

## Chaos, Creation and Sabbath: A Divine Dance of Trust and Hope

Genesis 1:1-5; 2:1-3

January 22, 2017

First, thank you for giving your pastors sabbaticals! While some of the fruit of sabbatical may not be apparent for a while, the immediate effects are a feeling of renewal. It was pure gift—I frequently used the word ‘decadent’—to have the time and space to be removed from the daily life of the congregation in order to reflect on ministry, engage more deeply with family and friends and engage in activities that nurture and renew me. My sermon this morning grows out of some of the reading I did on sabbatical and how it connects with faith and current events.

When I met with my spiritual director toward the end of my sabbatical, I reflected with her that some of the questions or ponderings I had at the beginning of sabbatical had been settled, some of them had shifted, and others that I thought were settled had unsettled. In listening to me, she responded that it sounded like the sabbatical had done its work! Sabbatical, time away, is a time for settling and unsettling, and we aren’t in control of what gets settled and what gets unsettled.

It also, not surprisingly, took a good 4-6 weeks to figure out a rhythm for sabbatical. I had to let go of the drive to accomplish a lot during this really awesome period of open time! Days of possibility stretched before me; there was so much I wanted to do—quilt projects to finish and begin, books to read. In fact, it was hard to actually figure out what I wanted to do on a given day. Did I want to read or quilt, and if so, was it this book or this one, this project or this one.

Maybe the chaos of figuring out the “work” of sabbatical explains why the topic of chaos arose as a focus for this sermon! It might also explain why the writing of Margaret Wheatley seemed to connect with me. Wheatley has worked a lot with organizations around management and leadership, paid attention to developments in science, and made connections between these 2 areas. I read her book, *Leadership and the New Science*. I don’t profess to understand everything she wrote about. She compares Newtonian ways of understanding the world with relatively new discoveries and understandings in the area of quantum

physics and chaos theory, and finds in the “new science” new ways of thinking about organizations.

Classical science, what most of us learned, tried to understand the whole by breaking it down into parts; believed the world is predictable and controllable, once we understand it; and that we can objectively measure and perceive the world and reality. The world and everything in it, including people, are perceived through machine imagery, where “responsibilities have been organized into functions; people have been organized into roles; and page after page of organizational charts show the workings of the machine.” (p. 29) Reason and logic and predictability have been highly valued, under Newtonian principles of seeing the world.

But we know that the world is not predictable or logical. No matter how much we learn and discover about the physical world, there is much that remains a mystery. Scientists have discovered in quantum physics a confusing, weird and fascinating world that explains, in a mysterious and confusing way, this unpredictability we experience. Wheatley says that “quantum imagery challenges so many of our basic assumptions, including our understanding of relationships, connectedness, prediction, and control.” (p. 33) Rather than seeing the world in predictable ways—if we just study it enough, we will understand it and control it—the quantum world provides new perspectives—nothing is fixed or measurable. (p. 33) The world is dynamic and interactive and inter-connected, defined by relationships, rather than predictability. Scientists have found that even at the micro level—the level of particles and electrons—relationship determines response and reaction, even when there is no seeming visible connection.

There is no way to predict outcomes, because we don’t know all of the connections that exist. And sometimes change occurs with no apparent cause. This is known as a quantum leap, a leap that appears “abrupt and [without any apparent connection to anything], where an electron jumps from one orbit to another without passing through an intermediary stage.” (p. 44)

Perhaps that explains what happened in November; contrary to all the predictions and data and facts before us, the outcome was nothing anyone expected or believed would happen. The country made an inexplicable leap from one reality

to another, without passing through any of the intermediary stages. This would also explain the fall of the Berlin Wall, which seemingly happened out of the blue. We have seen movements in our world come out of “nowhere”, and impact the course of history.

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I want to leave this notion of inter-connectedness for a minute and move to chaos theory. We tend not to welcome chaos; we experience it as destructive and disorienting. And that is certainly a reality. When tragedies strike, when the world as we know it is changed, it is disorienting and painful. We feel a sense of hopelessness and uncertainty. The creation account in Genesis 1, describes the order that came out of chaos at creation. The earth was an empty wasteland; darkness was over the surface of the deep; God’s Spirit, a mighty wind, moved over the waters, and in doing so, God created a liveable world where there was none; order where there had been chaos. (Roop, *Genesis*, BCBC, p. 25) Chaos, in this account, and throughout the biblical text, is a primordial, cosmic force that is loose in the world, opposed to the rule of Yahweh, often given a name—Pharaoh, Babylon, Assyria, King Herod. Exodus, the Psalms, prophets like Jeremiah name these historical figures and give them the attributes of chaos. (Brueggeman, *Reverberations of Faith*, p. 28-29) One image of chaos in the Bible, then, is this force that existed from the beginning and is opposed to God and God’s reign.

At the same time, the Bible also shows chaos as a force that can be subdued by God; God is the one who rules over the chaos and can use it as a tool to do God’s work—we see that in the flood, the crossing of the Red Sea. In these accounts the waters of chaos function at God’s command and for God’s purposes. (p. 29)

The Bible takes seriously the presence and reality of chaos in our world and our lives; and it also gives us a picture of chaos under the governance and control of God. But the balance of chaos and order is a precarious one; the imagery in the prophets also shows a creation that could be undone at the command of God.

Wheatley talks about the relationship between chaos and order, and says they are mirror images of each other, and that even within chaos, there are boundaries that are well-ordered and predictable. When scientists track systems that appear to be chaotic, over time they see these systems settle into patterns and order. Chaos, she says, has always partnered with order, and being able to plot those

seemingly chaotic systems on computers has revealed an order that is strangely beautiful. (p. 117) Scientists call these chaotic patterns fractal images and strange attractors, and say they are not the “shape of chaos, but the shape of wholeness. When we concentrate on individual moments or fragments of experience, we see only chaos. But if we stand back and look at what is taking shape, we see order.” (p. 118) Wheatley makes the point numerous times, that it is the presence and reality of chaos that brings about new life and creativity. Without chaos, destruction, un-doing, there can be no new life.

As I read and ponder these new ideas, I can't help but make connections with the biblical story, a story that moves repeatedly from chaos to order to chaos to order. The creation account in Genesis 1 sets out a world of order, with everything in its place. And following that account, are stories of chaos, messy relationships, people losing their way. And repeatedly, the poets and prophets of the biblical text remind us that God is in control. The Word of God, present at the beginning in the chaos, is in control. The order that is present in this account continues to order our world. While we are experiencing a change in climate, so that the seasons seem less predictable, the predictability of night following day following night remains an order we can count on.

And these ideas about chaos, order, relationships, and inter-connectedness, remind me of the current state of our world. The refugee crisis in Syria and other parts of our world immediately come to mind—we have been impacted by events on the other side of the world. The chaos of war and unrest touches us here in Goshen, and calls us to respond. And following the election, it would seem that chaos has taken on a name and a persona; it is easy to see the presence of this chaos as a signal of death and destruction. And there has been a lot of death and destruction and it could very well be that there will be much more death and destruction before a new order is found.

But I've noticed a consistent response to this chaos, here at Berkeley and in other places around the world. The chaos seems to have brought about more clarity in terms of who we are as humanity, and as a people of faith. It strikes me that the chaos of the election has clarified our call as Christians; it has awakened us in a renewed way to what we have to do, and who we are as the people of God. It has renewed our calling to be partners with God in working for justice, speaking for the voiceless, and protecting the vulnerable.

It would appear that the world has also woken up, and is speaking up for justice and peace. The fact that the Women's March on Washington had 616 sister marches across the country and around the world, including a huge march in South Bend, speaks to this phenomenon of interconnectedness; people are coming together to speak out for justice. What happens in one small corner of the world has an impact on the whole world, in ways we don't even know and can't predict.

The biblical story and the world of quantum physics remind us that chaos and order are part of the same dance, and that even small changes in one place can have an impact in another place. It is a dance that calls us to put our trust and our hope in the One who governs even the chaos.

In this dance of chaos and order, we are invited to trust in the One who holds us and our world; the One whose Word brought the world into being; the One who gives us hope.

I end with a blessing from Jan Richardson, written for a world in need of life-giving creativity.

Now more than ever

Let us be the ones who will not turn away.

Let us be the ones who will go farther into the wreck

And deeper into the rubble.

Let us be the ones who will enter into the places of devastation beyond belief

And despair beyond our imagining.

And there let us listen for the Spirit that brooded over the formless darkness,

And there let us look again for the God who gathered up the chaos and began to create.

Let us be the ones who will give ourselves to [God's] work of making again

And to the endless beginning of creation.

*(from Walking the Way of Hope: A Retreat for Women's Christmas, 2017,*  
<http://adventdoor.com/2017/01/05/celebrating-epiphany-and-womens-christmas-2/>)