

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing, Clarence Presbyterian Church
on January 7, 2024.**

OUT OF CHAOS

<Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29:1-11; Mark 1:4-11>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen

In the summer between my first and second years of high school, my parents took me on a cross-country road trip. Ultimately we were going to spend a week at a retreat and conference center in New Mexico, but they decided that - as we would be closer than we ever might be again - we would go the extra distance to see the Grand Canyon. I was excited by this as I had recently finished Earth Science that first year of high school and had fallen in love with it. I had even pretty much determined that would be my course of study in college and my profession. So to see the Grand Canyon in all its glory and grandeur was a marvelous sight. And of all the many takeaways, what impresses itself upon me still to this day is how much of that mile wide, mile deep canyon was formed by a river cutting through rock over the course of millennia.

I've always loved water. From the time I learned to swim in Otsego Lake, to looking for rocks with my grandma on the shores of Lake Ontario, to swimming up through my high school graduation and working as a lifeguard at Duffield, water has been an intimate part of how I view the world around us. And water is truly an amazing force within our created world.

It has the power to carve through solid rock, to erode and destroy most anything created by human hands, and to exert shattering force as it expands under extreme low temperatures. Conversely, it also has the power to bring about rejuvenation, to sustain life, health, and growth, and to ensure the promise of life. Water is the basis of our human form, comprising well over the majority of our bodies. And without water, life on this frail planet would be out of balance, and out of a future.

Yet for all this in the physical world, water represents so much more in the spiritual understanding.

“In the beginning, when God began to create, the earth was formless and void, and darkness covered the face of the deep...”

There is an understanding in theology that, from this first reference in our biblical heritage, in our story of faith, water is also a metaphor for the primordial chaos that was in existence as God's vision for the created world began to take shape. “Formless and void” - *tohu vabohu* - can also be translated as, and is often inferred to mean, “complete chaos” or, as one scholar puts it, “welter and waste.” It is nothing, but not in the sense that there is infinite emptiness. Rather, it is nothing in the sense that chaos is nothing -

no pattern, no shape, no direction or purpose. At the point when God begins to create, this is all there is: This nothing, this formless void, this primordial chaos...and then, hovering over the face of the deep, the Presence of The Divine. And into this chaos, God spoke, bringing order, shape, form. Creating direction and purpose. Enabling life. The beginning of it all is God's envisioning of order out of chaos, purpose out of meaninglessness, life out of unlife. And the building block of it all? Water.

From that time, from the beginning of measuring time in day and night, water has been used to symbolize beginnings and new beginnings, the washing away of the old to make way for the rebirth of the new. The waters of life, constantly in motion to bring about new life. And in the life of faith, baptism to proclaim one's entry into the fullness of faithful living.

Which is where we find ourselves today, gathered this morning with Jesus and John on the banks of the River Jordan.

John was confused, and uncertain, that Jesus should come to him for baptism. After all, why would Jesus need to be baptized? He was the One whom would baptize with the Spirit and truly make all things new! Jesus had done no wrong, and was not in need of a spiritual rebirth. Jesus, already at one with God, was not in need of being drawn close to God again. John was confused. But Jesus was not. He knew that the human understandings for baptism may not be what drew him there, *and* he knew that there was every need to be baptized. In this act, Jesus shows the caliber of his mission and ministry: to come alongside humanity in every regard, to stand in solidarity in order to bridge the distance, and to show - in his own life - what faithful living looks like. The baptism of Jesus sets the tone for the life of committed faith of all believers, and reminds us that, in this covenant, we are forever more linked and close to the Divine.

Mark wastes no time in setting the scene; he simply writes, "and Jesus was baptized." But Mark does spend a bit more ink in discussing what happens next: "the heavens are torn apart and the Spirit of God descends...and the voice of God proclaims, 'You are my Son.'"

The waters which once contained the fullness of chaos now have begun to bring together and meld the distance that has previously existed between the heavens and the earth, the immortal and the mortal, the spiritual and the earthly. No longer shall such separation exist, but now everywhere the edges, at the very minimum, begin to blur and overlap. In this baptism of Jesus, the distance and separation begin to close. When we ourselves are baptized, that distance and separation closes even more.

And from this, the work of God in our lives, and the work of God through our lives, truly begins.

Did you know, did you realize that, in this new year, God is at work in you and through you? I'm sure we've talked about it before, and even if you and I haven't, I imagine someone has. And such work is not dependent upon our calendar new year, but like all

liminal spaces and times, I think we're a bit more aware of it at a time such as this. God is at work in you and through you.

First, from our baptism, God has been at work *in* each of us. Creating and recreating. Making new. Building us into the fullness of creative vision that has existed from the time we were imagined. And to a degree, we can imagine, in turn, what God might be doing with us. But if we were to stop there, we would sell ourselves short.

C.S. Lewis puts it this way. "Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what God is doing. God is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently God starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is God up to? The explanation is that God is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage; but God is building a palace; he intends to come and live in it himself." (*Mere Christianity*, p160)

God is at work in us in order to make us fully into a person which holds the fullness of the Divine. God won't stop until we're at that point. And sometimes that will be difficult; it will feel as if we're being work down and eroded, like a river carving a canyon or glaciers reshaping the countryside. But other times, it will feel as if we're finally becoming who we've always meant to be. That is God at work in us.

And similarly, God is at work through us, to help shape, define, and build up the world in which we live. The communities in which we dwell. The church in which we worship. The spaces we move through in our daily comings and goings. All of this, through us, is being shaped by God into the vision of what it was initially imagined to be. In our baptisms, we commit to be an active agent in this work, this ministry.

Baptism is not God's work in our lives; not directly. Rather, to engage in baptism is to choose to be open to God's work in your life, in our lives. Baptism is our active intention, our commitment, our communal covenant to seek a greater awareness of God's presence and work in our lives, in our church, and in the lives of all those around us. And siblings-in-faith, God is indeed at work... In this new year, as we remember Jesus' baptism and our own, let us recommit to this work again. Amen.