

The Creation of Good

Genesis 1:1-5

The opening verses of the Bible—these memorable lines from the first chapter of Genesis—are not what most people commonly believe them to be. More specifically, if I were to ask just about anyone here, or for that matter, any person of Abrahamic faith (Christian, Jew, or Muslim) what these verses mean, the response would likely be, “Oh, this is the story of Creation—of how the cosmos and earth came into existence,” with the rest of the unread verses in the chapter referring to the creation of humankind and animal life. For centuries, this was the basis for understanding human origins and for some people, it still is.

Even in the 21st century world of science and human understanding, there are many who would argue to their dying day that this is exactly the way all things came into existence—in a literal manner of six days and in the order outlined in this ancient text. The basis for believing this, despite all the overwhelming evidence of geology, anthropology, and astrophysics, is the unrelenting religious conviction that with God all things are possible. If God’s Word declares this to be the way God created, then that’s the way it occurred. Fundamentalists of all strains are convinced they are absolutely right, even when their basic understanding of the biblical text itself is unfortunately wrong.

The opening chapter of Genesis is not a literal explanation of the earth’s origins. Instead, it is a poetic and profound declaration of how God works in this world, even from the beginning of time (which is what this passage refers to), i.e., God creates something good out of chaos even from the outset. For those who initially heard these words as a part of a worshipping Jewish minority community living in Babylon some 2500

years ago, this basic truth gave birth to the Genesis story as we have it and to the theological confidence in the divine presence even when the world of their Jewish identity was in utter ruin and despair. God creates good out of chaos. That, more than anything else, is the primary philosophical premise and theological conviction of Abrahamic faith, including our own. Genesis 1 is not about the creation of the earth, as much as it is a declaration of the creation of good.

The noted biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann, underscores this point:

...God did not create “from nothing,” but God’s act of creation consists in the imposition of a particular order upon the mass of undifferentiated chaos. For much of the Bible, the energy of chaos (antiform) continues to operate destructively against the will of the Creator, and sometimes breaks out destructively beyond the bounds set by the decree of the Creator...The insight of the text as we have it...is a recognition of the intrinsic contradiction to God’s will that is present in the “stuff” of creation itself. Thus the Creator makes creation possible, not by a single act, but by the endless reenactment and reassertion of a sovereign will over the recalcitrant “stuff” of chaos...

The sustained affirmation of this liturgy of creation is that the world (all of heaven, all of earth) is willed by and seen by God to be “good,” that is, lovely, beautiful, pleasing (1:10, 12, 18, 21). This reiterated affirmation that we imagine to be a congregational response to a priestly litany, culminates in verse 31 with the intensified phrase “very good.” This affirmation of the goodness of creation has been decisive for the Jewish and Christian traditions as a foundation for a life-affirming, world-affirming horizon with a determined appreciation of the good of the material world in all its dimensions...including sexuality and economics. This tradition will have nothing to do with world-denying, world-denigrating, or world-escaping religious impulses that characterize too much of popular faith in U.S. culture. ¹

To put it another way, despite the new Museum of the Bible in our nation’s capital, or the Creationist theme parks in Florida, Kentucky, and Tennessee, the story of creation is about God’s decisive actions to bring about good from chaos. Given the current condition of American culture,

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2003, pp.34, 35.

bringing good out of chaos may very well be an important calling we share with God as people of faith!

Chaos abounds. Virtually every day we suffer from the endless provocations and political battles with headlines that invoke fear more than confidence. Regardless of the role that President Trump has in much of this, the “reality show” atmosphere that has risen over the past few years is not only stunningly out of the norm, it has provoked some of the harshest rhetoric and offensive behavior that we have witnessed in this country for a long, long time, if ever. Even if one dismisses the craziness coming from the top, I don’t recall a time when average citizens became so inflamed, so untrusting of one another, and so polarized about any topic. It’s as if the demons of “road rage” have been unleashed and taken over the psychology of our populace to the degree that there is little respect or tolerance for one another and a surprising acceptance of and normality to bullying tactics, dishonesty, and lawlessness in our civil conduct toward one another and toward the basic standards of common decency. Spiritually, this is terribly stressful and disturbing for many who do not appreciate the clamor and craziness of this period in our history. The words of Jesus seem to describe it well: “Because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold” (Matthew 24:12). Chaos—not just the weather—has made us all a little colder as we begin 2018.

This is why it’s apropos for us to turn to this opening chapter in Genesis, to remind us of the original truth of Scripture: that God will make something good out of chaos. For that, indeed, is how God works in this world and how human civilization at its best operates as well.

If we examine the great strides of human progress throughout history, the advancements that have improved our lives and survival, most

human inventions or innovations were intended to bring something good out of chaos—to bring form, order, meaning, and usefulness to that which has been otherwise unknown, or mysterious and magical, or simply frightening and overwhelming. Chaos isn't just craziness, mind you, it's also anything which is meaningless, out of order, disorganized, unreasonable, or against our better interests. God takes the formless void—the chaos, if you will—and brought about order in such a way to become something good. Out of the darkness, came the order of light. God declared that to be good. Separating the darkness from the light, God willed into being the form of each day and night. Out of chaos came something good. It continued in the development of the chaos into realms of earth and sky, land and sea, vegetation and seed, animal and human, and so forth—each time bringing something new and beautiful out of a context of disorder and purposelessness—something that brought forth life, productivity, and purpose. And God called it good.

For the most part, this has been the nature of human beings as well. We progressed from foraging for food to developing agriculture, from living in caves to constructing shelter, from being vulnerable to the threats of Nature to inventing ways to protect our lives, increase productivity and comfort, and enhance human survival. Down through civilization, advancements in culture and knowledge have come by discovering the nature of all that exists and comprehending that which was unknown, and bringing order to that which is untamed and creating good out of what was formless and void. These verses which characterize God as the great creator are equally reflective of human ingenuity and intelligence—at our best, when chaos abounds—when that which seems uncontrollable threatens our welfare—we refuse to succumb to it, but instead transform it

into something positive and good. We are intrinsically called to create good from chaos, just like God. Good is the fruit of our labor, the vision of our imagination, the goal of our existence as human beings. Chaos is meant to end with the conscientious collective efforts to create something good in this world.

By creating good, we rebuild trust that is lost when chaos abounds. Trust is an elemental need for human survival and cooperation. Trust is the foundation of good relationships. And, very interestingly, it is also the most essential part of a productive society and an economic system that benefits everyone.

Stephen Covey, an acclaimed author of several bestselling books on business and leadership, wrote an entire volume on the importance of trust in every human activity, society, and economy, titled *The Speed of Trust*, because, as he saw it, economic efficiency and productivity is highly dependent upon trust. Low-trust will undermine the efficiency and usefulness of the enterprise between producer and consumer, between employer and employee, between all parties of an economic system. He writes:

When trust is high, the dividend you receive is like a performance multiplier, elevating and improving every dimension of your organization and your life. High trust is like the leaven in bread, which lifts everything around it. In a company, high trust materially improves communication, collaboration, execution, innovation, strategy, engagement, partnering, and relationships with all stakeholders. ²

Without trust, of course, everything falls apart and degrades into chaos.

Covey extrapolated what goes on in business world to the larger concern over human societies. Quoting Francis Fukuyama, who said: “Widespread distrust in a society...imposes a kind of tax on all forms of

² Stephen M.R. Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, Free Press, 2006, pg. 19.

economic activity, a tax that high-trust societies do not have to pay”, Covey pointed out, “...this low-trust tax is not only on economic activity, but on all activity—in every relationship, in every interaction, in every communication, in every decision, in every dimension of life.”³ It’s evident to many today that we’re paying that heavy tax now in American culture—the tax of low-trust—and its negative effects will impact us far more than we realize—even more than what we presently see.

That is why you and I, as people of faith, must capture the vision and urgency to create good out of the chaos. “Good” are all the things we do for others to benefit them and to build trust in relationships. Rebuilding trust in our society is our only hope for reversing the current devolution toward civil war and chaos—whether it’s between economic or social classes, between races, between generations, between religions and cultures. God created order out of the chaos so that all living beings could survive and flourish. This primary biblical act of grace we see symbolized in the act of creation is our same calling today—to create something good—to help all things flourish. Of any time in my memory, we are in desperate need of creative acts of goodwill to counter the chaos and craziness of our times and in our society.

As you know, it so happens that 2018 is our anniversary year as a congregation. The value of our being a church is not simply to maintain a meetinghouse that can host life’s ceremonies or serve our own needs. As our heritage has proven, it must continue to be a ministry that brings good things to life, especially for those who need it most. Yes, we have many accomplishments and good deeds that we can cite from our history in

³ Ibid.

Noank, but our history only counts if we continue its mandate. It serves no present good merely held as a passing memory.

So my challenge to us this year is to live out our calling as servants of Christ in this world by intentionally doing acts of goodwill—of creating good in our world out of the chaos. I invite you to continue doing what you presently are or to explore new things to do. More specifically, with our 175 years of mission and ministry, I challenge us to identify 175 people associated in some way with Noank Baptist Church—directly or indirectly—and name both who they are and what they do, so we can celebrate the activities that are bringing good things to life. I would imagine everyone here in some way over the course of this year can name something they are doing for someone else that brings good into their life. I would hope we would even consider ways that might be outside of our normal daily duties and toward something that we are not obligated in some way to do (in other words, not just doing good things for your family members). I hope we can find at least 175 people who can sign their name to a register of good deeds that we will keep in the Narthex throughout the year (one page per person). I encourage you from time to time, to read through this registry just to appreciate what is being done, often behind the scenes or outside of most people's knowledge. Then, later in the year, we will highlight all the various acts of mercy and kindness being done to help build trust between people and to counter the effects of chaos.

Be creative with your goodness. Be thoughtful and considerate. Raise up a concern for justice. Be bold, if you can, to stretch yourself beyond your normal boundaries. Be faithful, because not only is it good for our world, it will be good for your own soul. The creation of good benefits the actor and the receiver. It began with God from the beginning and it

continues today through each person who does what is right and beneficial for the objectives and loving atmosphere characteristic of the realm God is bringing to this earth.

The time is now to create light in the darkness and to bring order to the chaos. As we do this, we will affirm, as did Jesus in his redemptive mission, the fruits of our labors will bring forth life and allow it to flourish—deeds of goodness and grace, just as it was in the beginning.

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