

## *The Cat in the Hat*

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July 16, 2006

Genesis 1

Mark 1:9-13

“The sun did not shine. It was too wet to play. So we sat in the house all that cold, cold, wet day. I sat there with Sally. We sat there, we two. And I said, ‘How I wish we had something to do!’ Too wet to go out and too cold to play ball. So we sat in the house. We did nothing at all. So all we could do was to sit! sit! sit! sit! And we did not like it. Not one little bit.

Sound familiar? I don’t just mean about the story of The Cat in the Hat. I mean about the last couple of months. Rainfall reached record levels in May. And just when we thought we were in the clear, it continued to pour down in June. Geoffrey, my son who goes to University of Massachusetts in Lowell, was in one of the hardest hit areas. He sat in his dorm room and watched the Merrimac River rise over its banks until it covered the major street that leads along beside it. (He and his friends thought it might be a good time for water sports, but fortunately they thought again.) I remember how surprised people were when school was closed for not one but two days here in Derry. I have a vivid image of Confirmation class that Sunday night. The class was whooping it up outside, dancing in the rain in their rubber boots. I think we did actually manage to eventually settle down, but it was all pretty exciting.

It was wet. There’s no denying that. And there were people who tried to be optimistic about it all. “Look how green it is.” “The reservoir has enough water for the next two years.” But throughout this weather, I heard an undercurrent of something else. The question, though framed in different ways, went something like this. “What on earth is God doing?” Noah’s Ark jokes went around. As did echoes of Genesis. God may have separated the water from the dry land, but did God finish the job? These responses, of course, all assume that God had something directly to do with our weather. An assumption that I don’t think I want to tackle today.

What I would like to talk about is the sense that people seemed to have felt that something had gone awry. Everything was not all right with the world. There was talk of global warming and changes in climate conditions. But I think this was only part of it. There seemed to be a deeper sense that there was a lack of order. We expect a few April showers, maybe lasting into May. But then it’s supposed to get sunny. Summer is definitely supposed to be here by Memorial Day weekend. Why was it, then, that at the middle school retreat at Horton Center the first weekend in June the downpour lasted for two days straight? That really is a lack of order.

We all get a big squeamish, I think, when the world seems to be off kilter. When we feel ourselves to be outside order as we live it and know it for ourselves. The Cat in the Hat identifies the issues beautifully. Just listen to the reaction of the fish. “Now look what you did!” said the fish to the cat. ‘Now look at this house! Look at this! Look at that! You sank our toy ship, sank it deep in the cake. You shook up our house and you

bent our new rake. You should not be here when our mother is not. You get out of this house!’ said the fish in the pot.

The two texts we heard today are so very similar and yet seem so very opposite. Water plays a central role in both. Both focus on the activity of God’s Spirit. Both speak of creation. Both speak of order and lack of order. But the contrast between the two is also stark. Take first the Genesis text. The text moves from chaos to order. To put it another way, the text starts in wilderness and moves toward a defined world. When God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void.... This formless void, this dark covering the face of the deep, this was the wilderness in which the world existed prior to God’s creation. But then we have a beautifully crafted progression toward separation and definition of this nameless, faceless mass into waters above the dome and waters under the dome. Into Earth and Seas and vegetation and light and darkness and sea monsters and birds that fly and living creatures and humankind.

In our gospel text, we have a seemingly opposite motion. From order to disorder. From vision to chaos. Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan and the vision seems crystal clear. The Spirit, that same wind that moved over the face of the waters in Genesis, descends on Jesus like a dove and there comes a voice from heaven: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” But then what happens? That same Spirit that created the order of the world in Genesis now seems to be driving Jesus in the reverse direction. The text tells us that “the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.”<sup>1</sup> The movement seems to be from the sublime sense of order received in the rivers of the Jordan back to the chaos of the wilderness. As one author puts it, “the Spirit like a dove descending suddenly becomes a gale that whips Jesus away from the throngs and drive him westward across the valley into the isolation of the desert.

In all of our lives, there are times when order seems to be there. And there are times when there seems to be a lack of order. Parents concerned about a child’s new and perhaps not so wonderful behavior will often find that children go through periods of equilibrium and disequilibrium in their lives. When I work with couples prior to their weddings, we often talk about the major transition that marriage can be. Those couples have often achieved a certain equilibrium, or order, in their lives as single individuals. We talk about how, as wonderful as marriage can be, that order will probably be entirely disrupted just by the fact of now being a new entity, husband and wife.

In these cases, when there is a period of disequilibrium, there is also a glimpse of the order just around the corner. But what do we do with those times of seeming lack of order, of disruption, when no equilibrium seems to be in sight? What do we make of those times when lack of order seems to be the very root of the world we live in, seems to be the very nature of creation? As I sat in my own house some of those cold, cold, wet days, images came across the TV screen of cars submerged in the water up to their roof lines. People were flooded out in Alstead, New Hampshire, last Fall, and others in Derry and east of us were flooded out this past Spring. Some have not been able to replace the homes they once had. It’s not just a matter of kitchens and living rooms but of the very habits of order in life, of placing a coffee cup here, or finding that book there.

I think of the poem Alice wrote after coming back from New Orleans:

Fuzzy black mold has climbed floor to ceiling

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 1:12.

sending infiltrating tentacles between plaster and tile  
remnants of a life piled up  
entertainment center on top of CDs  
sponge bob under computer under leather sofa  
sewing basket, ironing board, clothes<sup>2</sup>

Maybe we need to take another look at those texts we heard. In the Genesis account of creation we heard today, it is true that we encountered Earth and Seas and vegetation and light and darkness and sea monsters and birds that fly and living creatures and humankind. But God's order is reflected not only in this content but in the very form of the text. The way in which God creates is as orderly as what God creates. For example, the days of creation parallel one another. Day one speaks of the creation of light and day four speaks of the lights in the sky. Day two speaks of water and sky and day five of winged birds and creatures with which the waters swarm. Day three is concerned with dry land and vegetation and day six with living creatures and humankind who will live on the dry land and eat the vegetation. Then there are the refrains: "and God said," "God saw that it was good," and "it was evening and it was morning." In this text, it is not just a specific order we are hearing but, deeper than that, the very orderliness of God.

What about Jesus though? What about the fact that, from an epiphany of clarity at his baptism, Jesus was driven into a featureless desert of doubt, despair, temptation. It's easy to think that Jesus just breezed through those trials because of who he was. But I think he felt deeply that sudden chaos, sudden lack of order. Like those early explorers coming to the edge of a known world. Like one suddenly struck blind coming to the edge of a sighted world. Like those soldiers in Iraq buffeted by sand and wind coming to the edge of any communion with others. Like any of us faced with such major changes in our lives coming to the edge of our very identities.

The Mark text about Jesus' being driven into the desert does seem to bring chaos out of order, rather than the reverse. But I think that God's order-making is just as evident as it is in Genesis. It may not seem like order to us and it may not have felt like order to Jesus. Being fired from a job, having a child suddenly become ill. Seeing the chaos in the Middle East this past week. There are times when we too are driven out into the desert with no landmarks in sight. But God does bring order at these times too. We see the coming of a new clarity in Jesus' time in the desert. It was *after* Jesus' time in the desert that He came to Galilee. It was *after* Jesus' time in the desert that he began to proclaim the good news of God. It was *after* Jesus' time in the desert that he was able to say, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:15)

Today we have heard, not one, but two stories of creation. In Genesis, God not only created the heavens and the earth, but became for us a God whose very nature is to bring order out of chaos. A God who reaches deep into the darkness, and says "let there be light." A God whose bringing of order nourishes the living creatures and humankind with dry land and vegetation. A God whose order encompasses all the cosmos and beyond. In space, yes, and in time, throughout our lives and throughout history.

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<sup>2</sup> Rev. Alice M.C. Ling, *Katrina*.

The Spirit not only drove Jesus into the wilderness. The Spirit was also with Jesus in the wilderness. The Spirit was the One who called Jesus through the wilderness to the fullness of a personhood and of a ministry that has created the world anew for each and every one of us every since.