

to work in and with the corporate sphere to ensure that business uplifts communities, rather than adversely impacting them. And as the situation around us changes we may need to dig into truly creative ways to do these things, to express our thoughts, which are grounded in faith, and to generate change. All with the goal of taming chaos, and reshaping it into the beauty and joy that God has always intended for the world.

Even when science describes other ways the formation of the world likely happened, our proclamation of the creation stories demonstrates our trust in God's good and creative power. It shows our trust that chaos and heartache is never what God intends for the world - God has always intended an order that honors all creatures and the earth itself. And God's way in creation also calls us to use our voices, our choices, and our minds to co-create order and beauty right alongside God, who is always at work to preserve and sustain creation.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

September 7, 2025

13th Sunday after Pentecost

"Chaos into Order"

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Genesis 1:1-2:4

Many people are concerned that the world is seriously out of joint. Climate change, wars, famine, authoritarianism, severe weather, violence. With the kind of track we're on, many doubt that young people will ever be able to achieve the same lifestyle and prosperity as their parents. In the light of all this, some have a worrisome sense of foreboding. People posting on the website Reddit have described our zeitgeist, saying, "it feels like something bad is hanging just off camera" or "like all the color has been sucked from life." Others have called it simply chaos. I applaud you if you're not feeling this way. But I suspect that many people here can relate, or at least have someone in your life who can.

The opening verses of Genesis describe what the world was like as God started to create. The way many of us grew up hearing it was "the earth was without form and void." The newest translation that we read today says "the earth was complete chaos." These original words in Hebrew that describe the state of things are *tohu va bohu*. They're kind of fun to say: *tohu va bohu*. Hebrew scholars from the Jewish and Christian traditions could, and do, talk for hours about the meaning of these words. Those two English translations help us see some of the possibilities of what the Hebrew words mean. Perhaps they mean emptiness and absence, an unformed space. Or maybe they mean a total, chaotic mess. If we go with that meaning, when God began to create, God entered into a scene of disarray, havoc, tumult, mayhem. Then a wind from God, the very breath of the Spirit and the animation of life swept over all of it. And the ordering of all that chaos was set in motion.

The words of this creation story were written down by the Hebrew people—Israelites—living in exile in Babylon. Remember, too, that there's a totally different creation story that begins right where we left off reading today. So we already know there are several different, Biblical ways of understanding God's creation. And that people were involved in writing those down, even as we also believe their experiences were inspired by the

1 Terence Fretheim, "Commentary on Genesis 1:1-2:4a," *Working Preacher*, September 10, 2017, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/creation-by-the-word/commentary-on-genesis-11-31-21-4-2>

2 Fretheim.

3 Fretheim.

Spirit. Those Hebrew people in exile had been taken from their homes by an occupying force and deported to Babylon in terrible and dramatic ways. They lived there for three generations. Global powers shifted during their time there. And amid all of that tumult, *this* creation story was written down. This way of understanding God's intentions and care for the world was preserved.

Our current state of worry and foreboding is not the same as what those exiles were feeling. But there is a parallel. We can relate, at least a little bit, to their sense of unease and worry. Our faith in God is strong, but we have a lot of questions about what is going on in the world. We are not sure what God is up to in the midst of everything happening around us. So what poetry would we write down right now? What are the truths about God's rule of the world that we would dare to proclaim today?

The Hebrew people in exile prayed and begged God for assistance, for the ability to return home. But even as they did that, they cemented their trust that God can tame the chaos. God is the one who can create beauty and life from a single breath. The *tohu va bohu*—the havoc and mayhem—will not, in the end, prevail. God had and still has vision for order in the world: for cycles of day and night, tides and wind and waves, and seasons. God has a vision for animals and plants to live in harmony, and a vision for people who are made in God's image, who have the capacity to be loving and compassionate stewards. And God's vision is not only a dream but also an ongoing reality. That was how the Hebrews experienced God: as a Creator who would not let the earth waste away in chaos, but who lovingly brought and would bring order and goodness to every part of it. They declared this trust and celebration of God's work through the beauty of this first creation story. As one commentator writes, "one can appreciate the ordering capacity of God as evidence that there is meaning to life." They proclaimed that good news, so that we can, too.

I need this good word when I read about mud slides in Sudan, earthquakes in Afghanistan, giant military parades around the world, starving children in Gaza, not to mention sweeping changes at home that make me question the safety and freedom I used to take for granted. I am grounded and strengthened in faith when I can proclaim with the faithful throughout history that yes, even in difficult times, I still believe God is powerful enough to protect us and save us. But our trust in God's ability to bring order to the chaos can too easily become an out for us, if we let it. "God's got it. God's in charge. So I don't need to do anything."

But that 'it's not up to me' attitude is nowhere present in this scripture. Deep trust in God's creative power is not meant to absolve us of our call

to love and serve. Quite the opposite. As Terence Fretheim writes, "God is not the only character in this text whose action is creative."¹ The earth itself puts forth vegetation of plants and trees and seeds. The sun and moon give light to spark life. The creatures themselves become fruitful and they do multiply to fill the water with fish and skies with birds. Fretheim continues, "this divine move means that God chooses not to do the creating of the world alone. Indeed, God's creative action is made explicitly dependent upon the activity of that which is not God."² God is present and part of all that happens, but there is initiative on the part of the other 'characters' too. Eventually, the people, made in God's image, begin to create families; they become stewards of the earth and caretakers of the animals. They receive God's handiwork as a gift, and they are called on to keep up the good work; to continue creating. And so Fretheim concludes, "What creatures do actually counts in the ongoing becoming of the world."³

If we sense that we are, indeed, living in a time of turmoil and confusion, then our call is first to declare our trust in God who can and will ultimately bring order to the chaos. Affirming God's reign over all creation—especially in hard times—is a bold and faithful declaration that means we refuse to succumb to despair. But our trust invites us to participate in the way God is bringing harmony to the *tohu va bohu*. We are called into service in God's ongoing efforts to restore the wholeness God envisions. Now, we are not God. We should never imagine that we are. But the Triune God invites us to be co-creators; recognizing the upheaval and being willing to get our hands dirty as we confront it and work toward peaceful order.

There are plenty of ways where the Spirit can work through us to breathe order into chaos. We can start with rest for our own bodies, just as God demonstrated rest on the seventh day. We can use our breath to calm ourselves when we are in the middle of divisions at work or in our families. We can focus on active listening, on being present with people who need us, and on prayer. All of that helps create something new.

But the disorder in our world is widespread, and often very public. So sometimes our actions will need to be more than just what we do in our homes and families. And they will need to be creative—both in the sense of making something totally new *and* doing something imaginative or inspired. Some of us are led to witness in the public square calling for peace at home and in faraway places. Some of us may be called to lead efforts toward restoration for those unfairly imprisoned or for those who pay a higher price for wrongs due to racism and prejudice. Some are called to involvement in our local schools, seeking to ensure good policies that serve all students well, not just the best and brightest. Others are called