

The First Sunday after the Epiphany
Church of the Holy Cross
January 11, 2015
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Chaos in the Waters

As I grew older, I very slowly began to accept the possibility that I may... just may... be somewhat high-strung. In college, I used to entertain this fantasy that I was a mellow, laid-back sort of person. But I confess my deep love of the color-coded spreadsheet. I like my receipts organized by month. My file cabinet at home is color coded. I once presented Martin with a spreadsheet detailing our life with a dog, and that is why we have cats. So I now admit that I can be pretty uptight.

Many of you know I do triathlons for fun, and one would naturally think I didn't like the water leg. Surprisingly, I actually love the swim leg of the triathlon. I'm a lucky triathlete: I have no fear of open water, which is apparently a bit of an anomaly. Many of my peers and competitors are terrified of open water. Me? I've just never had any fear whatsoever of open water. I understand the fear, though- water is powerful. It always wins. It is immense and powerful. Fear of water and its chaotic elements is a pretty universal human sensation.

Our readings this morning start out with Genesis, in the beginning, as God moves over the chaos of the jumbled waters, separating the day from night. As God breathes order into that chaos, all is made good. In the very beginning, God masters the chaos and breathes order and rhythm. That is good. We also hear the gospel where Jesus is baptized, descending into the waters of the Jordan, flowing out of eternity, and his cousin John blesses the one who will call us from chaos into the rhythm of a life with God. As human beings, I think we respond well to order and rhythm. Of course, we flirt with the edges of chaos. Jackson Pollock made a living out of chaos, if you explore his artwork that strove so carefully to avoid order. John Cage threw established music out the window in order to flirt with chaos of sound that does not obey order. Yet even so, we put the Pollocks up carefully in the Hirschhorn in carefully curated collections in climate-controlled buildings. We take classes in music appreciation where we learn to apply traditional rules to the appreciation of John Cage. We touch the edges of chaos, and even so, the ability to put up boundaries and parameters gives us comfort.

The Gospel today starts with John the Baptist striding through the wilderness. He meets his cousin, Jesus, and baptizes him. Mark takes his time to describe the unusual appearance of John- that he was clothed with camel's hair and ate locusts and wild honey. We hear much less about Jesus. But the people who crafted the RCL lectionary actually started the reading at an odd place, four verses in. We don't hear the first four verses of the Gospel of Mark, which start with "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus...". I find that a little sad: our old testament reading starts with "in the beginning" as God moves over the chaos of the waters. Our gospel also starts with "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus". So there's this really lovely parallel of two beginnings. From the chaos of words we have parallels and order.

We are just starting to get to know the adult Jesus. As we have walked through Christmas, we spent time in the manger, together with Mary as she birthed this miracle child. We saw her visiting her cousin Elizabeth, who would give birth to Jesus' cousin, John. The unborn children leapt within their mother's wombs. Later, Joseph would play an important role in protecting Jesus. Some stories tell us that Herod killed all the boys

under age two. Other gospels leave this out entirely. I think we can't know with certainty the facts of Jesus' birth and early childhood, except to point out that for years and years, he was entirely dependent on his human parents to care for him and protect him. In today's baptism story, we stumble abruptly on two grown men who had miraculous conceptions, notable births, and dangerous childhoods. And they meet in the waters, the place where chaos was first breathed up on by God, the place where chaos was blessed and brought to order.

To me, water represents a delightful sort of chaos. One of my favorite pieces of Episcopal liturgy is the Thanksgiving Over the Water that we say at baptisms. It's one of my favorite acts as a priest, even above the actual baptism itself. I love the chaos of pouring the water, letting it splash down into the basin. It's a tactile sort of stuff, water, and I find it to be one of the most powerful stories of all as we hear how God moved over that water in the beginning of creation and led his people to freedom through the Red Sea, and how Jesus was himself baptized in water. Water is a constant element throughout our chaotic lives. The waters that moved over creation at the beginning- the waters that God put boundaries on- the waters that saw the first dawn and the first night- are the waters that we know today. Think of that some time- even though they have changed form from liquid to solid to gas- the water that we have today is the same water that God blessed on the first day of creation.

It's been a chaotic year for us, too, here at Holy Cross. In a few months, we will be welcoming a new Rector after more than a year of intense work by the search committee. You have come through a time of chaos- an interim rector who came with big-parish functional ideas, a change of leadership, a budget crisis. And now we have this day where we hear of the chaotic waters cascading down over the face of the Messiah as he stands in the Jordan river, being blessed to the ministry he was about to do. Out of this chaos came a clear call.

I imagine that some of you, too, might be hearing a call. Where is God calling to you out of the chaos? Are you being called to transformation? John promised us that Jesus would baptize us with the Holy Spirit. This is a tremendous charge, and a huge change if we dare let it take hold.

Jesus' baptism stepped into the eternal waters. The waters that we touch today once touched Christ. As his followers, that should change us. Come, God's people, and come with me out of this year of chaos. Let us look with joy to the new leadership coming in, let us bless the new ministries about to start, and let us bless the chaos that brought us to know God once more.