

Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29;
Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

If I were to ask each of you to picture chaos in your minds, I suppose we would come up with a rather rich variety of images. Chaos might be imagined as the family room on Christmas morning, with boxes and paper and ribbons and bows scattered pell-mell. Or perhaps chaos is a patrons brawl at Chuck E. Cheese. Or the floor of the Stock Exchange in the fall of 2008. . . . Or a street in Gaza in 2009.

Whatever image you assign to the word “chaos”, it is clear chaos usually involves confusion, disorientation, uncertainty about the direction to go, a sense of helplessness, or things out of our control. And perhaps your image of chaos involves darkness, or at the very least, the inability to see things clearly. A friend of mine told me about their family’s recent trip to Disney World – how they love that place, and how they enjoyed their vacation to Disney World to the hilt. Except when her husband, having removed his glasses prior to getting on the ride Space Mountain, ended up thoroughly nauseated by ride’s end. (For those of you who have never ventured on it, Space Mountain is built very much like the Hershey Park ride the Wild Mouse; there are lots of short but sudden drops and abrupt 180 degree turns. The difference between Space Mountain and the Wild Mouse is that Space Mountain is pretty much in the dark, its theme is having you speed through the inky-black universe, with only little bits of light emanating from a few “stars” and “galaxies” far away. So Jeff, glasses off so they would not come off accidentally, with only his blurry vision to assist him, stepped onto a ride in which he cannot see the next straight drop, or the upcoming 180 degree turn. He hears the screams of the other riders (though I suspect those screams might have been his). He feels the rush of wind as spaceships rocket by him going in the other direction. He feels helpless. It is totally disorienting for him. It is, for him, the longest ride of that day. And I suppose Space Mountain would be Jeff’s current image of chaos.

That is where our first lesson begins. That is where our Old Testament canon of the Bible begins – with chaos. What did we hear, but this “. . . the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep . . .” That’s Space Mountain into infinity. In the beginning was an inky-black nothingness without order, without a single point of reference, without a beam of light, without a place to rest or a direction to go. It was total confusion, disorientation; it was an emptiness out of control.

But at that beginning, besides the nothingness we can scarcely fathom and of which we would be terrified, is something else. Or **Someone** else. That’s also where our first lesson begins; that’s also where our Old Testament canon of the Bible begins – with **Someone** in the midst of emptiness, in the midst of chaos, who takes all that nothingness and creates: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth . . .”

There. God was, is, that **Someone**. Bible scholars believe that the people of God who first read or heard those words were Jews who were exiled in the foreign land of Babylon, about the sixth century before the birth of Christ. These were people who had been ripped from their homeland, and all that was familiar to them. They were disoriented constantly by foreign language and religion, custom and culture; they were helpless. It was obvious that they lacked control over anything in their lives. Don't you think their situation was the very image of chaos?

What the priests of those exiled people in Babylon did, was offer to them the story of God's raw power at the beginning of all things; a power that takes chaos and shapes it into something good; a power that voices creation into being, and this creation has order and beauty and purpose.

Now while the reading or the hearing of this narrative of the creation of the world did not end the Jews' exile in Babylon (in fact it would be many years before the Jews returned home), it did provide them with a confessional statement; it gave them a way of expressing their understanding of the nature and the character of their God. And so those words became part of their worship in Babylon, in a foreign land. Those words became part of their worship which turned them toward the One – the only One – who could take chaos and transform it into order, who could banish darkness with light. And so it is that the Jewish priests hold carefully to this treasure of a story about a God who loves this particular people and chose this particular people and with the priests giving this treasure of words to the Jews in exile, they gave the Jews a point of reference, a beam of light, a place to rest, a direction to go. Ultimately, what the opening words of the book of Genesis do is provide an answer to the question that the exiles were surely asking: Is our God great enough? Is our God strong enough to bring order to our present chaos? Light to our current darkness? And the answer was: Yes.

Now for some folks, at least for those who don't tend toward motion sickness, the ride on a roller coaster like Space Mountain is exhilaration bar none, a rush unlike anything else. But it seems to me that the same could be said about these opening words of the Bible: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth . . ." They should exhilarate us as well. The rush of wind that is God's powerful Spirit speeds through some inky-black nothingness and creates with a holy intentionality that changes everything – now there is a future. Nothing has no future. But when God creates, God opens up possibilities for all the life that is teeming within that creation.

So these words in Genesis stood as a confessional statement about the character of God for the Jewish people in exile so long ago. Can these words stand as confessional statement for us? Today? After all, our present day chaos seems oft times as disorienting as theirs. Don't we feel helpless at times? Don't we think that things are out of our control? There is an inky-black chaos that envelops our world. Hatred among nations that breeds violence and bloodshed. Turbulence in financial markets that impacts the rich, devastates the poor. Sorrows and worries that darken our own individual days.

But God said, "Let there be light!" and there was light. If God can take a vast infinite darkness of nothing and somehow create order out of it, then perhaps God can take the chaos we have made of our own lives, the disorder and dysfunction in which we so consistently find ourselves, and bring order and beauty and purpose to our world.

You and I are the priests in this place. We are the priests in this fellowship known as Trinity Lutheran Church. We are priests because we offer to one another this story of the One who gave Himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ; we carefully hold the treasure of this story of God's love for the people he has created. And that is where the gospel of Mark takes us; that is what Mark has done for us with this story of Jesus' baptism. I love this story! See, no other characters in this story, besides Jesus, seem to know exactly what's happening at this moment. But, Mark lets us in on the exhilarating secret. We learn from Mark in our gospel lesson that Jesus is the very Son of God. And we learn that Jesus is beloved by and pleasing to God the Father. And we learn that at his baptism, when he came up out of those waters of the Jordan, and the heavens were torn open, that Jesus received the very same Spirit that created "in the beginning." And filled with that Spirit, Jesus is great enough and strong enough to save God's people from the chaos that surrounds them.

But, maybe the most exhilarating thing of all, is believing that now Jesus Christ has actually given that Spirit to us, people baptized in His name. That means we've been given a holy order and beauty and purpose for our lives in this world. Just think of all the creative possibilities that are ahead of us in this next week, in this next month and year, as we work and play, as we befriend and serve.

In the Jewish body of writing known as the Talmud, there is a story about a rabbi who one pitch dark night meets up with a blind man, who is carrying a blazing torch in his hand. And the rabbi asks him, "Why do you carry that torch? With or without it, you cannot see a thing." The blind man responds, "True enough. But as long as I carry this torch, other people can see me."

There was the blind man, in the dark, lighting the path, helping guide others along the way. To think that you and I might actually participate in creation, participate in banishing the darkness with the light of Christ shining through us. Now that's a rush!

Amen.