

The readings for this first Sunday after the Epiphany juxtapose images of chaos and possibility. What is frightening and inscrutable is also full of potential and promise, and we are offered both. I want to unpack that a little bit and then ask you all to speak up and tell the rest of us about the juxtaposition of chaos and possibility that you've experienced before, or are looking at now.

The first story of the Creation from Genesis, of course, begins with an image of chaos. The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep. There was no sorting, no order, no light. It was just stuff, and it made no sense until God said "Let there be light" so that the chaos could be looked at. And the light was good, so God said, "let's keep this" and separated the light from the darkness. We have our first binary division, a time to look at the chaos and ponder it and perhaps mess with it, and a time (night) to leave it alone, take our sticky fingers off of it and go away. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

God takes time to create in this story; it's a very deliberate process, and at the end of each step God evaluates it. Possibly it is not acceptable; let's step back and think about it. There are loose ends, touches of disorder, creative possibilities. It is not perfect at the end of the first day, nor the end of the second day, nor the third. But as the creation progresses God likes it enough to pronounce it good and to build on what's there the next day. Creation is a dynamic process; the cosmos doesn't spring complete from the mind of its creator, but develops through a series of choices and divisions.

Also, you'll remember from hearing this story read in its entirety, God doesn't create entirely solo. Along the way God pulls in the creatures already created to

participate in the next developments: “let the **earth** bring forth.” “Let the **waters** bring forth.” Each part of the creation pitches in and makes its own contributions. God invites the earth and waters and you and me into the creative process. [As Sibley Towner (*Genesis* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2001] 21) explains: ]“If there were no freedom in this creation, no touches of disorder, no open ends, then moral choice, creativity, and excellence could not arise.” At the same time that God is establishing order, God is inviting a certain amount of disorder so as to have moral choice, creativity, and excellence.

There’s the same juxtaposition of chaos and order in the story from Acts about Paul meeting disciples in Ephesus. They had learned about Jesus from someone else, and he’s sort of trying to figure out what their faith consists of, because as you can imagine, a viral movement like the Jesus movement could mutate pretty rapidly, especially in a place like the Roman empire with so many different kinds of people and such excellent roads for their messages to travel on. So Paul asks them *first*, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” No, they don’t know what that is. *Then* he asks them what kind of baptism they had, and it was the baptism of repentance that John had exercised. So he says, well, let me baptize you “in the name of” e.g the way that Jesus was baptized, and he does.

What’s interesting is that the first thing he wants to know is whether they’ve received the Holy Spirit. In other words, Do they live their lives aware of, open to, filled with, and guided by the Spirit of God? Getting the rites right is important but secondary; the most important thing is whether they live in an awareness of the

dynamic and intruding Spirit of God. And if they don't, then that has to be repaired right away. Again, what I'm seeing in the context of the creation story is this necessity to bring in some creative chaos. I know the gospel story is about Jesus' baptism and that's why these other texts are here, but what are they telling us? They're telling us that creation is a process into which God invites our participation, and that although creation brings order out of chaos, it always leaves the door open to a certain amount of chaos or loose ends so that we can exercise creativity, so that we can be inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that creation can be more wonderful and surprising.

I personally do not like chaos and the unknown, but I know that when it's been forced on me, and I had to go into it and live in it, sometimes wonderful unforeseen things have happened. The terrifying first semester of teaching at DMACC springs to mind. But I don't have to be the only one preaching this sermon. What instances can you all share of your meetings with chaos and perhaps co-creating with God?

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Rabbi Arthur Waskow has written a wonderful poem called "Beresheit," or "In the Beginning," with which I would like to close.

### **On Deciding Whether To...**

**Beresheit/** in the beginning  
God was lonely, suffering  
though everything in the universe was held within.  
Unfulfilled, overpowered by *chesed*-energy  
God breathed out, kissed out, sent it all out,  
every possibility that ever was and would be.  
I imagine God was frightened.

What a terribly momentous step,  
even with overflowing love as catalyst and reference point.  
What if something went wrong  
if the universe made its own choices at breakneck speed  
if there was no breathing any of it back in again.  
Once it began, this process more powerful than its Creator  
with beginning middle end all at once, all possible --  
how could there not have been Divine panic?  
So in the split second eon after that first outbreath kiss  
a proclamation "Let there be light!" and there was  
a moment when sight would be unhampered  
a snapshot flash of eternity in which to see  
before darkness was once again welcomed  
the realm of comfort from all the see-ing.

So, too, in the beginning  
the universe breathed its kiss into me  
and with that kiss, possibilities  
thousands of them  
limited only by the chance of time and place.  
And the world, spurred on not by love  
but by something far more selfish, far more limited  
intervened  
to remind me of the correct response to light and darkness  
according to the desires of many faces, many voices.  
My panic is undeniably mortal  
gripping me during folding laundry or cooking dinner.  
As I stand as witness before the creation of my life,  
well into its 3rd day  
I try commanding light out of the confusion  
but I lack Divine will  
and all brilliance is gone  
before I have a chance to see into the flash.  
I can only comfort myself with the thought  
that even God didn't know if the plan would work,  
but moved forward into the darkness on faith.

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<http://www.theshalomcenter.org/node/282>

God of grace and glory,  
you call us with your voice of flame

to be your people, faithful and courageous.

As your beloved Son

embraced his mission in the waters of baptism,

inspire us with the fire of your Spirit

to join in his transforming work.

We ask this in the name of our Savior Jesus Christ,

who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.