

“Chaos, God’s Muse”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,  
concerning Genesis 1:1-2:3  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,  
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If we are to hear this text as a living, breathing story with something to tell us, it will help to remember that the first chapter of Genesis is probably not a scientific explanation of what happened, because, after all, there were no eyewitnesses present when the world began, no secretary to take the minutes. It all just happened without spectators, and when the biblical writers sat down to try and explain the unexplainable and give shape to the unknown, they knew that their task was not to recount events but to name what people most need to know about God. They were not writing the draft of a textbook for future Texas schools—rather, they were working on something far more cosmic and compelling. They were delivering a theological proclamation draped in awe-inspiring poetry. They were the original Michelangelos attempting to bring into view the great Mystery that is God, that is beyond our comprehension, that is transcendent and close by all at the same time. They were tasked with opening for public consumption the story of how that great Mystery interacts with this present home, our world, which, you as can imagine, was no easy task. They were composing a beautiful song with something to say that could resonate through the ages.

Talk about a pressure-filled writing assignment. And miraculously, they delivered. You might say they were inspired. Filled with the wind of God’s Spirit, despite the overwhelming task before them, the biblical writers discovered they had something to say about all this, and what they said is that God is like an epic artist on steroids, pouring forth effortless masterpieces by the millisecond. God is all creativity and imagination bursting into vibrant reality with the simple utterance of God’s speech. What the writers said is that creation is good, good, and very good, that no matter how bad you feel or how bad things look from where you are standing, in the beginning, it was good. The essential nature of God’s creation is good. What the writers said is that human beings are created in the image of God—like, every. single. human. being. ever. reflects the image of God. We could spend the whole morning just trying to get that one reality down into our bones, past all our presumptions and judgments about others. What the writers said is that male and female are created in the image of God. I bet you won’t be surprised to know I could definitely spend a whole morning on *that*, discussing how the truth about gender gets a little lost in translation when we hear it in English, “In the image of God, *he* created them; male and female *he* created them.” What the writers said is that we humans are appointed stewards of this amazing gift that is our world. We could spend the whole morning confessing our sins about the damage we have done and continue to do to this beat-up and ravaged earth.

The writers of Genesis pack so much in this opening story that a single sermon could never do it justice. Preaching this passage is like giving you a few seconds with a photograph of the Sistine Chapel, then snatching it away. In fact, I think preaching is always like that, which is why we preachers recommend visiting the stories for yourself. The best we can do is offer snapshots that invite you deeper, and perhaps that is not so different from how the biblical writers felt attempting to articulate that which is not meant merely to be read in a book but to be experienced in the body and felt in the heart and stirred in the soul. How limited we are this morning, reading

the story inside the four walls of a building, surrounded by sheetrock and brick. If it were up to me, we would be sitting in a clearing in the forest right now, or worshipping together at the base of the mountains or listening to this text at the same time we were listening to the ocean crash upon the shores. Perhaps the story would make more sense out there where we could experience God's creation as part of our story and ourselves as part of creation. Perhaps you would feel in a more tangible way the tug, the pull, the invitation to marvel, to give thanks, to listen, and to respond.

One of my favorite quotes about preaching comes from Georgia O'Keefe, who was actually talking about painting, not preaching, when she said, "A flower is relatively small. Everyone has many associations with a flower—the idea of flowers . . . still—in a way—nobody sees a flower—really—it is so small—we haven't the time. So I said to myself—I'll paint what I see—what the flower is to me but I'll paint it big and they will be surprised into taking time to look at it. I will make even busy New Yorkers take time to see what I see of flowers." When we are doing our job right, preachers preach and painters paint and writers write and liturgists craft worship and musicians write songs and the Bible tells its stories all for the same purpose—to surprise us into paying attention. Paying attention is some of the most important work we created beings do.

Throughout the first chapter of Genesis, God speaks, and the molding clay of creation listens and becomes. Creation is an interactive affair. You may have noticed you don't get a lot of response when you speak to an empty room. Speech must be heard to be effective, which means that which is created must participate by listening. God doesn't just command. God invites. "Let the earth put forth vegetation. Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures." Creation is a participatory act, not a solitary one.

So despite being trapped inside on this beautiful morning, let us daydream that God does, in fact, have some creative word to say to us today, maybe everyday. But. For the words to have power, we must hear them. Friends, you may have come here today formless and void and without direction, but if I told you the Spirit was hovering just above you, would you listen?

Many of us are accustomed to hearing the line, "In the beginning, God created," but many Hebrew scholars think the opening line of Genesis is better translated, "When God began to create . . ." and I like that distinction because we are likely to mishear this story if we think it is just about The Beginning, long ago, *when* God created, instead of hearing it as a poem about the God who *is creating*. If God created just once, then cleaned his paintbrushes and packed them away, what does that matter to us? What if God is actively creating even now? What if God is creating again and again, even as we sit here? If this story isn't just about the past, but also about the present, what might we hear?

"When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was formless and void," or, "the earth was emptiness and chaos," or Robert Alter translates it, "the earth was welter and waste," and "darkness was over the face of the deep and the breath of God was hovering over the waters." If it is true that God is still creating, what *I* hear is that wherever there is emptiness and chaos, the Spirit hovers close. I hear that our chaos and our darkness is the stuff of God's creation, that if you asked the Divine Artist her medium, God might tell you, "My medium is the

mess, the murkiness, and the turmoil. When you cannot see your way through the thickness and the fog, when you feel broken and void, that's when my creative juices get flowing. Chaos is my muse; your emptiness my canvas."

Now, personally, as someone who likes order and organization, I'm not particularly fond of chaos, and I'm probably not the only one who sees chaos and panics, "Let's hide!" I do not smile and say, "Bring out my sketchbook!" When chaos strikes, I think, "Code Red," not, "Let's pop some popcorn and watch what God's up to."

This week I had coffee with Marsha Martie, the long-time pastor of Cross Ties Ecumenical Church. We settled in for some deep spiritual conversation, and she told me that early on in Cross Ties history, they all wanted to kill each other. "I'm serious," she said. "We were all looking at each other like, I could find a way to get in a room alone with you and make this end."

But she said the chaos of that time was necessary in order for them to become true community, and here they are, some thirty years later, still in community. She said chaos is normal, and despite my disdain for chaos, I found that heartening, since chaos is often unavoidable. And I kept thinking of Genesis, as I had been all week, and how the Spirit of God hovered over the chaos, and creation began. I thought of Pentecost, and how it felt like chaos but was in fact the Spirit at work, ushering in a new creation, the birth of God's church.

Marsha quoted Scott Peck, who says all communities start as pseudo-communities, and that they have to go through chaos to become real community, and each community goes through those stages more than once. Just like creation, it's not a one and done kind of deal but an ongoing evolution. In other words, buckle up, church. It's often going to be a bumpy ride.

Naturally I wanted to know how do you get past the chaos (preferably as quickly as possible) and on to true community? "Emptiness," Marsha said. "What?" I asked. I was confused, but also somewhere in the back of my mind I was rehearsing those words: "When God began to create . . . the earth was formless and void, the earth was chaos and emptiness."

Emptiness, according to Peck, means emptying yourself of barriers to communication, because it is those barriers that block authentic community. Peck is not recommending an obliteration of the self, but a removal of that which stands in the way of creation. There are so many barriers to communication, and thus to creation. There are the assumptions we make about each other before we really know each other, and those assumptions block communication, community, and creation. There is our self-serving desire to fix people, which blocks authentic communication, community, and creation. There is our habit of talking *about* people rather than *to* them, which blocks communication, community, and creation.

Notice how direct God is in the Genesis account. In the emptiness there isn't much to get in the way. God speaks directly to the light, to the earth, to the water, to the humans, and they all listen to the speech and are moved. The listening is immediate, not delayed or distracted, and the listening generates life. What if that sort of powerful partnership with God were still possible, if only we removed the clutter?

You might be able to suppress chaos for awhile, but it's still bubbling volcanic under the surface. What if the chaos is writhing beneath our stringent order and our oppressive micro-management, pining to encounter God, and God is pining back for access to his painting palette? How might you and I be channels of communication, co-creators and collaborators with God rather than obstructionists who are more alarmed by chaos than invigorated by the hope of creation? The best thing to do in chaos is not to cover it up but to bring it out into the light, to listen for God's voice, and to watch for what new thing is being created.

Beloved of God, I invite you to take a deep breath in the midst of your chaos, and in the sound of your breathing, hear the wind of God's Spirit stirring, bringing life to your lungs even on the days you feel more like death. Church, I invite you to pause, to take a deep, collective breath, and in the sound of your neighbor's breath, I want you to hear the wind of God's Spirit stirring—not just in you, but in her and in him, bringing life to Christ's body, even on the days when these people drive you nuts. Whatever is agitated in you, whatever is scared, whatever is lonely, whatever is empty, trust that the Spirit draws nearest to that murky place within you. You are being invited, not to manage your stress, but to release it into the Artist's hands, and have your listening mood, that is, your creative fire, restored to you. Amen.