

The Spirit's Sweep

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Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:4-11

Baptism of the Lord Sunday – January 10, 2021

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

Well, if any of us thought that simply turning the calendar page to a new year would mean that the turbulence and chaos of 2020 would cease, the events of this week put those thoughts to rest. The shameful events of this past Wednesday - when a crowd of rioters stormed the US Capitol, forcing an interruption in the constitutionally provided process of certifying the results of the electoral college, and leaving multiple people dead, including a Capitol Hill police officer - have shaken our country and left images that are seared into our minds. It was heartening to see congressional leaders reconvene on Wednesday evening, some with their voices trembling, with shattered glass on the floor and broken windows in the gallery, as together we begin to move forward, to figure out how we're going to live together.

It is in the context of those and other related events that the church gathers for worship. This is another reminder that the church's worship never takes place in a vacuum. The church's worship *always* takes place in the world as it is, even as worship reminds us that – in the words of Psalm 146 – our trust and our hope is not “in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish. ... [Our] hope is in the Lord [our] God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever, who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry.” The church's confidence and hope is not in human institutions or human leaders; the church's hope is in the creator God, in Jesus Christ his Son, and in the Holy Spirit, who makes all things new.

Chaos is not something new for those of biblical faith. Chaos has been around since the very beginning. “In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth,” we just heard as Cathy just read for us from Genesis 1, “the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep.” The words “formless void” are a translation of the Hebrew phrase *tohu wabohu*, one of those Hebrew terms that disciples of Jesus Christ need to have in your vocabulary. The *tohu wabohu* is the preexistent chaos, unruly, untamed, unordered. It is the wild, threatening chaos that corresponds to the times of chaos that we experience in our own lives. Many scholars believe that Genesis 1 was written during the time of the Babylonian exile, when faithful Jews had been uprooted from their homeland and deported by the imperial forces of Babylon. It was one of the many times of enormous political, economic, social, and

theological *chaos* that the Jewish people have suffered. Genesis 1 acknowledges that chaos, *tohu wabohu*, is a reality of life. It has always been so. People of faith should never be surprised when we encounter times of chaos.

But Genesis 1 wants to affirm, in the strongest possible way, that God is sovereign over all that is, including the pre-existent chaos in the beginning, the chaos of the exile, and the chaos of our time; over every leader, every nation, every turbulent moment. For the text says that in the midst of all of the chaotic void, "a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." Here we remember that the Hebrew word for wind is also the word for 'breath' and the word for 'spirit.' So that the text is saying that God breathed upon the chaotic, threatening waters, and God's spirit hovered and brooded over the waters. We are to understand that God is not afraid of the storm, God is not thrown off balance by the chaos, God enters into it, and like the mother bird that Jesus references in Matthew 23 and Luke 13, stretches out God's protective and creative wings over the waters, and brings forth the light of the new creation.

The sovereign Spirit of God sweeps over the chaos of creation, and the sovereign Spirit of God is sweeping over the chaos of our own time, bringing forth order and light and form. Friends, that is happening right now, even as it can feel like the earth is trembling under our feet.

What we learn from our gospel text this morning is that the Spirit is not just doing that; the Spirit intends to *use us* in that new creation. We are ourselves summoned and enlisted as agents of the new creation, we are summoned – from our varied places along the political spectrum - to stand against the forces of violence and chaos, and to build the beloved community together. As we enter into these baptismal forms of leadership, our stand must be taken along the humble path of confessing our sins. Mark 1 teaches us that our way of participating in the Spirit's work, of bringing new life forth from chaos, is through the paradoxical path and the humble energy of *confessing our sins*. "John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." The humble leadership of confessing our sins does not feel particularly heroic, *which is part of the point*. After all, bringing forth new life is ultimately the Spirit's work; it is not all up to us. But we are invited to participate in that work, and we do that by recognizing, naming, and letting go of our own sins, so that the Spirit of Jesus Christ can flow through our words and our actions.

Reading this text this week, it occurred to me that what we have here in Mark 1 is actually something *of a mob*. A mob of people streaming out into the desert wilderness, people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem. But this is a mob that we want to be part of. This is not a mob that is seeking by force to disrupt and assault a constitutionally provided process for the peaceful and orderly transition of power. This mob – if we may even call it that – is drawn towards

confession and humility and sorrow and grief and repentance. That makes all the difference for how they will live their lives.

Earlier this year, in this worship space, we talked about how “wherever we encounter the spirit of violence, whether it is in the lives of others or in our own hearts, whether it is from those on the political right or those on the political left, wherever we find ourselves permissive towards violence as long as it being done by those we agree with, *whenever* we encounter the spirit of violence, we need to recognize that we are in the presence of an idolatrous spirit that is impatient and fearful and unwilling to stay with the power of courageous love” (sermon from September 6, 2020).

Violence and force and manipulation are characteristics of the world in which we live. But the kingdom of Jesus Christ does not and will not come through force, but always and only through love. For, as we read in 1 Corinthians 1, “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.” These words resound with power for us in our time of massive polarization, violence, and hatred. By submitting himself to the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, by coming alongside of us in our own sinfulness, Jesus hallows this process and makes it his own.

Friends, we are living through an extraordinary moment. It is a moment that can feel as though chaos and turbulence and fear are all that there is. But do not be misled. The Spirit of the living God is profoundly at work around us, within us, and through us, bringing forth new light and new forms of life, as we speak. And the Spirit of God is summoning you and me, through our baptisms, to stand – firmly and humbly – against the spirit of violence and chaos. The confession of our sins is one of the greatest tools we have in this work of baptismal leadership, to constantly be aware of our own desires for control, our own defensiveness and self-interest, our greed, our fears; to recognize those day by day, moment by moment, to turn them over to God, and to allow God’s Spirit to flow and work through us. To the triune God be our praise, our trust, our glory, and our honor, now and forever. Amen.