

CHAOS REIGNS – CHAOS BROKEN

Sermon for the 1st Sunday after the Epiphany (The baptism of Jesus)

Genesis 1:1-5

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our First Reading from before, Genesis 1:1-5: ¹ **In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.** ² **The earth was formless and empty, darkness covered the surface of the deep and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the water.** ³ **God said, “Let there be light!” And there was light.** ⁴ **God saw that the light was good. God separated the light from the darkness.** ⁵ **God named the light “day” and named the darkness “night.” There was evening and there was morning, the first day.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

What a year 2020 was! It was a year that we would perhaps rather forget. Among other things, who knew at this time last year, we would soon be plunged into a period of time of worldwide disease and lockdowns? While things have eased somewhat in our country, nevertheless, the threat still remains. Covid 19 is still a significant problem for many overseas countries, and we ask, have we dodged a bullet, or is our time yet to come? We do not know what 2021 will bring for our nation, or what is just around the corner for any one of us as individuals. Disease, heartache, loss of job or income, loss of life, family problems: you name it, we don't know.

We all experience problems in this world, but when things go from bad to worse, we think, “*Stop the world! I want to get off!*” We may even think to ourselves, “*Come, Lord Jesus!*” These are the kind of reactions most of us have when we run into a major roadblock in our day. You know that feeling when something out of your control happens and throws a major spanner in the works. There is harvesting to do before it rains, but the header decides to break down. There is no hot water in the house because the hot water system decided to die and needs to be replaced, but it's a long weekend, and no plumber or electrician is available. I'm late for work or even church and find that the car has a flat tyre or a flat battery. The computer with all my work on it has crashed, and me, being the person I am, haven't backed anything up, so now I've lost the lot. On it goes. Most of the time, we get annoyed by something minor, but there are other times when life is downright chaotic, and we want to scream.

Nobody likes chaos. We can't thrive under fear or when being bombarded by demands, worries, and problems from every direction. Sure, we may keep our cool most times, but there are times when it feels like chaos, and we want things to stop. Life cannot exist in chaos.

In the Book of Genesis today, Moses takes us back to the beginning and even before, where we get to peek into those moments of prehistory - before the Fall, before the rat race of modern life, before work, before crashing computers and cars that won't start. When we encounter Genesis, perhaps we first think of the Garden of Eden, of paradise or perfection, but here at the very beginning - at the time when there is God and only God - we find chaos. And one thing is very clear - life cannot exist in the midst of chaos. Life cannot take place in the void of nothingness, and right now, as the **Spirit of God** hovers over the waters, chaos reigns. That is not to say that there was utter disorder and confusion, as if God did not know what He was doing. Moses writes, “**In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.** ² **The earth was formless and empty, darkness covered the surface of the deep and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the water.**” The Hebrew words used to describe this stage of pre-creation, how “**the earth was formless and empty,**”¹ is a phrase that is difficult to translate into English, but it means something like “formless void” or “swirling water mass” or “shapeless, unformed, orderless thing.” It's not evil; there's no sin yet. But whatever the Hebrew means, the point is made. Life cannot exist where something orderless reigns. It's chaos. You can't build a castle on top of a black hole; it just won't work. There is nothing solid on which to build. Life cannot exist here. For life to take place, chaos must be subdued and defeated.

While chaos reigns, life cannot go on. We know this all too well. God created the world by the power of His Word²,

¹ (tohu wabohu) תהו ובוהו

² John 1:1-3

but the chaos soon after came roaring back in the form of a seductive serpent and a bite of forbidden fruit. That *was* evil! From that moment on, the fall into sin assured us that life in the world would be a pitched battle against chaos. Cut off from the Creator, Adam and Eve and all their children right down to you and me today are caught up in a world doing its best to tear itself apart, and *that* is evil.

It started bad enough. To the woman God said, *“I shall greatly increase your painful labour and your pregnancy. In pain you will give birth to children. You will yearn for your husband and he will rule over you”* (Genesis 3:16). To the man He said, *“Because you have listened to what your wife has said and have eaten from the tree about which I had commanded you, ‘You shall not eat from it!’ the ground is cursed because of you. You will eat from it through painful toil all the days of your life. ¹⁸ It will cause both thorns and thistles to grow for you and you will eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹ You will eat bread in the sweat of your brow until you return to the ground.”* (Genesis 3:17-19). Those are the effects of sin, the chaos, and of course death. As the LORD God had earlier commanded, *“you shall not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil! For in the day when you eat from it you will surely die,”* so now it would be. When God told Adam that he would surely die if he ate from the tree, He meant both physically and spiritually. That is chaos.

We also know how it’s gone since. You and I feel this chaos every day. We can sense it stalking us like a wild animal hunts prey. We feel the void closing in on us when income is lost, and the bills are due. We feel it when families drift apart, or when tension fills the household. We feel the void trying to swallow us whole at the hospital and at the funeral home. Chaos takes the shape of addiction or depression. Chaos confronts us as Christians suffer persecution, and ungodly agendas are forced down our cultural throats. Name your poison - abortion, violence, abuse, neglect, the sins others commit against us and the sins we commit with our hands, minds, and hearts - they all beckon us to the edge of the abyss. The void, the chaos, the enemy of life seeks to devour us like a roaring lion.

Some of these chaotic effects we bring on ourselves by our own evil living, while some are indeed done to us by others’ sin, and no, it’s not because of some particular sin we’ve committed that the computer locks up or the car breaks down or, more seriously, we lose a job or suffer a terrible accident. No, in every case, the root problem is that sin - Adam’s sin, Eve’s sin, my sin, your sin, the world’s sin - has separated us from God, and thoroughly corrupted His perfect creation. That is the cause of chaos!

For life to exist, the chaos in the world and in our lives must be subdued. The enemies of sin, Satan, and death must be broken for us, for we have no strength of our own, and this cosmic job is just too big.

You and I look at the chaos in our lives and say, *“Stop the world! I want to get off!”* Our God hovers over the void and says, **“Let there be....”** With His powerful Word, chaos is broken. God saw what He had made, and it **“was good!”** Over the course of the six days of creation, the formless mass is brought to heel and life abounds, not because God had to do it, but because of His *limitless love*. God, our Father, created life out of nothing. Chaos is broken, and life is the result. In the void, in the black hole, in the chaos, life cannot abide, but with the Word of God *there is life*.

This is God’s world - it all belongs to Him. Everything is His, from the billions of insects and animals to the people from a thousand nations. Everything and everyone is His creation. He has made it, and He will sustain it, and He will redeem it for Himself.

So when the chaos of evil threatens to overtake His children, His creation, or His Church, it is God’s living Word that brings order, peace, and salvation. His Word has created the world and His Word made flesh and blood in Jesus Christ has re-created you and me to save us from sin, death, and the devil. That incarnate Word has come to us at Bethlehem’s manger, and today it stands in the Jordan River with John. Here the mighty Son of God stands with lowly sinners. My sins, your sins, and the sins of the world were poured on His head as Jesus undergoes baptism for us sinners. The Father who **“saw that the light was good”** now praises the Light of the world and proclaims an eternal “very good” upon Jesus as He says, *“You are My Son, whom I love. With You I am well pleased”* (Mark 1:11).

In a way that no one could dare to imagine, God the Son re-created us. Not in power but in weakness, with humility and service, with lowliness and stripes, with a cross and nails and a spear thrust into His side. At that place called Golgotha, the place of the skull, Jesus re-creates a fallen world and rescues hell-bent sinners by dying their death. When the baptised Son of God said from the cross, *“It is finished,”* He spoke a deeper truth than we could ever fathom. His baptised, crucified flesh redeemed our fallen, sinful flesh. By removing the sin that had separated us from God,

Jesus' death has reconciled us to Him, has restored our relationship with the One who brings order where there was chaos, perfection where there was a formless void, and paradise where there was a black hole. Jesus' perfect life has redeemed our wretched performance and squalid choices. His beauty has re-created our ugliness and made us beautiful in the eyes of our loving Father.

Dear friends in Christ, the void is not our fate. The chaos of sin, death, and the devil has no power over you. God has created us and re-created us in Jesus Christ, our Lord. **“The Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the water”** at the moment of creation, and the Spirit of God descended upon Jesus at the Jordan River.³ The Spirit of God has also descended upon us to wash us and re-create us when we were baptised. Remember what Paul said from our Second Reading, namely, *“Or do you not know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death? ⁴ Therefore, we were buried with Him through baptism into death, so that, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might begin to live a new life* (Romans 6:3-4). And remember what Paul wrote to the Ephesians? The *“Holy Spirit is the guarantee of our inheritance until God redeems us to be His very own, so that His glory may be praised”* (Ephesians 1:14). The Holy Spirit dwells in us now as the firstfruits of God's gifts; the final “payment” is the resurrection and eternal life.⁴ Baptism is a means of grace. Baptism is effective in doing something. It accomplishes something. It puts us in touch with Christ, or, to be more specific, it makes us partners in Christ's death and burial. Being connected to Christ through our baptism makes a difference. Christ's death and resurrection were the basis of the righteousness that the Father credited to us to make us children of God, fit for His kingdom.

Today, as we dwell on the creation of the world, and as we see Jesus being baptised in the Jordan by John, we thank God that our baptised, crucified, and resurrected Lord Jesus has broken the power of chaos and death and brings us into His kingdom. To Him be all glory now and for ever. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Lord God, heavenly Father, we praise You that You have revealed Your will and wisdom in the life of Your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. We praise You that You have given us the gift of Your Holy Spirit in our baptism, and that in baptism You have acknowledged us as Your dear children. We praise You that in the baptism of Your Son in the Jordan You marked Him out as the Messiah to be our true representative, to fulfil all righteousness, and, as our substitute, to give Himself in sacrifice for our sin and death. We praise You that, as Jesus saw the heavens opened when He was baptised, You have assured us of eternal life, where we shall see Your heaven opened to us.

Through Your Holy Spirit renew the mind of Christ in us, and let it grow in us. As Jesus began His public ministry for us at His baptism, we thank You for the privilege of regarding our baptism as our commissioning to serve You. Make us ready to give ourselves sacrificially for others, as Jesus has done, in ways that glorify You.

In mercy care for the spiritual welfare of all our baptised children. Give us grace as parents to show Your will and way to those who have yet to learn all that Christ has commanded us, by faithful worship, love for Your Word, and the desire to walk in the ways of Christ at all times. Free us all from being like this world. Transform us inwardly, that all our thoughts, words, and deeds may reflect Your perfect will.

Bless those who are one in confession with us in the fellowship of Your Church. Pour out Your blessing and strength on our pastor, that he may preach and teach Your Word with warmth and energy, and let the light of Your Gospel shine to people in darkness. Bless the witness of us all to the power of Jesus Christ to save sinners. Fill us with increasing zeal for the salvation of people who do not yet know Him as their Saviour, and for the extension of His kingdom. Send Your Holy Spirit to all Your people, to overcome weakness in Your Church, to remove all indifference, to cast out all fear of human beings, to reject the love of the world, and to banish all lukewarmness.

³ Mark 1:10

⁴ Romans 8:23; 2 Corinthians 5:4-5

Grant that we may find strength in Your almighty power and daily care. Show Your mercy and goodness to the sick, the lonely, the bereaved, and the suffering. Teach them to cast their cares on You. Show them that You are not dealing with them in wrath, but in love, for Jesus' sake.

Help, heal, uphold, and strengthen us all, and in all things enable us to rejoice in Your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ, whom we adore, with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY (THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD)

Genesis 1:1-5

¹ In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ² The earth was formless and empty, darkness covered the surface of the deep and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the water. ³ God said, "Let there be light!" And there was light. ⁴ God saw that the light was good. God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God named the light "day" and named the darkness "night." There was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Romans 6:1-11

¹ Therefore, what shall we say? "Shall we go on sinning so that God may be more gracious to us?" ² Certainly not! How shall we, who died to sin, live any longer in it? ³ Or do you not know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death? ⁴ Therefore, we were buried with Him through baptism into death, so that, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might begin to live a new life. ⁵ If we have been planted together with Him in the likeness of His death, then we shall be planted together with Him also in the likeness of His resurrection. ⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with Him, that our sinful bodies might be rendered powerless, in order that we might not be slaves to sin any longer. ⁷ For the one who has

died has been declared free from sin. ⁸ If we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, ⁹ because we know that, since Christ was raised from the dead, He will not die again. Death no longer has any mastery over Him. ¹⁰ For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all, but the life that He lives He lives to God. ¹¹ So you too, reckon yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus!

Mark 1:4-11

⁴ John the Baptist came in the wilderness and preached that people should repent and be baptised for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ All the land of Judea and all the people of Jerusalem kept coming out to him. They were baptised by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. ⁶ John was dressed in camels' hair, wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He preached: "He who is mightier than I am is coming after me and I am not worthy to bend down and untie His sandal-straps. ⁸ I have baptised you with water; but He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit."

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised in the Jordan by John. ¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, He saw heaven being torn apart and the Spirit coming down on Him like a dove. ¹¹ Then a voice came from heaven: "You are My Son, whom I love. With You I am well pleased."