

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Out of Chaos”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Baptism of the Lord--January 7, 2018

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

One of our family stories, involves our final hymn today, the Navy Hymn, *Eternal Father Strong to Save*. The hymn is one that a great many people like to sing, although on a day that we are ordaining a good Army Ranger, there might be questions about why we would sing the Navy hymn, especially after the Army football team managed to hold off Navy with a missed field goal attempt in the last seconds of a very snowy game. Nevertheless, we are going to sing the Navy hymn. The story I grew up hearing was about my great, great grandfather, who served ages ago as choirmaster at the Naval Academy in Annapolis. According to my great grandmother, he decided that this hymn should be sung at every service at the academy, and thus by tradition it became the Navy Hymn. We are singing it most of all because it fits our service today. The words of the third verse fit our Scripture: *O Holy Spirit, who did brood upon the chaos wild and rude, and bade its angry tumult cease, and gave for fierce confusion, peace....* That describes the actions of God in creating the world. As it says in Genesis, in the Everett Fox translation: “At the beginning of God’s creating of the heavens and the earth, when the earth was wild and waste, darkness over the face of Ocean, rushing-spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters--God said: Let there be light! And there was light.”¹ From the very beginning of time God has been about the business of giving peace where there was chaos and fierce confusion. When the earth was wild and waste, when there was chaos, God created light. The creation story in Genesis shows that chaos exists and has existed and will exist; we don’t know why or where it comes from. It’s just there. I don’t need to prove to you the existence of chaos; we know all about it. The world is chaotic and confusing and that is true for much of our own lives, but from the beginning God has stood above that chaos, bringing order, bringing hope, bring light, promising that peace which passes our understanding. Chaos is the arena of God’s creative activity.

If your world is wild and waste, with more darkness than light, then remember that God chooses to create in this environment. Remember that the rushing-spirit of God hovers over you. You are not alone.

That is also the message of our gospel lesson today. Barbara Brown Taylor speaks of the baptism of Jesus. “The place was teeming with sinners--faulty, sorry, guilty human beings--who hoped against hope that John could clean them up and turn their lives around. If you have ever read the arrest record in the newspaper, then you know the kinds of things most of them were guilty of--drunk driving, bad checks, petty larceny, assault. Some were notorious sinners, and some were there for crimes of the heart known only to themselves, but none of them had illusions of their own innocence. They had come to be cleaned. They knew they were not clean.

“Then Jesus showed up and got in line with them. No one knew anything about him yet. In Mark’s gospel, there are no accounts of Jesus’ birth. His life begins with his baptism, so the crowds did not part when he appeared. He simply took his place in line and waited his turn, but later, after the heavens were torn apart and the voice from heaven made clear who he was, there was a lot of controversy. What was he doing in that crowd of sinners, looking and acting like one of them? What

¹ Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*. Schocken Books. © 1995.

did he have to be sorry about, and why was God's Beloved submitting himself to a scruffy character like John?"²

It is ironic that the church chooses to mark a day to remember and to celebrate the baptism of Jesus, because the church has never been all that comfortable with it. Read through the different accounts of this story and you will see the unease of the authors. In Matthew, John tried to talk Jesus out of being baptized, suggesting that Jesus should baptize John rather than the other way around. Luke doesn't say who baptized Jesus and John's gospel doesn't mention anything about a baptism at all. Yet the power of our story today, is that God in Christ, quietly stands in line with us. Jesus doesn't just stand off to the side encouraging us; instead he joins us right in the midst of our sorry, sinful, chaotic, and also joyous world. God is faithful and that is especially true in the hard times that come our way.

Today, as we prepare to ordain and install officers, we will reaffirm our own baptismal covenant. As a congregation we together will claim again the promises that we proclaimed, or were proclaimed for us, at our own baptisms. It is an opportunity to renew our own commitment to God, and it is also an opportunity to remember that God is at work in our midst. That's something we've seen that here time and again. It is an opportunity to listen again for that voice that cries out from heaven: *This is my beloved. The one in whom I am well pleased.* You are. Scruffy, a little worn, not the person you might be or used to be, but still beloved.

In the midst of the chaos of your own life, God promises to be at work, bringing peace, bringing light. Chaos is the arena of God's saving activity. Out of the chaos, God is still creating.

Let us pray: Gracious God, giver of life, you have called us by name, and pledge to each of us your faithful love. We pray for your blessings, that you will watch over us and guide us as we grow in faith. Remind us of the promises of our own baptism and renew our trust in you. Make us strong to obey your will and to serve you with joy, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *The River of Life* in Home By Another Way. A Cowley Publications Book. © 1999.