

**Order Out of Chaos**  
**The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC**  
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*Genesis 1.1-2:4a*

As a clergyperson, I have been told things from time to time that I simply don't know how to react to. It's an occupational hazard, something they don't really teach you about in seminary.

For example, I'm never quite sure how to respond when someone I've just met finds out I'm a pastor and begins apologizing profusely for the curse words they just said a few moments before (*oh, don't worry – I've heard them all!*).

And I'm not always sure what someone is looking for when they tell me – unprovoked - about their childhood baggage growing up Roman Catholic or 7th Day Adventist (*am I supposed to tell them it's better on our side? That doesn't feel very ecumenical*).

Sometimes there are things I hear that I *do* begin to react to, because I know what's coming next. Someone begins to say, "*I don't believe in God....*" (and here's where I tense up) "*Because I believe in science.*"

So I'd like to take a moment to reiterate what I've said before in many other contexts... this Creation story from Genesis is not meant to be presented as science, nor should it be received as such.

We are not meant to take this literally and believe the world is only 6,000 years old, or that it was created in a mere seven 24 hour days. You can be a person of faith who takes Scripture seriously and also accept the findings of science.

Honestly, the entire conversation distracts us from the deeper insights, the profound beauty and theologically rich messages contained in this passage of sacred text.

Instead, we are meant to explore how this story functioned in the community that first spoke it, from the mouths of elders to the young ones, around a nighttime campfire in the middle of the desert.

That's how I picture it, in the before times, when a mostly illiterate population shared it with each other.

These majestic, poetic verses from the very beginning of the Hebrew Bible paint a cosmic and transcendent picture of God's work creating "*the heavens and the earth.*"

Through its imagery, we are invited to marvel in the beauty of the branches of the trees around us and rejoice in the song of the bluebirds as they fly overhead. We are urged to look in awe at the expanses of blue sky and white clouds, and bask in the warmth of late summer's heat.

There is something else present in this story, though, that we often overlook. Perhaps this is because it isn't as pretty. It could be that we do our best to avoid it at all costs, so we truly have a hard time picturing it.

What I'm speaking of is... the chaos.

In the beginning, all was formless... void... darkness and chaos.

Even with our best and deepest imagination, it is difficult (if not impossible) to wrap our brains around what that formless void, that watery chaos, must have been like.

We hear that the work of God in the very beginning was all about bringing order out of that chaos. In the midst of watery mayhem, God clears a space in which life can not only exist, but *thrive*.

The jumble of waters is separated out, so everything can have its place: sky, seas, dry land. All of this ordering, this chaos-clearing, this place-making... is pronounced good... good... very good.

But for a tale that speaks of so much being good, you might be surprised to hear that this version of creation is handed down to us from a people who were experiencing the not-so-good.

Scholars tell us that this particular story (which is in fact *newer* than the one we find in the second chapter starring Adam & Eve in the Garden of Eden), *this* creation story comes to us from the time when the Israelites were in exile in Babylon in the 500's B.C.

These people experienced their world as anything but orderly. Their chaos began as Jerusalem was destroyed and they were hauled off across the desert to live out their days in a foreign land, under foreign rulers, who worshiped foreign gods.

In this life of exile, they experienced deep poverty. They knew unemployment. They struggled with famine and hunger. Their futures were bleak, and in the face of all that they had lost, all that they had suffered, they began to lose hope.

All around them, the world had grown formless and void of any meaning. In Babylon, chaos reigned supreme.

In the midst of their life in exile, in the midst of the deep pain of loss, these people were forced to ask difficult questions about who they were and how they had gotten to this place.

And in the midst of a reality in which their dreams had been defeated, a world where their people had lost, this story gave them hope,

When the people told each other this story, they were powerfully reminded that their God is, in fact, the creator of all. The Lord of all life, the One who speaks a word that cuts through the chaos so that order can emerge.

This story of creation served as a witness to what they saw God doing, already. Into their lives ruled by chaos, they saw God at work, still making order in their midst. They saw God take the stuff of their new reality and arrange it in ways that were meaningful.

And by proclaiming *this* story to be their narrative, the people proclaimed that Babylon, the all-powerful and irrepressible monster of chaos, was not bigger than God.

God was bigger than the void. Even in exile, God was creating new and meaningful life. Even when disconnected from all that they loved and cherished, God still created and declared it was good.

Which makes me think about our own world today, because, let's face it, ours is a world filled with chaos. Not simply the civil and political chaos in our own country, although that certainly contributes.

All over the world, there are societies in upheaval. The aspirational dreams of the West, which once propelled forward entire generations, suddenly seem fuzzy and out of focus.

The promise of prosperity no longer seems extended to everyone, and many of us face the reality that our own lives will *not* be better off than our parents, and our children's future may not be as good as our own.

Even the future of this very "creation" upon which we stand—this earth and its waters and skies and ecosystems—it is uncertain and threatened.

It is bleak! And in the face of this bleakness, it is very hard to not lose hope. And in our hopelessness, we lash out.

We lash out with violence.

We lash out with hatred.

We lash out with words.

Meanwhile, we see the hands of terrorism at work.

We see the effects of racism.

We see the markers of extremism at play.

These are our monsters of chaos, and they feel overwhelming. We feel powerless in the face of their advance. It is easy to feel that the world has become void of meaning, and lose our hope.

But just as our suffering ancestors in exile in Babylon discovered, God is bigger.

God is bigger than our violence, our hatred, our injustices, and our brokenness. God is bigger than the monsters of chaos.

Here in this place, God is setting things in order.

Here in this time, God is taking the void in our present world and arranging it in new and meaningful ways.

Here in our world, God is creating new life out of the stuff of chaos.

Here among us, God is making things and declaring that they are good.

My friends, can we see what God is doing? Can we, like the ancient Israelites, look up and witness that our God, who is bigger than our present reality, is scooping up the chaos and the void that seems so deep, and forming it, shaping it, creating something new?

On a beautiful day like this, surrounded as we are by these tall windows that look out on the beauty of God's handiwork, it is easy to see the divine presence in all of the awesomeness. And we *should* look to the natural world to be reminded of what God can do.

But that is not all... That's not the challenge before us, and it's not the core invitation of this story.

So, sure, go, friends, and gaze at the creation around us to see what God has done... but then go deeper.

Go and look at our world and all the mayhem that lies within it and speak to it.

Go and look within your own life and search out the chaos within you.

And in so looking, *there* you will see. And you will know what God *can* create, and see what God *is* creating. Know what God *can* do, and see what God *is* doing. Amen.