

**WATER; GENESIS 1:1-5; MARK 1:4-11**  
**JANUARY 11, 2009 – FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE BAPTISM OF JESUS**  
**THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

There is a debate among the rabbis about those first lines from the book of Genesis. Some say God created the universe out of nothing, *ex nihilo*. It's why Genesis uses the term "void" in verse two.

But others say God created the cosmos out of the swirling, watery "deep" which verse two says later on was covered in darkness. Thus the vast ocean spaces have ever since secured their place in literature as representing chaos, unruly matter.

Milton in *Paradise Lost* preferred the later interpretation. In his vision of the cosmos there was always a little chaos handy for God to use in the on-going work of creation as a sculptor would keep wet clay on hand for a new work of art. The wonderful implication being that creation isn't over and done with but God is ever ready to create something new.

I too like the watery chaos vs. empty void theory of creation for several reasons not the least of which is it makes God look less like a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat and more like an artist taking the raw stuff of the universe and shaping something beautiful.

But I like the watery chaos theory also because it is so descriptive of our life experience – we are constantly moving between chaos and creation.

At birth, our work is to learn that there are boundaries, the world is neither one and the same as my wants and needs nor does it exist to serve me only. That can be a painful lesson for infants whose parents do not jump at the slightest cry but nevertheless come to realize that they are loved and will be cared for.

Out of the chaos of discovering that we are one among many beings in this world individuals learn to engage and interact, to share and be patient with others. That lesson goes deeper when a new brother or sister comes home.

In adolescence, we learn to handle freedom and that with freedom comes responsibility: driving responsibly, managing time productively, earning money to pay your way.

Misusing freedoms can lead to the chaos of restriction and confinement: having a driver's license revoked, a curfew imposed, the necessity to repeat a subject in school. But out of such lessons comes the responsible use of freedom.

In adulthood, we learn how to commit and serve and that a life without commitment and service gives way to the chaos of loneliness and futility.

Perhaps the biggest question of adulthood is what am I supposed to do with my life? What am I here for? How am I to use the gifts and interests I have? Answering these questions, which can take years in some cases, leads to a deep sense of connection to the human race and purpose in life.

Finally, in later years we come full circle and learn again how to trust our caretakers and God herself into whose loving embrace we prepare to enter without which we are vulnerable to the chaos of despair.

So while our lives are mostly governed by order, throughout life, we experience chaos at critical moments which turns out to be a good thing: the crucible for personal growth and change. Out of such transitions God keeps reshaping us into his faithful people.

We are presently, I believe, at such a junction as a congregation. Groups, like individuals, also learn to deal with their watery deep so to speak. For Westminster our 'watery deep' is the global financial crisis that has so reduced our resources that we are now forced to re-prioritize what is essential to our ministry.

This is what your elders are now focused on and have been focused on since early October. One thing about entering the chaos – there are no maps or guarantees or easy solutions. By definition, old behaviors and attitudes don't work, we have to cultivate new behaviors and approaches.

It can be difficult and painful work but also very exciting as deep change brings new possibilities. As our world – our status quo – changes our comfort zone disappears and we find ourselves in new territory.

And here I want to put in a word for struggle. If you are like me it is easy to look at some people or at some congregations and conclude that they are the picture of perfection, they make everything they do look easy, and seem to be free of struggle and suffering. And at this point it is often a small step to seeing myself as a victim or martyr or both. Life isn't fair I say to myself.

But I have also learned and observed that there is really no person or church worth its salt that has not been through some fire of despair or felt itself over its head in some watery deep covered in darkness. To be alive is to go through such experiences. The question is how we deal with such transitions and disorienting moments in life.

And here my observation is that God's people in the bible and in history have responded to spiritual disorientation by choosing to trust God and then surrendering or letting go of their compulsion to control.

I can give you an example of this. I was talking recently with the proud grandfather of a two year old granddaughter who was here for the holidays and he told me that his granddaughter at her tender age is an excellent swimmer.

Her parents, he explained, took their daughter about a year ago when she couldn't even walk to the community pool and the swimming instructor taught her to swim by taking her gently into the deep end of the pool then letting her go.

The little girl bobbed and sputtered and shrieked once or twice then suddenly, as if shifting into some new gear, started floating buoyantly and a smile broke across her face as she heard the praise of the teacher.

Who was it who let go? Yes, the teacher let go of the little girl's grip; the little girl was forced to let go of the teacher, but the people who really had to let go were the parents. And they had to trust – the teacher.

Some of you taught your children to swim like this and I remember when Carol and I took our sons in infancy to learn to swim and I can tell you I was squirming.

My head was telling me trust the teacher, trust your son; but my fears were saying he's going to drown, that teacher is crazy, what were we thinking!

Of course, parents learn to let go again and again and again don't we! The first day of school, when you hand over the keys to the car for the first date, when you pull away from the college campus with your kid waving in the rear view mirror.

Letting go is the way of all things. It is the way of parents but it is also the way of individuals as they grow and discern God's claim upon their life, just as it is the way of congregations as they grow and discern God's claim upon their ministry.

We are entering 2009 at a scary, exciting moment of growing and discerning God's claim upon us. And the only way to get there is to let go of what ever it is from our past that holds us back and our reluctance to turn the tiller over to God.

How will we let go as a congregation in 2009? We are in the process of letting go of an Associate Pastor position and an Associate Pastor which is strange, awkward and scary.

I suspect there are other fixtures in our life together that we have come to rely upon that, by the time the Session passes a budget for 2009, we will no longer have. Things that we thought we couldn't live without. It won't be easy and we may not be in total agreement with each other. But I can tell you I was deeply heartened by our elders who at their last special session meeting in mid-December talked together about the proposed cuts and reductions we are facing. They listened respectfully and spoke carefully, and as I sensed a possible consensus emerging, I concluded with that kind of leadership Westminster will be OK.

I do want to convene two informal congregational meetings: one at the end of February and one at the end of March to keep talking to one another as we go through the difficult days ahead; as we navigate our watery deep, as we let go of what ever it is we need to let go of and as we trust God's hand upon the tiller of this church to get into open and safe water.

The title of the sermon today is "Water." I chose that simple title because upon reading the Scripture lessons for the day it occurred to me that water captures both the chaos and order of God's ongoing work of creation.

It is out of the deep waters of chaos that God creates the cosmos; it is out of the waters of baptism that Jesus answers the question of what he is called to do as God's son; it is out of the waters of our baptism and the deep waters of our life journey that we are shaped and reshaped by God; and it is out of the waters of baptism that we as parents and as a congregation let go of our children and acknowledge that they belong to God as we give them over again and again throughout life.

I will never forget my first triathlon this past October at Montauk Pt. Long Island. The first leg was the swim and as I stood in my new wetsuit at 5.30am under the stars at the tip of Long Island about to enter deep water covered in darkness, I was a little scared.

The whistle blew and hundreds of us raced to the water's edge and began swimming; I started to hyper-ventilate, my wetsuit felt like a straight jacket. Then I remembered to let some water in at my neck which loosened the suit. I relaxed and began to breathe easily and at each stroke looked at the stars then said a spontaneous prayer of thanksgiving for the water that kept me afloat and beauty of the coming day.

We're now at the edge of our watery deep as a congregation and unless I miss my guess not a few of us here this morning are at the edge of some personal watery deep. It's scary and new and we're wondering if we can make it. Some of us may even be on the verge of hyper ventilating.

But like that little two year old girl who learned to swim because her parents let her go, and like my first triathlon experience, I think the best thing we can do now, the only thing we can do now is to trust ourselves into God's care, relax, breath easy and let the water, which is our chaos, baptize us into God's new vision of who we are to become. Amen.