



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

Order out of Chaos
Genesis 1:1-5
Second Corinthians 5:17-18

This past week has been for me one of the most chaotic in my ministry. The chaos started off with a meeting of the Congregational Life Committee of the Presbytery's Committee on Ministry, followed by a meeting of the entire Committee on Ministry. These meetings always add to the chaos in my life. Then there were certain events during the week that added to the chaos, followed by writing a sermon on Genesis 1, then accidentally deleting it before I saved it. That was not too awful, for the sermon was still in the old noggin, but it still had to be rewritten.

I hear the tiny violins playing your little notes of sympathy, and certainly my chaotic world does not compare with the chaos that fills the earth, but it has been a rough week.

For many reasons I believe it is in the wonderful providence of God that the lectionary text (and I admit that I seldom plan sermons by the lectionary), but the lectionary text for today is Genesis 1. I know that at times like these we can always use a word from the Lord, but today, at least for me, in God's providence, this is a very special word.

Hear the word as I read the first two verses found in the Bible, Genesis 1:1-2: **"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ²Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters."**

I know that Christians view the literalness of Genesis 1 with varying degrees, but I for one understand these two verses with absolute literalness. In the beginning there was chaos. Scientifically call it what you please. Call it a mass that contained all the matter of the universe whose gravity closed in upon itself and made an entity that was so dense and so unstable that it caused a big bang. My guess is that I have only demonstrated my lack of current science, but in the beginning there was chaos, instability, and within this chaos the earth came into

existence and the writer described it as a formless and empty, a dark chaotic sea, and the almighty God who has existed eternally was there. We will never understand eternity. But God was there before creation; that is why God is God. Mass did not appear out of nothing, but God was there and God came into the chaos. God's Spirit hovered over the chaotic waters, **"and God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. ⁴ God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light 'day,' and the darkness he called 'night.' And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day."**

What follows is a primitive, unscientific, beautifully poetic and inspired description of the creation of the sky, the vegetation, the forming of the sun, the moon and the stars, the life created in the oceans and in the air, then the creation of the animals that walk on the face of the earth, then the creation of man, both male and female.

Is this a literal understanding of creation that should be taught in a science classroom? Well, some believe that, and fight tooth and nail over the issue, but to do so is to miss the whole point of this Holy Spirit inspired poem that proclaims a truth about God who gives comfort to a life filled with chaos.

Maybe if we understood the person who was inspired to write this poem, we might better understand the comfort of the creation story. You see this poem was written by one whose world had literally come apart. He lived about 2,600 years ago; that would be in the sixth century B.C., and most everything he held dear had been taken from him.

You see he experienced the Babylonian invasion. He may have seen the armies of Nebuchadnezzar breach the walls of the holy city of Jerusalem following a horrible siege of the city, so many died. The Temple, the center of his worship, was destroyed, and he was carried away from the land he loved and forced to march to Babylon where he lived as an exile.

His grief was expressed by someone he may have known, that is the person who wrote in Psalm 137. **"By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept; when we remembered Zion, on the willows there we hung our harps. For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"**

Notice in the Psalm they were sitting by the waters of Babylon. There are those chaotic waters again. Yet, this person living in exile, remembering the

almighty power of God, took his pen and wrote, **“In the beginning, God created...”** In the beginning God created order out of the primeval chaos.

Genesis 1 is more than a story of creation; it is a confession of faith. It is a faith that trusts in the God of creation to continue to create order out of our chaotic lives. It is a confession of faith that when we are faced with all the chaos that is reported daily in the news about the disease in Washington, it is the faith that when the beliefs we hold dear are challenged, it is the faith that when personal tragedies are experienced, it is the faith that when we lie on our deathbed that God is there creating order out of chaos, and our calling is to trust God to be at work.

And with this conviction, the day came when the Babylonians were defeated. The Median King Cyrus declared that the Jews could leave Babylon and move back to Jerusalem. And trusting in God who creates order they rebuilt the Temple of God, they rebuilt the great wall that surrounded the city, they rebuilt their homes, and schools, and their markets, and their farms. Out of the chaos, by God’s hand, order was created.

I bet some of you Biblical scholars are wondering about my understanding of who wrote the first chapter of Genesis. Some believe that Moses wrote Genesis, not some nameless person who lived in the sixth century B.C.

Of course, tradition calls the first five books of the Bible the Pentateuch, which was authored by Moses. Well, Moses probably did write some of what is found in these books, but for argument’s sake, let’s say Moses wrote Genesis 1, and the message does not change. You see, Moses was the leader of a chaotic band of nomads wandering out in the desert, and Moses had the same conviction that God creates order. With that conviction these nomads, following the commands of God, moved into the Promised Land and eventually built a nation.

I remember Dr. Tony Campolo telling about a friend of his who was a well-respected seminary professor. Now I have to admit that I read the story years ago, and may not remember it exactly, but what happened was this:

Dr. Campolo’s friend resigned his position at the seminary and became a mailman. He was depressed, so Dr. Campolo bought a plane ticket to make a visit.

The two friends met, got reacquainted, and Dr. Campolo said, “Stan, you are a brilliant professor, and the seminary has been your life’s work. You have helped train so many pastors. How can you just give it up to deliver the mail?”

Stan was silent for quite some time then said, “Tony, I spent hours in my study, always seeking to learn more about the wonder of God. I then went to the

classroom to teach truth, to teach about existential truth gleaned centuries of human suffering. I taught about the wonder of God's power and love and how to make application to the suffering and darkness in the world where so many do not know Jesus Christ, and when I am through, some kid in the back of the classroom always raised his hand and asked, "Do we have to know this for the final?" And something died inside of me. I can only experience so many of those deaths that I am afraid I will lose my faith."

What do you tell someone whose professional life is defined by chaos?

What about the person who works in the medical profession? They spent many years in school, then in the practice of medicine, dedicating their lives to make people healthy, and about the only people they see in their clinic are folks who continue to overeat, don't get any exercise, and don't take their medicine and wonder why they are diabetic. It can get you down.

How about the young woman who has dedicated her life to truth and justice and enters the legal profession in order to help people who are the victims of an unjust society? And what she finds out is that no one seems to be interested in truth or justice, they only want to win their case. She is depressed. I do have to say that I am honored to serve a church that has lawyers who are members who hold onto the values of truth and justice.

Life can seem so chaotic.

Then there is the story written by Soren Kierkegaard about the Duck Church. It is a silly story, but it convicts me to the core:

In the little duck village all the ducks rise up early on Sunday morning to put on their Sunday best. They then waddle to the door of their house, waddle through the door, and waddle down the sidewalk to the church where they waddle through the church door. They waddle to down the aisle to their pews and take their seats.

After singing several of the majestic hymns of the church, the duck preacher waddles to the pulpit and proclaims, "Ducks, we have been called by God to be his agents of change in the world, we are to stand up for truth and righteousness, for as the prophet Amos said, **'Let justice flow like rivers of water and righteousness like ever flowing streams.'** Oh, yes, we can soar with the truth of God's word. We can fly with the eagles."

As he preached the ducks sitting on their perches shouted out, "Amen, preach on brother, we can fly, we can fly with God's holy word of righteousness."

When the service was over all the ducks stood up, waddled to the aisle waddled to the church door, then out the door. They waddled down the sidewalk to their homes, then waddled through their doors to their refrigerators to get the ingredients to make a sandwich to eat as they watched television. They did this as the preacher waddled home to take a nap before watching a baseball game.

It is God who creates order out of chaos whether it be the chaos of the waters from which creation sprung, or the chaos in our lives. But where God creates order from the chaos, and I may be pushing the text from Genesis 1, but the next 11 chapters of Genesis support my case, where God creates order, humans have been given the freedom to either join God in the creation of order out of chaos, or they can take God's order and create chaos.

I connected the words of Genesis with the Old Testament law for the first time in my study this week. If I had read the entirety of Genesis 1, I would have read that God made everything good. And when he created humans, the man and the woman needed something to eat, and God said, "Everything, plant and animal is clean for you to eat." Well, those are not the exact words, but the message is found in verses 29-30. Then I wondered where the dietary laws in the Old Testament come from. Why did certain foods become unclean to eat when God made everything good and clean?

You see, God created the earth and everything in it out of chaos, and then God looked at the creation and said it was good. Then he created man who he also declared good, and gave humans the capacity to freely make choices. "In the image of God we were created."

And what is the first thing the man and the woman do? They disobeyed. Then there was a murder when a brother killed a brother, and the chaos spread so widely that God sent a flood. But after experiencing the judgement of God, humans still wanted to make a name for themselves so they would not be scattered, so they built a tower. And God saw that everything man was doing was leading to more and more chaos, and nothing would be beyond their capacity to self-perpetuate the chaos in God's good creation.

Now move into time to June 11, 2017. I wonder if one word you would use to describe our nation, its politics, our maneuvering to create a name for ourselves, how we have a system where we have almost made it impossible to break the cycle of poverty and have the gall to say those poor people are just ignorant and lazy; and then move onto the world scene and consider the horrors in Syria and Iraq, and then turn our attention to the lunatic kid who is leading the nation of North Korea.

Don't you think that human beings have done an outstanding job of creating chaos out of God's order?

God already knew when he created human beings that something would have to be done, so at the right time he sent his Son Jesus Christ into the chaotic world, and he still sends him into our chaotic lives.

He sent Jesus to redeem us through the blood of the cross which is the message of the church, and Jesus teaches his redeemed people that all the commandments are fulfilled by loving others whether they are our worst enemy or your very child. In other words, we can add to the chaos by forgetting that God loves every single person who walks on the face of this planet, and we can judge them as unworthy. We can live with the goal of making our world a safe and secure place for you and me, or we can be agents of God who create order out of the chaos by loving others even at the cost of our own lives.

Move with me from Genesis 1 to the writing of the Apostle Paul, who followed Christ and loved all people, even those unclean Gentiles, and it cost him his life. Paul wrote the word of God in Second Corinthians 5:17-18, **“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciles us to himself AND GIVES US THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION.”**

Our job is not to self-perpetuate the church. Our job is to give our lives in a ministry of reconciliation and leave the perpetuation of the church in God's hands.

The late Fred Craddock used to tell the story of his first church. He wrote, “The first little church I served was in the eastern Tennessee hills, not too far from Oak Ridge. When Oak Ridge began to boom with the atomic energy, that little bitty town became a booming city just overnight. Every hill and every valley and every shady grove had recreational vehicles and trucks and things like that. People came in from everywhere and pitched tents, lived in wagons. Hard hats from everywhere, with their families and children paddling around in the mud in those trailer parks, lived in everything temporary to work. Our church was not far away. We had a beautiful little church—white frame building, a hundred and twelve years old. The church had an organ in the corner, which one of the young fellows had to pump while Mrs. Lois played it. Boy, she could play the songs just as slow as anybody.

The organ was a little slow. The church had beautifully decorated chimneys, kerosene lamps all around the walls and every pew in this little church was hewn, hand hewn, from a giant poplar tree. After church one Sunday morning I asked the leaders to stay. I said to them, “Now we need to launch a calling campaign and an invitational campaign in all those trailer parks to invite those people to church.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I don’t think they’d fit in here,” one of them said.

We argued about it, time ran out, and we said we’d vote next Sunday. Next Sunday, we all sat down after the service. “I move,” said one of them, “I move that in order to be a member of this church, you must own property in the county; that is the only way to keep order around here.”

Someone else said, “I second that.” It was a well-orchestrated ambush. Well, the motion passed. I voted against it, but they reminded me that I was just a kid preacher with crazy ideas and did not have a vote for I was only a preacher.

When we moved back to these parts, I took my wife to see that little church, because I had told her that painful, painful story. The roads have changed. The interstate goes through that part of the country, so I had a hard time finding it, but I finally did. I found the state road, the country road, and the little gravel road. Then there, back among the pines, was that building shining white, as beautiful as ever, but there was something different. The parking lot was full—motorcycles and trucks and cars packed in there. And out front, a great big sign: “Barbecue, all you can eat.” It is a restaurant, so we went inside. The pews are against the wall. They have electric lights now, and the organ pushed over into the corner. There are all those aluminum and plastic tables, and people sitting there eating barbecue pork and chicken and ribs – all kinds of people, black, white Asian, Arabs, Europeans, Tennessee rednecks and white collars, all kinds of people. I said to my wife, ‘It’s a good thing this is not still a church. Otherwise those people couldn’t be in here.’”

Brothers and sisters, you are a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciles us to himself AND GIVES US THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION.

So let’s go back into the world with this ministry of reconciliation and work with Jesus Christ to bring some order out of the chaos. Amen.