mark has this prophecy in mind, as he is selecting and writing up accounts of Jesus that he had available to him to include in his gospel. Mark is acting like a journalist in writing this gospel, but he is also mindful of the poetry of Hebrew scripture, reflecting this image.

Poetry is often portrayed by people as flowery language, but this misses the point. At its essence, as the poet T.S. Elliot put it, poetry is the language of the inarticulate. By this he meant that poetry is the concise words and images, meant to give us a language, through metaphor and images, to understand and speak about the deeper meanings—those meanings that we struggle to understand because we don't know how to articulate them. These are things like life, death, chaos and nothingness.

And so, from Genesis 1, we ponder what it means to create from nothing, for God to bring order and create, without any raw materials. And for the people of Judah in exile, it is God's people in Babylon, and we ponder God making a way, when it seems like they have nothing left and all seems lost. God builds a highway through the wilderness, taking and anointing a heathen Cyrus, to send the people to their home.

And so, from this language in Hebrew Scripture, Mark sees something in this story of Jesus he most likely heard from Peter. Mark gives us the image of the apostles, experienced fishers, who knew the sea. Yet, they were out in a storm so great that even they were afraid they might not survive. Even they were afraid of being swallowed, brought down by chaos, and being taken deep into the void, to be no more, lost at sea, waste. Mark also knows Isaiah said God did not create in *'tohu.'* No, God did not create in chaos, but formed the earth to be inhabited and have life. This is God's doing, yes, and it is the power of God alone. Only God creates and brings order.

Notice then how Mark presents this story for us – the storm of wind became great – *'mega'* in Greek. And yet, there is Jesus on a cushion taking a nap, relaxing as the people panic. He had called them to take the trip, and there are other boats around them at risk too. Yet, and I'll say it again, Jesus is now in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. Hear the disciples' words, 'Teacher, does it not concern you that we might perish,' or, better still, 'do you not care at all that we might die here?' They succeed in waking Jesus, who rebukes the storm. This is the same verb used in the exorcisms earlier in Mark and again after. Jesus takes command of unruly creation, and does what only God can do – He brings order to the chaos.

Jesus tells the wind, 'Silence, be still' and the great storm became a great or *'mega'* calm. You see, we find Mark repeating this word, and Jesus asks them why they are afraid, why they do not have faith, since he is with them. But this only causes them to fear a great or again, *'mega,'* fear in response, they ask, *'Who is this that the wind and sea actually obey him?'* Is it the Holy One? That's who the demons said he was earlier in Mark, a reference to Isaiah who calls God the 'Holy One.' They have just lived the events written in Psalm 107, where experienced sailors

face a stormy wind and waves, and their confidence and courage gives way to fear. They cry out for help and are answered, by the Lord, left in calm waters to live again.

In the Psalms, in Isaiah, in Genesis, in every storm, it is always the Lord – it is God alone – who saves. Now, here they are on this boat, and it is Jesus who holds this very power of God, who is being revealed to them as the right arm of God that Isaiah spoke of. He is being revealed, as the One to whom, every knee shall bend, and every tongue confess, as the Apostle Paul said to the Philippians, adding that Jesus is the Lord. The realization that they are in a boat with the Almighty God, fills them with fear, because they do not understand.

Friends, a couple of weeks ago, I had the opportunity to visit our friend Leo in the hospital. He told me of a near death moment, in which he experienced this *'tohu w'bohu.'* Indeed, he said, that as the doctors and nurses filled the room he was in, he felt that sense of dread of his own death. With it, he felt the intense pain of his infection in his back. As he put it, he felt in him the suffering of Jesus on the cross. Yet, in that moment, he said he also felt the presence of Jesus with him. In that room suddenly there was a great calm.

You see, the God who brought order to chaos and creation into the nothingness, brought to this moment of great dread and uncertainty, a sense of great calm. But unlike the apostles, who had not yet seen the cross and resurrection, Leo was surprised by the hope he felt, because he held on to the truth, that the Creator had shared in his humanity, your humanity, and my humanity. The Lord experienced the chaos and nothingness that sin creates, bringing sin and all of its power, even death itself, to that cross where it was destroyed in Jesus, who is the incarnation of the Lord our God, who gave love the final say.

As you may know by now, Leo died early Saturday morning. There is a great sadness in my heart and I'm sure yours as well, that he is gone. God used Leo to bring order to this church, to show us love in action in the world. As a pastor, I think it's natural that often people assume I have all of the answers. I don't. Or that somehow, because of my ordination, that I am closer to God than others. I'm not. We are all close to God together. But I will tell you right now, that Leo showed me God. Leo showed me Christ in ways I had never seen God before, far more clearly than any book of theology, including the ones Leo and I had read. He loved getting recommendations from me. Leo embodied Christ's love, the love we see in the scriptures, and he did it especially for people in chaos and nothingness.

The image of the open waters, with the wind and waves, show us what hell is really like. It gives us language to speak of something that we cannot otherwise articulate, and it is in this poetry of scripture that we find ourselves in the story of God. As creation flowed from God the Father, the source of all things, so then God the Holy Spirit hovered, or as I love to translate it, brooded over the waters. Imagine God thinking deeply over those waters about chaos and nothingness. These are not the creation. God didn't create chaos. Rather, the Spirit was there knowing that this is not how it should be. The Spirit brought order and life, in order for the Son, the Word of God, to speak in those next verses, 'Let there be light,' and bring the Good creation, into its being.

We are a part of that creation, and we need not fear the waves that overtake us. Just as I stood there, knowing the dangers my son faced running into the waves, God is with us in the storms of our life, in the chaos and our fear of nothingness. God is with us in our fear of change, and the loss of possibility, what we know and hope for. Even if the confidence we have in our own abilities is inadequate, like the swim lessons that emboldened my son in the water. This confidence does not save us, but emboldens us to do what God asks, to do the next right thing.

God is with us, brooding over the dangers we face, sharing our feeling that this world is broken, and God is there to raise us up out of the waters. The loss of Leo presents for us a great void in our hearts, in our church, and perhaps even in our hope, because we know how integral Leo was in the work of this church, to show God's love. Leo's work with the poor, the homeless and the marginalized in our community, expressed the love of God through practice. He loved that concept of practice guided by God's Word, both that which is printed in the pages of our bibles, and the Word of God which shared in our humanity. The Son was humbled to live in our mortality, in solidarity with us, to create for us a ministry of reconciliation, so all things might be reconciled to God through the Son.

Losing Leo is yet another wave in what seems in this last couple of years especially, an endless onslaught of chaos and nothingness, but you see, the apostles were wrong about Jesus in that moment. Even though it seemed like he was napping, he was there, and when he rose, he brought order and preserved their lives in that moment, just as when the storm centered on him on that cross. It seemed on that cross as if Jesus was passive, not fighting back, doing nothing by letting it happen. The people who kept yelling at him, 'If you are the Son of God, save yourself.' Yet he stayed up there for us. He rebuked the chaos and the nothingness of sin and death, by rising again to rebuke these forces forever, giving us the hope that Leo expressed, that life in Christ is abundant and real, and it is truly eternal.

I want you to know on this Father's Day, that you are loved by God your Father, your Source, your parent. And I want you to know that this same God is a community, not only an eternal parent, but three persons in One God, and the Son knows what you are going through. For your God did not look at this broken world and judge from a distance, but entered into it, to be personal to you and to show you true love. God did this by living in your limits, dying for you, and rising again. It is by this, you may trust that the Spirit is with you also, calling out by your side, still brooding over the chaos and nothingness, to make order and life, from it.

As Leo's experience showed him, when *'tohu w'bohu,'* chaos and nothingness, seem in control, you are the beloved of God. You truly are. And the God who brings order is in your boat with you. And God's creation is not in the chaos, but in the goodness of this world, which is meant to be inhabited, filled with life and love, both now, in what we do to share this love and give life to others, and eternally, when all things will be made new, when all things will be restored, reordered and good creation will be all we know. We will see all things reconciled in Christ Jesus and know heaven and earth as one. Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in *bold italics*.

Mark 4:35-41 (Pastor's Translation) And when it had become *evening* on that *day*, he *called* to them, "Let us *travel* across to the other *side*." And having *dismissed* the *crowd*, they took Him with them since he was in the boat, and other boats were with him. Then a *storm* of wind became *great*, and the *waves* were *breaking* over the boat, so that already the *boat* was being *filled* up with *water*. And he was in the *stern*, on the *cushion sleeping*. And they *woke* him up and called out to him, "*Teacher*, does it not *concern* you that we *perish*?" And having been *awoken*, he *rebuked* the wind and said to the *sea*, "*Silence*, be still." And the wind *ceased* its *raging* and there was a great *calm* And he said to them, "Why are you *driven* by fear? You still do not have *faith*?" And they feared with great *fear*, and were saying to each other, "Who then is this that even the *wind* and sea *obey* him?"