

19th Sunday of Ordinary Time A “Tohu wa bohu”  
Fr. Frank Schuster

My friends, to understand what is going on in the Gospel, we must start at the beginning! And so, the bible begins, "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland and darkness covered the abyss while a mighty wind swept over the waters." The early Jewish and Christian sensibility regarding the first sentence in the bible involves an interesting Hebrew term that is found there. Some of you might have heard this from me before; however, repetition is how we master concepts. And I think with everything going on in the world today, this is a helpful concept to cover again. The Hebrew for "formless wasteland" is ... *tohu wa bohu*, literally welter and waste. It is a great word that rolls nicely off the tongue, *tohu wa bohu*. Let's all say it together... *Tohu wa bohu*, welter and waste, formless wasteland, it all basically means the same thing, primordial chaos. Parents can have a lot of fun with this word. Moms can now walk into their children's bedrooms and say, clean up this *tohu wa bohu* right now!

Some background on this concept: Early Jewish preachers, in order to safeguard God's omnipotence, interpreted this first verse of the bible as saying: in the beginning, God first created the *tohu wa bohu ex nihilo*, out of nothing, and then from the *tohu wa bohu*, God created the universe. *Tohu wa bohu* can be understood as the paint on a painter's palette. The paint on a palette is without order. The artist has the ability to mix and blend globs of color, brush it on a canvas, and then in a kind of a miracle, create something wonderful. The image I get is the old PBS show with the artist Bob Ross, remember him? He could take a blob of paint on a big brush, squish it on a canvas, and immediately there would be mountains, a lake, and happy little trees. He was remarkable. The art God creates, however, includes time and space, stars, planets, and living creature. The art God creates includes humanity, made in God's image and likeness, created to co-create with God from within the painting itself, creating order out of chaos, like an army of Bob Rosses.

As one Jewish commentator argued in an ancient Midrash, "the Lord created the world in a state of beginning. The universe is always in an uncompleted state, in the form of its beginning. It is not like a vessel at which the master works to finish it; it requires continuous labor and renewal by creative forces. Should these cease for only a second, the universe would return to primeval chaos", [Simchah Bunam of Przyscha].

Human beings, created in God's image and likeness, are co-creators, or co-artists with God working inside the creation. With this hermeneutic, we can then take notice that when human beings sin in the Old Testament, there are huge cosmological consequences. The painting gets smudged. What was ordered becomes disordered, and the *tohu wa bohu* comes back. When human beings live in right relationship with God, all of creation is in harmony. When God's co-artists rebel and are not in right relationship with the Artist, the entire universe becomes disturbed and the primeval stormy waters of Genesis return.

And so, in Noah's day, when all of humanity rebelled against God's right order, what happened? Stormy waters! God tells Jonah to go by land. Jonah disobeys and goes by sea. What happens? Stormy waters! Jonah gets swallowed up by the *tohu wa bohu*. When the Hebrews followed Moses to the Red Sea, they were able to pass through the waters because they are in right relationship with God. The bible tells us that Pharaoh's company was not in right relationship with God and what happens? *Tohu wa bohu!* Stormy waters! In the first reading, Elijah understands this biblical insight. Elijah does not encounter God in storms and earthquakes, things indicative of a disturbed creation, but in the right relationship and calmness of a world at peace. In the Gospel today, the disciples were in a boat that was being tossed about by the waves, for the wind was against it. They have entered into the stormy waters!

And doesn't life feel that way many times, like we are being tossed about by life, like we are not in control? And when it could get no worse, during the last watch of night, dawn comes with Christ the Light walking on water. If we have been paying attention, we could immediately think again about the first chapter of Genesis, darkness, stormy primeval waters, and the Spirit of the Lord hovering over the waters. The disciples think they are seeing a ghost. But Jesus was not a ghost. We are dealing with the incarnate God, humanity in perfect relationship with divinity, and therefore in perfect relationship with the stormy waters of life. Peter sees Jesus transcending the storminess of life and he wants to transcend the storminess of life too. And don't we all have the same prayer when our lives get stormy? Peter asks Jesus if he can transcend the storminess of life too. Jesus says "come". What happens? It says that Peter was able to walk on the stormy waters. He was able to transcend the storminess of life so long as he focuses on Jesus. What happens when Peter begins to lose faith? *Tohu wa bohu!* Peter begins to sink into nothingness.

My friends, the moral of the story is when we are focused on Jesus as a people of faith, we can transcend the storminess of life. When we are not focused on Jesus as a people of faith, we can begin to sink back into the nothingness from which we were created. Peter cries out "Lord save me!" And isn't this our prayer when our lives are being swallowed up by stormy waters. Notice that the Gospel says "Immediately" Jesus reaches out and catches Peter, not after a few minutes or a few days, but "immediately". Christ can be a powerful ally for those who cry out to him in faith. What I find interesting is that Jesus has to get into the boat before the stormy waters become manageable. Similarly, as Christians, the storminess of life is unbearable without Jesus in our boat. In the Eucharist, we can invite Jesus into the boat of our hearts. When we receive Jesus into our hearts, the storminess of life becomes manageable.

Notice that the primeval waters do not disappear in the Gospel reading, they only become manageable. They become ordered. When we are in right relationship with Jesus, the storminess of life can be weathered. After all, Christians, God does not want us to sink into the nothingness from which we were created. As Jesus tells us in the Gospel of John, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life." (Jn 3:16).

You see, death is the dissolving of creation back into nothingness. Because of the cross, Psalm 139 is fulfilled. To paraphrase, where can I hide from your love O Lord? If I run to the mountains you are there. If I run to the ocean, you are there. Because of the cross, even if I fall into the netherworld, *sheol*, God is there in the person of his son Jesus, arms outstretched, capable of catching us. This hope in salvation we have as Christians can have a powerful impact on how we live our lives. Pope Benedict in *Spe Salvi* argued that, without a faith in Jesus, all we can say about our existence is that we come from nothing and we will go back to nothing after we die. How hopeless is that? This kind of hopelessness can have an impact on the decisions we make today. On the other hand, if we believe in the resurrection of Jesus, we live with a founded hope that our lives do not come from nothingness and return to nothingness. There is something after this life, and this hope can have a positive impact on the decisions we make today, in how we conduct ourselves and how we treat others.

As an aside, we priests get a lot of calls from people who are convinced their house has a ghost, they want a house blessing, or they want a personal blessing to help with demonic forces at work in their lives. I appreciate the calls, these things are real, and we priests do our best to help people with these concerns, however, the first question priests might ask when people request this of us is, “When was the last time you went to church?” The reason why we ask this is because no amount of blessings I can give as a priest will help anyone if the person receiving the blessing isn’t taking care of their soul by turning to God by praying regularly and going to church regularly. It is like a patient unwilling to make lifestyle changes but nevertheless demands that the doctor provide a cure. Going to church, receiving the sacraments, being faithful to prayer, and caring for others more than ourselves are the biggest things we can do to combat the *tohu wa bohu* of life.

And so, my friends, what are the areas of your life that is being tossed about by stormy waters right now? What are the areas of your life that is being tossed about by *tohu wa bohu*? What areas in our lives are smudging God's masterpiece? Is it an addiction? Is it in a stormy relationship with your kids, parents, co-workers or spouse? Is it in the stewardship of your money? Is it in your career or perhaps worries about what is going on in our country or world today, lots to worry about there. My friends, what are the areas of your life that is being tossed about by stormy waters? My friends, the invitation is to accept the embrace of Jesus like St. Peter. After Peter got back into the boat with Jesus, the winds died down.