

“The Talk”

Let’s talk about this. I probably haven’t seen as much of the world or have experienced the rich tapestry of life that most of our members have, but this time we are living in is just too much. In fact, I am tempted at times to minimize it, to think that this cannot possibly be as serious as the health experts say, or that economists say, or that the news is saying. It is too much.

Chaos.

I’ve been looking for the word that best defines the moment in which we live. I have tried several on for size: terrifying, confusing, uncertain, bleak, hopeful. I have seen within the turmoil the chance that this crisis could be like a refiner’s fire, helping our entire society live with more unity – helping us live into the society dreamed in the best, most aspiring thoughts of our country’s founders. All too often, however, we are witnessing the scars that are their legacy.

Chaos seems more apropos.

The story that is the heart of our scriptures for today, is a story founded on chaos. More pointed, it is about God bringing order out of chaos. The beginning of the beginning is chaos. The story begins in a state of chaos. “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, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” The formless void of watery abyss was an anarchic mess, already in existence prior to creation; creation was (in this version) God’s work to bring order out of chaos.

We certainly know about chaos these days. It seems as though the whole of our culture is exploding and imploding at the very same time: the health crisis is flattening in our area even as it is surging in other states; the looming economic crisis has seen already 40 million new Americans out of work. Perhaps the most painful news is the resurfacing of racial tension. Now, when I say this, I do not mean that the tension went away and came back, I mean only to say that it has become obvious (and uncomfortable for those in positions of privilege, people like me) once more. Let’s, please, talk about this.

Before going on I need to say something. I am uncomfortable talking about this; there is a part of me that would much rather paint a rosy and hopeful image of God already at work in the chaos of this health crisis, and leave the discomfort well alone. I also know that some who read this are really struggling with scenes of protest and violence. I know that and I ask for grace, because I feel that the only response for people of faith, especially those of us who do not face this sort of pain daily – who may even be shocked and wounded each time racial tension resurfaces, is to ask, “*where is God in this? Where is Christ? Where am I called to follow?*” Please join me in what follows, please share in my discomfort, because, frankly the daily life of minorities, especially of African Americans, in our country is rife with considerations that people like me do not have to think of.

One of the most common is “the talk.” I first learned of “the talk” in college. I was a sophomore, an advisor living on a freshman hall. One of the new kids and I had become close. Don (his name has been changed) grew up in West Texas and had dealt with racism his whole life, but this evening I came to see if he wanted to hang out. The lights were out. Blues was playing. Don was alone, had been crying. We sat in silence for a long time. I recall, but it could be a superimposed memory, *The Thrill Is Gone* playing in the back ground.

Don spoke after a long time. Most of the conversation has been drowned out by 20 or more years since that day, but he had faced multiple moments of overt and covert racism that day: in the classroom and the administration, in the town square, and among classmates. When I asked what he wanted to do about it, I was made to know that this was the wrong question. Don told me why he was powerless to stand up. He told me about “the talk.”

“The talk” is a conversation that African American families have to have with their children to keep them from being targeted, seen as dangerous (especially young boys), or to give authorities any reason to suspect them. This is because the amount of melanin their skin produces has been taught in our culture to equal dangerous, less than, *something* to control.

I have been thinking a lot about Don since the Ahmaud Arbery case erupted in the news, and admit that until then there had been a period that I hadn’t given much thought to race relations since last fall when working with the local Martin Luther King, Jr. organization to plan the January service. My privilege had

given me room to not consider it. But when the news brought this back, I was silent. Then there was George Floyd.

People I consider to be mentors and leaders in my own personal spiritual life, people like Paul Roberts (the President of Johnson C. Smith Seminary) and Aisha Brooks-Lytle (Executive Presbyter of the Atlanta Presbytery) have expressed their grief and fears. Even as protests have been occurring nation-wide, Paul posted his fear. He showed a self-photo of himself sitting in the backyard of his home. His face one of anguish. The words read, "My 17 year old son went for an evening run. It's dusk. Never done this before, but on this fraught day in this fraught week I'm keeping vigil until he gets back home." I started to write him. I deleted the mumbling words that came from finger-tips. I wrote again. Deleted. After the third failed attempt to share my thoughts I simply closed the page. I was silent.

I have done the same on Aisha's page. I have done the same on Paulette's, and on Johann's. I have remained silent, and I am ashamed. My silence is not from a desire to be complicit in a society that makes my friends terrified that their children could go for a run and never come home. It is not from a desire to keep my own privilege (although I am sure there are feelings there that I have not fully explored). Anyone who knows me well knows that I can talk, too much. I mean, my job is to preach, to pontificate! I am rarely at a loss for words, but here, now, I am rendered speechless.

When I first began writing to Paul I wanted to speak a hug to him. I wanted to let him know that I was praying for him. I wanted to let him know that... that... this isn't o.k., it is not right that he should fear so deeply, hold so intimately a feeling, that I will never have because of the color of his skin. I wanted to tell him that my heart breaks and that I was crying (something that is extremely rare for me) as I was trying to get the words out.

But I realized that it was all trite.

There is nothing that I can say to these friends that will change their reality. My feelings of helplessness in this time, in that moment of wanting and failing to respond to Paul are nothing – nothing – to the feelings of helplessness my old friend Kevin felt all those years ago in college. There is a power in this chaos that leaves me speechless.

The beginning of the beginning is chaos. I keep coming back to that in my head.

Before there is a new thing. Before there is new life. Before there is a new start... there is chaos. So, here we are on Trinity Sunday of 2020 and we are trying to mark how God being "three-in-One" makes sense, and reading about Creation (and order coming from chaos) while living in one of the most disordered times of the age. Where is God in *this* mess?

God is One, because of the love that binds the three in perfect unity. The "right" relationship, the communion and *co-union* of God's most intimate self, is the very power from which all life springs. Order is not a structure, but a way of living. In the creation story God is at work; the Spirit is moving over the chaos before anything happens and God's Word speaks out into the void, and it was good. This may seem too high-minded and abstract for some, so let's talk about it another way.

Where is God in *this* mess? God is wherever the Spirit moves in the chaos giving us the power to speak a word of love, of support, of unity. God is in this whenever we see hurt and suffering met with comfort. Where is God when friends of mine are hurting from wounds I have not, will never receive? God is ahead, asking me to listen.

I mentioned earlier my own shame in being rendered speechless by the hurt of others. To be honest, this may be because I need to learn to use my voice differently. For example, my friend in college taught me about "the talk." I have begun to have a different one with my children. My daughter and I were on the back deck the other day when she started asking about why people were marching in streets, and why the news seemed so angry. We had a talk. It was not about how to avoid being targeted, or diffusing situations with police, or how to swallow pride when taking abuse for fear of retribution. This talk was about how, in our country, the amount of melanin that our skin produces determines opportunities in life, the neighborhoods we get to live in and the schools we get to attend and the jobs we are seriously considered for; we even talked about how this can be a matter of life and death.

Her response gave me faith, "That's not ok, my friend _____ has dark skin and we used to share a mat at nap-time, I even shared my toy with him." Here in the innocence is a sign of love, right relationship, the life I think God intends for us. Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in NY has on its sign, "Justice is love in action." Where is God in *this* mess we are in?

There was a video on the news the other day. A line of police walked toward a line of protesters – somehow I feel compelled to add that this protest was a peaceful one. A young African American boy stepped forward, kneeled to the ground, with his hands up. A girl of European descent joined him. This time standing, then kneeling in front of him as if to say, “you must go through me to get to him.” Young as she was, she seemed to understand exactly what was happening, and in joining him created a new reality in that moment between those protesters and the police. There are images, too, of police kneeling in front of protesters, connecting and showing that we are not all at war with each other. Even in this pain, God is present.

We, those of us who profess that there is something about this Jesus of Nazareth that is special, that speaks to us, for those of us who witness the character of God in this man and see that love and grace are the meaning of life, we are invited to *be* the church for those who hurt. Being the church is not about us having a sanctuary or haven for our own sake, it means that we *get* to be sanctuary for others.

Where there is fear, we can be refuge. Where there is pain, we can be balm. Where there are tears, we can be comfort. Where there is injustice, we can rise.