

Out of Chaos  
Reading from the Old Testament: Genesis 1:1-5  
Reading from the New Testament: John 1:1-5

In *The Screwtape Letters*, by C.S. Lewis, we have the correspondence between two demons, Screwtape and Wormwood, a mentor and a student. Through these letters they discuss the best strategies to lure someone from the ways of Christ and faith in God. In one of the letters, the mentor counsels the pupil with this useful sign in a potential target: "Tortured fear and stupid confidence are both desirable states of mind." (C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*)

Tortured fear and stupid confidence are both desirable states of mind, you see, for the emergence of the worst in us, and both were certainly on full display this week around and within our nation's Capitol building: The fears of those who for four years failed to speak truth to power because doing so might risk political exile combined with the fears of those whose insecurities incited skepticism toward sane governance, tribal blame toward diversity, and rejection of the common good; all of that working seamlessly with the stupid confidence of those who equated the militancy of their cause with patriotism combined with the stupid confidence of their prophets and princes in assuming that the

great con could continue unabated. The resultant afternoon of infamy, memorialized with photos of insurgent commandos dropping from the Senate balcony and mugging for selfies in the Vice President's chair and the Speaker's office, provide irrefutable confirmation of Screwtape's counsel. Tortured fear and stupid confidence provide a playground for our iniquities.

Dostoevsky's character Father Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov* observed, "A man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to a point where he does not discern any truth either in himself or anywhere around him, and thus falls into disrespect towards himself and others. Not respecting anyone, he ceases to love, and having no love, he gives himself up to the passions and coarse pleasures, in order to occupy and amuse himself, and in his vices reaches complete bestiality, and it all comes from lying continually to others and to himself." (Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*)

Though it sounds like a columnist reviewing the impact of talk radio, conspiracy theory driven media, and a reality show presidency, these words were actually written in 19th Century Russia. That they so eloquently describe the dynamics that created Wednesday's debacle

indicate that Dostoevsky was not speaking to a particular era but was examining something deep in the human condition that transcends history.

In the wake of Wednesday's madness, there have been numerous voices declaring, "This is not who we are." Unfortunately, as voices like Dostoevsky, Lewis, Augustine, Calvin, Barth, and others have attested through the ages, we must confront the truth that this is who we are. We are not innocent observers, but participants in the culture that begat the brouhaha. We acknowledge as much each time we worship, confessing, as it states in *A Brief Statement of Faith*, that "we violate the image of God in others and ourselves, accept lies as truth, exploit neighbor and nature, and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care."

Conspiracy theories are not new but have certainly gone mainstream of late because they scratch the itch of our biases and rationalize a world we don't understand. We accept lies as truth. When I was young, we'd entertain ourselves in the grocery checkout lines, scanning the headlines of the tabloids. They were ridiculous and we knew it. That was the fun of it. A classmate once pinned a cover of *The*

*Weekly World News* on a seminary bulletin board. The headline?  
 "Preacher Spontaneously Combusts during sermon. (The subtitle?) He  
 went down in flames, but the word of God was not even singed."

Everybody knew the tabloids were farcical except for that crazy  
 aunt or daft cousin in every family tree who read them religiously and  
 took them as true. "No, Aunt Ginnie, a computer virus did not spread to  
 humans." "No, Cousin Billy, that woman is not bald because of her  
 husband's 174 mph sneeze." Problem is, fueled by the networking magic  
 of social media, Aunt Ginnie and Cousin Billy are getting elected to  
 public office along with the opportunists who exploit them.

At some level, I think we all knew Wednesday's chaos was coming.  
 Folks have been pouring fuel on the fire for some time. The visceral  
 images of madness on a Wednesday afternoon will endure, alongside  
 the images of 9/11, Selma, Auschwitz, The Somme, and Antietam, signs  
 that chaos always lurks at the edges of superficial civility.

This truth is acknowledged in the opening chapters of the opening  
 book of the Bible. The first three chapters of Genesis contain two  
 separate Creation narratives composed by two separate groups

addressed to two separate communities in two separate eras of Israel's journey. Yet, both stories are relevant to our current environment, their intent not to relate history or refute science, but to speak timeless truths.

Chronologically, the second Creation story (Gen.2-3) was written first, most likely composed during the high-water mark of Israel's narrative, the united monarchy during the time of David. In Adam, Eve, and the serpent, we see the grace of being welcomed into this nurturing and creative venture of life-giving goodness in God's garden; and we also see a warning of the inevitable fall that comes when we arrogantly assume that we can claim God's righteousness and trust the illusion of our own greatness. This week has served as a dramatization of the Adam/Eve creation narrative.

Separately, Genesis 1, our text today, was written later, most likely during the time of Israel's exile in Babylon. A succession of failed leadership, illusions of security, and a craven lust for power, such that values like justice, mercy, and humility were cast aside, all converged to prompt the collapse of Israel into chaos and exile. "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion."

Exile, thus, was a time for reflection, self-examination, remembrance, repentance, and renewal. It was a time for Israel to make some sense of their origin story in light of their present chaos.

A time to make some sense of our origin story in light of our present chaos. Hmmm. Sounds timely, does it not?

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep." The earth was without form and void. The Hebrew here is memorable - *tohu wabohu* - a formless void - chaos. That's not all that foreign a concept to us.

Author J.K. Rowling observed that, "It's so difficult to describe depression to someone who's never been there, because it's not sadness. I know sadness. Sadness is to cry and to feel. But it's that cold absence of feeling—that really hollowed-out feeling." Hollowed out, cold absence ... chaos.

Elizabeth Wurtzel, author of *Prozac Nation*, suggested, "A human being can survive almost anything, as long as she sees the end in sight. But depression is so insidious, and it compounds daily, that it's

impossible to ever see the end. The fog is like a cage without a key.” No end in sight, insidious, compounding, fog, darkness ... tohu wabohu, formless void ... chaos.

The focus of Genesis 1 isn't a history lesson. The focus of Genesis 1 is a diagnosis. Temple destroyed, property seized, identity robbed, vocation and purpose cut off. The text is speaking directly to the people living a tohu wabohu existence. "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep."

The pandemic, combined with this hall of mirrors we've wandered into, feels like the deep, primordial chaos is creeping back, threatening to consume us. I talked this week with a child of this church, Bryce Morgan, who is an ICU nurse, i.e., an angel of mercy. Day after day she bravely pursues the overwhelming, emotionally draining, exhausting chaos that this airborne, microscopic menace has cast upon us. And Bryce spoke of the growing dire need for long-term care facilities dedicated to Covid patients, because with the present surge, the hospitals are already at over-capacity with many of the suffering having needed ICU care for months; and they are not going home anytime soon. Chaos.

I saw a meme Thursday that said: *I'd like to cancel my subscription to 2021. I've experienced the free 7-day trial and I'm not interested.* The Psalmist laments, "My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?" Could Flaubert be right, that the future may be a dark corridor, and at the far end the door is bolted? I do not believe so.

Take a look: to all the exiles, the despairing, the suffering, the cynical, the writer of Genesis speaks: Then God said, "Let there be light; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good."

The initial creative act of God is illumination. Joseph Price observes that "in the dark void, even chaos could not be perceived. Light is the first step for order to be established and discerned." He says that this act of speaking life into being "begins a crescendo of creative action that is crowned with the creation of humans, who are formed in the image of God, and who serve as God's companions." (Joseph Price, *Feasting on the Word*)

Amidst the formless darkness, the void of nothingness, God speaks, and light and life emerge. There is no darkness in which God's



light cannot emerge; no chaos that can consume God's Spirit; no nothingness that can shackle the creative hands of God. The prophets affirm it: "But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish ... The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined." The Gospels reveal it in Jesus Christ, "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Paul proclaims it, "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

There is no darkness, nor any experience of darkness that is immune from the light by which God continues to create. Wednesday was a dark and depressing day; a Good Friday kind of day; an Amos 5:12-13 kind of day: "For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins ... Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time." A time to reflect on the ways we are complicit in our arrival at this impasse of chaos and darkness.

But today is Sunday, the day of resurrection, the day of new creation, the day the Creator's light can lead us on the road toward the

peaceable kingdom; an Amos 9:11 kind of day - "On that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old;" a John 1:3-4 kind of day, "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people."

A legislator this week was rightly excoriated for affirming Hitler's tactic of recruiting the young to own the future. In stark contrast, an old high school friend lifted up a prayer for the future of our children and grandchildren, a prayer that holds to a belief in God's continuing capacity to create light in the darkness and hope in the void: "May they always know how precious they are to you and to me. May they grow to be responsible, generous, humble people of integrity and good sense. Lord, I place them in your loving care and trust that you will always lead them, guide them, and love them." That's how our God creates light from darkness and hope from emptiness. May it be so. Amen.