

Remember

Genesis 1:1-5 and Mark 1:4-11

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While I slept through the captain's voice beaming into our small cabin in the middle of the night, beckoning us to get out of bed and look at the view of Mt. Etna from our window or balcony, it was impossible to continue sleeping when the ship rocked in ways we had not experienced on any of the previous nights of our journey that had commenced in Athens and was now hours away from our scheduled disembarkation in Rome.

Craig and I both sat straight up in bed before I attempted to make my way to the bathroom, quickly realizing how every step required the stability offered by a nearby wall.

When we had both managed to shower and get ready for the day, we made our way to the dining room where it could have been easy to believe every person on the wait staff had consumed too much to drink as they struggled to hang on to their trays, let alone walk straight.

With enough food in our stomachs to take the edge off but not tempt the power of the ocean to later empty them, we returned to our room where we waited for the captain to announce it was finally safe for the ship to sail into the port—some seven hours later than scheduled.

Those extra hours felt like an eternity as we watched waves reach a pinnacle I have only perceived through movies and sensed the sea's power to violently thrust a massive ship back out to sea instead of closer to the shore.

While little about the experience was funny at the time, I can still imagine the conversation in some of the cabins where one person was shouting, "I told you I didn't want to go on a cruise!"

We could see our intended destination.

Rome was illuminated on the horizon.

But we could also see and feel the enormous challenges preventing us from reaching our destination—ones no human could do anything to change.

The distance between chaos and order was substantial.

But when reflecting on Psalm 29, scholar Ellen Charry suggests "Order and chaos are but a hair's breadth from one another, and God controls the space between them."¹

Charry is reflecting on how the original listeners would have heard Psalm 29. The Israelites were intimately familiar with God's capacity to unleash violent forces of nature against them without a moment's notice. They had heard God speak through tall trees breaking, vulnerable calves shaking, and flames of fire illuminating the desert. They knew God's voice to neither still or small but rather disruptive and disturbing as it unleashed tones of unpredictability.

And they also understood the power of God's voice to call forth light on the first day of creation, when "the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep."²

I wonder if you know the power of God's voice.

¹ Ellen T. Charry, *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Psalms 1-50* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015), 151.

² Genesis 1:2.

Have you experienced the divine dialect that can be “darkness breaking, chaos ordering, and life giving.”³

Are you familiar with God’s capacity to speak into the space between order and chaos in a way that tenderly holds you until you are carried safely to the shore?

I suspect many of you may be thinking, “Pastor, I have never heard the voice of God.”

And while it is true that I have yet to hear God interrupt the liturgy crafted for the sacrament of baptism with a voice speaking from heaven, “It’s my child, my beloved, the one with whom I am well pleased,” I believe with my whole being that God is still speaking.

In her short story titled, “The River,” Flannery O’Connor writes about a young boy named Harry who is picked up to be cared for by a woman who has not yet met him. Mrs. Connin gathers Harry from his family home and tells him they are going to see the Reverend Bevel Summers, a young preacher who offers healing and baptisms in a nearby river. The two set off when Mrs. Connin asks the child his name. Without giving it a second thought, Harry tells her his name is “Bevel,” just like the preacher they are going to see.

The journey to the river is filled with the taunts of bullies, tangible reminders of how Bevel fits in neither at home where his mother is constantly drunk nor amongst his peers who regularly torment him. His life has been anything but easy, making him perhaps even more curious to embrace what the preacher has to offer.

When they finally get to the river, Mrs. Connin holds Bevel up before the preacher and says, “Listen here, preacher, I got a boy from town today that I’m keeping. His mamma’s sick and he wants you to pray for her.”

The conversation continues and the preacher asks the boy if he has ever been baptized:

“What’s that?” he murmured.

‘If I Baptize you,’ the preacher said, ‘you’ll be able to go to the Kingdom of Christ. You’ll be washed in the river of suffering, son, and you’ll go by the deep river of life. Do you want that?’

‘Yes,’ the child said, and thought, I won’t go back to the apartment then, I’ll go under the river.

‘You won’t be the same again,’ the preacher said. ‘You’ll count.’⁴

Can you recall times in your journey when you, too, would have done anything to escape to a river of life?

Can you comprehend how the words “You’ll count,” could bring order to a life filled with chaos?

Who has told you that you count?

Who has convinced you that you matter?

Who has looked you in the eye and said, “You are beloved,” in a way that makes you accept “beloved” as your deepest identity?

Who has allowed you to dip your toe in the river of life?

³ John W. Wurster, *Connections*, 172.

⁴ Flannery O’Connor, *The River*, https://www.doxaweb.com/assets/The_River.pdf.

Bill Love was a college student who showed up every Sunday afternoon to greet a group of not always nice adolescents who gathered on worn out couches in the church's room reserved for youth. I do not recall him saying the words "you count," but his steadfast presence enabled all of us to see how there was an adult in our lives who we could always count on to be with us and for us.

When my parents were going through a devastating divorce when I was in high school, a person from our church would regularly pull into our driveway. I do not recall Randy Gross ever telling me that I counted with his words, but I will never forget how I felt each time I watched him climb out of his minivan before walking over to embrace us while saying, "I just wanted to check on you"

When I found myself filing for unemployment after a Congressional election during the day before learning how hard it is to not have an answer to the most popular question asked in this city, "What do you do?" at night, it was a pastor at a United Methodist Church on Capitol Hill who allowed me to see more value than I ever saw in myself while working for a Member of Congress. David never said, "You count. You matter. You belong here," but I knew I did by the opportunities he gave me to discover and use my gifts.

Each of these individuals surrounded me with a community of love and forgiveness. None of them erased my pain, but they reminded me of how God was always with me—standing in the gap between chaos and order. Each one of them took me to the river of life by taking seriously the vows we make at every baptism.

Baptism marks our initiation into Christ's holy church. And unlike a fraternal or communal organization that requires action on the part of the one joining, it is God and not us at work in our baptism. God's grace is prevenient and offered to all persons without price.

Baptism signifies a washing away of sin. But unlike human relationships where we then must prove that we truly have repented to gain the trust of another, God says, "Your sins are forgiven *and* forgotten. You can have a clean slate every time you turn to me and seek to live a changed life."

Baptism ignites an awareness of the unique set of gifts instilled within each one of us—a revelation of the light that exists within every person to dispel evil and injustice while making a bold difference in God's world.

Baptism allows us to hear our name—not only the name our parents have given to us and sometimes the meaning behind it—but who we are at our core—beloved—the reason God's heart beats and sometimes skips a beat.

And these gifts—a sense of belonging, a new beginning that releases us from sin and shame, a naming of our gifts until we have the courage to claim them on our own, and a capacity to hear we are beloved no matter what—may very well be the only thing powerful enough to securely hold us when we find ourselves struggling to bridge the gap between chaos and order, heartache and healing, sadness and joy, exclusion and belonging, sin and mercy, death and life.

Many of you may have established resolutions for this new year, joining the 38% of adults in this country who do. But if I could resolve anything for you, it would be for you to walk out of this place no longer clinging to a sin you have grown to love or a sense of shame you have been able to shake.

It would be for you to know that you are an embarrassment of riches, one who has bestowed with gifts that can make a difference in this community and the world around you.

It would be for you to hear that you count, you matter, and belong here in this community of faith.

It would be for you to know, as you look out and long to move away from whatever chaos your life holds that God is with you and God has not and will not let you go.

It would be for you to know that your deepest identity is not what your business card says or does not say about you, but rather, "Beloved."

Beloveds, come to the river of life.

Come and touch the water.

Come and remember your baptism and be thankful.