

This year most of our gospel lessons are taken from Mark's gospel. Although it is the second gospel in our New Testament, scholars agree that it was the first one to be written down. Each of the gospel writers uses a different lens in thinking about Jesus' life and teachings. Mark's project is to show that Jesus is God by emphasizing his power over demons, sickness, and in today's reading, over the forces of nature. As is clear from the first reading we heard, which comes from God's self-revelation to Job, humanity has little control over the really big things – storms, oceans, volcanos. We may be able to predict that a volcano will erupt, we may be able to track a hurricane or a tornado but we cannot prevent them any more than we can stop a wildfire in its tracks. We are not the creators of the universe though our behavior can have a profound effect on its systems.

Last Thursday the Hollister group that is reading Rabbi Artson's book "Renewing the Process of Creation" had an interesting conversation about chaos. In Artson's reading, the creation of the cosmos in Genesis chapter 1 was not creation from nothing but bringing form and order out of the chaos of the deep. We wondered, is there a rhythmic nature to God's work – does God create out of chaos and then allow creation to return to a new state of chaos in order to be re-created into a new form?

I certainly notice a rhythm like that in my own life and in our life as a faith community. I am not a tidy person and I don't live a tidy life. I am constantly working against chaos – trying to bring form and beauty out of the mess that naturally builds up when I'm busy thinking about something else. And just when something seems complete and in its own way perfect, change comes. That has certainly been true of the music program here – we have had times when every part was covered and we were singing beautifully together and then someone's life has changed, they have left, and John has had to adjust, changing the music we sing to fit the new situation.

The pandemic is a perfect example of chaos suddenly arising with very little warning. I remember when I first read about the city of Wuhan being quarantined because of a coronavirus and marveling that such a thing could happen. That was like the first whitecaps appearing on the waves, a warning that a storm might be approaching, but then again it might not. And what a storm it has proved to be. Sweeping away much that we valued, leaving us reassessing our lives, working out how we go forward when we are no longer the people we were and when so many tears have appeared in the fabric of our society.

Major chaos arises in our individual lives just as quickly. A sudden illness, an unexpected loss or the eruption of inner dis-ease can pull down the edifice we have constructed and called life in just a moment. This is not just the daily battle against chaos – trying to keep things clean and in their place and be where we said we would be with a cheerful heart – no, there are times in our lives when we experience a deeper chaos. All of us have them. And then we long to find Jesus asleep on a cushion and to wake him up and say, “Lord don’t you care that I am perishing?” and have him get up stretch, yawn, smile and then say “Enough already,” as we watch the chaos recede and calm return.

Unfortunately, it rarely happens like that. It seems like God is asleep on the job as we try all we know to how to do to return to normality.

But what if this is the way God creates? What if the rhythm of creation is chaos and the Spirit of God hovering over the deep, hovering over the abyss and then gradually something new developing? It’s not the way I would do it if I were God, but we have many examples of something similar. Like making pots or sculpture from clay – something goes slightly wrong and you end up throwing the whole thing down and starting again. Or consider the butterfly. When the caterpillar goes into the chrysalis, its entire life turns to the chaos of green goo and yet that reorganizes and in time out comes the beautiful mature insect.

We see it in the story of crucifixion and resurrection. The disciples' hopes are dashed, their beloved teacher cruelly killed, God apparently deeply asleep or even completely absent, yet something happens in the night, in the dark when they are grieving and crying out to God, something happens and out of the chaos of the death of the Son of God comes resurrection and new life, hope and joy for all.

Like the waves on the lake, God's creative force brings something new and then it recedes again for a time. Job understood this when things started going really badly in his life and he said, "Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither. The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." Job 1:21

But most of us are not as sanguine as Job. We want order restored. We want the waves to drop and the water to become calm. We want Jesus to wake up and sort it all out for us. After all, if he could do that on the sea of Galilee, he could do that now and the fact that he doesn't means that he doesn't really love us, right?

Wrong.

Mark included this story in his gospel to show us that Jesus is God because only God can command the waves to calm and the wind to abate. He didn't include it as an example of how Jesus typically worked. I am sure there were many, many storms during Jesus' life which he did not challenge.

I want to draw your attention to one little phrase in the gospel reading: "they took him with them in the boat, just as he was." Just as he was. Intriguing. I wonder how he was. Tired? Dirty? Cranky? We trust that God will take us as we are, but do we take God as God is?

Or do we feel let down and unloved because God is God is God and God's creative cycle is not comfortable or easy for us?

My friends, there will be chaos in your life. There probably is chaos in your life right now even if it's just quietly churning chaotically. And that is OK. That is the creative work of God. That is a sign that God is present and God is loving you – just think of the chaos that happened in Jesus' life and yet we know the intimate love that he shared with his Abba. Chaos is not a sign of God's absence or God's lack of interest.

Our God is not a tidy God who can be put in a box. Our God is a God who challenges the status quo, who is in constant movement, challenging us and encouraging us to co-create with him, inviting us to step into her boat and meet God just as she is.

And our God is a God who continues to love us and continues to walk alongside us always encouraging, always faithful, always accepting us just as we are and then calling us to become calm, taking our fear of being swamped and turning it into faith in the God who creates out of chaos and allowing the waves of transformation to turn us into the people we were created to be.