

“Chaos into Order”

Reading: Exodus 19:1-19; 2 Corinthians 3:3-18

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People have always been afraid of the dark. You don't know what's lurking there. Sounds sound stranger, shapes get distorted, the familiar becomes colorless and indistinct. The darkness is that boundary in our world between light and dark, order and chaos, civilization and wilderness. Our eyes don't work well in the dark, and we're creatures of the daytime, so we're out of our element in the dark. Some of you no doubt know that our heating system in our church building uses a mechanical switch that directs the heat flow between the sanctuary and the upstairs classroom, and sometimes when that switch moves from one to the other, it makes an unearthly racket. Like most men, I like to think of myself as the sort of guy who could wrestle a bear into submission if I had to, but I'm not ashamed to admit that if I'm in our church building by myself after dark and that switch starts screeching like a banshee, it's a little bit creepy. I know perfectly well what it is, but it still creeps me out.

We've always been afraid of the dark. There has always been a human fear that the darkness might break out of its bounds, and the wild world might encroach on our attempts at civilization. The Babylonian creation epic tells of how the primordial chaos monster named Tiamat had to be defeated, and from her body the gods had to bring order for the world to be created. Many, many other ancient myths tell of something similar. And there's always a fear that the old chaos monster might one day break out of its bounds and undo creation. That's underlying the story of the Tower of Babel: its builders were afraid that the chaotic sea would escape its boundaries and flood the world as it had done in Noah's time, and so they were building a refuge.

So humans have always been afraid, or at least vigilant, at the borders between settled, civilized life and the chaotic wilderness. Out there in the dark is where the spirits live, or the willies, or the fairies, or the Bigfoot, or the wildmen. Early seafaring maps, at least in the popular understanding, always have the phrase “Here be monsters” on the margins of unexplored realms. Even in our own times, an archetypal Western movie will probably involve a confrontation between the settlers, representing the spread of civilization, and the Indians, whom we chauvinistically cast in the role of the wild men. Even modern science isn't all that different: it says that the universe was created out of an explosion of materials so chaotic that even the laws of physics didn't yet apply, and one view is that the universe will one day again give in to diffuse, disordered chaos.

Creation is that space where chaos has been tamed, at least for now. The act of creation is taking something raw, like paint or sound or wood or metal, and transforming it into something beautiful and useful. That is, on a larger scale, how our entire story got started: we began in Genesis 1 by hearing of how God's Spirit hovered over the waters, and the world was formless and without order. And so the story of God making our very good creation is a story of Him putting things in their places. He gives boundaries and times to things like the sea and the day; they are separated from the land and the night. It's order out of chaos, until we as humans let some of the chaos leak back into the order. We thought we had a better way to order things, with us on top, but what we were really doing was disrupting God's good order.

And so as we've been reading through The Story we've watched the slow unfolding of the beginning stages of God's work to undo our damage, and since we're at the epicenter of the chaos in His creation, we're also the epicenter of His plan of re-ordering. We've watched as God begins to build a relationship over many generations with one family of humans so that through them, He can restore His relationship with all of humanity. We've watched as He blesses and saves and protects and fights for this family, and as He leads them out of slavery into the wilderness.

It's here that we see, for the first time, the famous Ten Commandments. It's kind of a terrifying scene: God descends to the top of the mountain they are encamped around, and His appearance is accompanied by fire, thick smoke, rumbling, and trumpet blasts. It's as though they have pitched their tents at the foot of an erupting volcano, which is pretty much the last place in the world I would want to spend a few months. It's so dangerous, in fact, that God has them mark out a boundary around the mountain, and anyone or anything that crosses the boundary risks death. But Moses approaches God and God gives him not just Ten Commandments, but an entire body of instructions on how to worship and how to live in the presence of God and one another.

We have to confess that some of the commandments God gives him sound a little odd to us today. I mean, yes, it's pretty understandable that God would want His people to not kill one another, but there are other laws in there that seem kind of domineering. Why does God forbid them from eating shellfish or pork? What's wrong with wearing clothes made out of two different types of fabric? Some of the orders are understandable, some make a little more sense when we realize that they were probably intended to prevent God's people from participating in some of the pagan beliefs of the nations around them, and some of them remain pretty hard to explain. But what's clear is that this law God is giving His people is an injection of God's order back into the chaotic world. He's once again separating the light from the darkness, separating out a people for Himself. In this one little nation, God is creating a structure in which they can become His people, a little plot of land out of which one day a new, redeemed Garden of Eden can grow out of the chaos of our fallen world.

In our enlightened modern times we tend to value the freedom of the individual above all else, and we get annoyed with God for daring to tell us that certain things are off-limits. What we choose to forget is that our lives apart from God are subject to chaos. It's as though someone in the audience brought an accordion to a performance of a Bach concerto; the structure is wrong and the result is off-tune. We think that God's law is there to crush our freedom. It's true that there have been times when law has been used to restrict freedom and crush our spirits, but there is also a type of law that is intended to be life-giving and freedom-bestowing. The structure of law is intended to give us space to flourish; God's laws for Moses were designed to define this nation of people as God's. The law was a way of freedom to life in God.

So sometimes we reject God's order for our lives as being too cumbersome or too hard. Sometimes we think we're better judges of how our lives should be ordered, and we decide to ignore what God has revealed to us about the order He has in mind for us. And the result is that we're letting that old chaos bleed back into our lives. Other times we focus so much on God's rules that we worship the order rather than the one who created that order; we turn God's order that was intended to bring life and freedom and use it as a weapon or a restraint to hinder our freedom. That's the message Paul was giving to the church in Corinth in our reading from 2 Corinthians, that some

people take the letter of God's law and turned it into something that kills. The point is not the law itself, the point is the one who made it and gave it to us so that we could know Him.

Today we enter ourselves into this story of God speaking His instructions, His order, into our chaotic lives. It's not the same order He gave Moses all those years ago, not exactly. We live after Pentecost, in the age of the Spirit of God, the one who points us to Jesus Christ as our example of what God's ordered creation looks like. He is the one who subdues the chaos of our lives and brings it into conformity with God's concerns. Today we celebrate the Lord's Supper, and we write the latest chapter in the story of God speaking order into the chaos. Our participation today is our act of commitment to God's order. We partake of the body and blood of Christ as a rejection of the life lived in rebellion to God, as a sign of our commitment to Him, as an expression of grateful love for His acts for us in bringing order into our chaos.



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