

Genesis 1:1-10; 26-28

¹ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ² Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

³ 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.

⁶ And God said, “Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water.” ⁷ So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. ⁸ God called the vault “sky.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.

⁹ And God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.” And it was so. ¹⁰ God called the dry ground “land,” and the gathered waters he called “seas.” And God saw that it was good.

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

Romans 8:16-23

¹⁶ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. ¹⁷ Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

¹⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.

You may remember this vivid video feed from the camera on the Coast Guard's Frying Pan tower off the coast of Cape Fear. As Hurricane Florence moved toward the Carolina coast in September of 2018, we all saw the raw power of the storm moving across the sea and foreshadowing the devastation to come. The wind, the noise, the raging sea – it's a picture of untamed power and raw chaos.

I remember watching the live feed from the Frying Pan Tower for a long time that day, wondering if the opening words of Genesis, the story of creation, might read differently with that image in our minds.

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The Biblical picture of the beginning is a picture of disorganization and uncertainty, a disordered world. Everything is "formless and empty." The Hebrew words translated here suggest confusion, emptiness, and waste. All is shrouded in darkness.

But God changes everything. Creation happens because God's Spirit was "moving." Translations try to capture that word in many ways. They write that the Spirit of God was moving, hovering, sweeping, brooding, studying, fluttering, examining, lingering. And when the time is right, God takes action, sets boundaries and calls forth order and purpose in the chaos.

God says, "Let there be light." The light illumined everything, shows the difference of dark and light. God is pleased. God brings land from the raging waters, stable ground in the midst of the relentless, churning seas and this, too, is good. Day after day, God brings order out of chaos, life of all sorts of diversity – and finally, humankind. As God surveys creation, God declares it all very good.

Paul describes in his letter to the Romans that God is still at work in our lives, creating. God does not stop with us at our first breath, or when we first make our decision for Christ – or when we make our first mistake. Today, we hear how God works to bring clarity to our confusion; organization to our disorganization; certainty to our uncertainty; order to our chaos; life where we only see death. Those who are lost are given God's plans. Emptiness is filled with purpose. And, when we choose it, our darkness is banished by walking in the light of God's grace and love.

That's good news for us because it often feels like life is mostly chaos. At a particularly low point in my own journey as a dad and as a husband, when I felt incapable of meeting the relentless demands upon me, that was – in fact – the counsel that I received from a friend: "Embrace the chaos," she told me.

Think about your own life. Is "chaos" a good way to describe it?

Before I got married, I could go out with friends, go to school, try to get started in my working life and career. I didn't have time to sleep, but that wasn't much of a problem, because how much sleep did I really need?

But now, young people are facing a series of challenges and obstacles that I never could have imagined. They have all the information of the world relayed to the palms of their hands in their phones, but they have too little guidance in how to understand it. The path of a good education, upward career mobility and meaningful social relationships is anything but clear-cut. I truly think it's harder now than it once was to be young.

Pick your life stage: Maybe you get married, try to work and grow together with your spouse. Maybe the family grows. You don't have any more time or money, but there are diapers, feedings and at least one who just refuses to sleep. That sleep you neglected earlier? Now it's unavailable. Maybe there's homework, virtual school, everything requiring attention you never prepared for. Soon enough, the temptation is coming to return to the pre-pandemic overscheduling of swim lessons, or soccer, or piano lessons or fencing lessons (yes – fencing lessons!) and being cook, chauffeur, counselor and disciplinarian.

But middle age has its own chaos. Sure, maybe you can reap the fruit of some of your earlier labors, but there are lots of responsibilities to people above you and also to the people you supervise. You might hold membership in different organizations. Maybe you even have a hobby. Church often grows so functional in this time, transactional after awhile, too. Maybe you're active in church leading a Bible study or singing in the choir. Everyone wants you to serve on a committee. But it all begins to come up emptier and emptier. All you know is that you can't wait to retire so that you will have more time on your hands to do what you really want to do.

But when you retire you find you're busier than ever. Everyone thinks that your retirement has left you free to help them with this or that project. Your children ask for help with home repairs or free child care. And things keep changing! Your body, your mind, your spirit all seem to be changing, degrading, growing (sometimes in the wrong directions), dying, threatened. Every step you take is filled with another measure of worry about what you don't know and can't control.

If you needed the reminder, there's COVID-19, there's a presidential election afoot and massive social changes and long-overdue questions are upon us. It's hard to watch the news, or even casually scroll through a social media feed, without being stirred up, discouraged or despondent.

Often enough, life is chaos. Life is that untamed sea. You never outgrow it. All of Creation groans, Paul told the Romans, groans up until the present time.

Today, we remember that where there is chaos, there is God. That's the first thing that you need to know. You are not alone in the chaos.

But that, today, is not the end of the news. Why is God there with you? God is there in your chaos for the same reason God was there at the beginning in Genesis 1 – to create space for you to thrive and fulfill the purposes for which you were called into being. Genesis is the beginning of a marvelous story that unfolds across the Scriptures that tell how we are created for relationship with God, and relationship with one another, relationship with all of creation. God spares nothing, not even his own Son, to accomplish this.

When life grows chaotic and aimless, when a thousand things call for your attention, when there is no time for you to think about what your going to do with your day much less what you will do for God – understand that God calls forth a place of peace in the midst of the chaos. It is there, while the stormy waves crash all around you, that God provides the environment in which you will abide and thrive.

“When is this going to be?” Surely you ‘re asking.

That’s the promise of the Gospel. God has already done it. Only one thing brings order from our chaos: and that’s faith in Christ Jesus. From that place of trust, we are granted peace because we have the assurance that we are never alone, that God’s Spirit is still brooding over the untamed chaos of our lives and speaking peace so we can abide in times like this.

- It is why David could sing in Psalm 62:2 (*The Message*): “[God] is a solid rock under my feet, breathing room for my soul, an impregnable castle: I’m set for life.”
- It is why Peter can preach in his great sermon on Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon the Church: “I saw God before me for all time. Nothing can shake me; he’s right by my side.” (Acts 2:25, *The Message*)

It is that assurance that brings us the peace that passes understanding. The book of Hebrews describes that sort of mature faith as an anchor for our souls (Heb. 6:19) that holds us fast with a relentless hope as the people of God no matter what storminess may threaten to drive us from our God-given purpose.

If you grew up in church like I did, you might remember the old hymn that speaks to times like these:

*Jesus calls us o'er the tumult
of our life's wild, restless sea;
day by day his sweet voice soundeth,
saying "Christian, follow me."*

*Jesus calls us from the worship
of the vain world's golden store,
from each idol that would keep us,
saying "Christian, love me more."*

*In our joys and in our sorrows,
days of toil and hours of ease,
still he calls, in cares and pleasures,
"Christian, love me more than these."*

*Jesus calls us; by thy mercies,
Savior, may we hear thy call,
give our hearts to thine obedience,
serve and love thee best of all.*

When your world is formless and empty, when you are swamped and overwhelmed, remember that God takes the chaos and calls forth order and purpose that is strengthening the relationship of love that nothing in all creation could ever sever – it is through Christ our Lord that he has done it, and will do it again. Thanks be to God. Amen.