

12th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Tohu Wa Bohu”

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The readings this weekend are exquisite and revolve around one of the Church’s favorite symbols, water. I have shared with you on occasion an old Jewish take on the opening line of Genesis. You remember, the spirit of the Lord hovers over the primordial chaos of creation symbolized by stormy water. The Hebrew words, you may recall, are the wonderful words tohu wa bohu. Remember this? Tohu wa bohu, welter and waster, primordial chaos, it is the disorganized paint on the creator’s palate if you will. You probably have seen a painter’s palate before with bunches of globs of paint, in many places mixed together to make new colors etc. The tohu wa bohu symbolized by the stormy waters of creation are like the chaos of the divine painter’s palate, who makes miraculous order of this goop as He paints a masterpiece on His canvas. The creator says, let there be light and there is light . Let the ocean and land be separated, and it was. Let there be creatures in the landscape and let there be mankind to govern this creation in God’s image and likeness, and it happens. One of the most wonderful aspects of the creation story is that God creates and he calls what he creates good. The Hebrew midrash I like so much creates a cosmology out of this whereby so long as creation is in right relationship with God, you don’t even see the paint that makes up our creation. Once things go awry and out of relationship with God, the paint begins to smear back into globs of goop, the tohu wa bohu, the primordial chaos comes back.

And so, in the days of Noah, humanity was no longer in right relationship with God. What happens? The stormy waters descend on creation and everything turns back to what existence looked like in the first sentence of the bible. The interesting thing about this Jewish interpretation I like so much is that it isn’t God’s fault really that the creation melted back into primordial chaos. Humanity does it to itself by not being good stewards of creation. I am sure environmentalists in particular appreciate that point.

You then, of course, have the story of the Exodus. The Hebrew people, once liberated from the tyranny of pharaoh, find themselves blocked by the sea with Pharaoh’s chariots not too far behind. What happens, the stormy waters of the sea part for God’s chosen people. These people were in right relationship with God so the stormy waters part for them. Pharaoh’s army tries to cross and what happens? Tohuwabohu right?

Of course you remember the story of Jonah. Jonah was told by God to go by land to Ninevah to be a prophet to these people. Instead of going by land, Jonah goes by sea in the opposite direction, and what happens? You guessed it, tohu wa bohu. He ends up being swallowed by a sea monster. He endures 3 days in the belly of the beast before making it to shore. There are all kinds of Christological significance to the three days in the furthest depths of

the primordial chaos. When Jesus said, this generation will only receive the sign of Jonah, this is what he was referring to: his descent to the furthest limits of Godforsakenness on the cross.

When Jesus says, my God my God why have you forsaken me, Jesus has existentially and truly entered that place where humanity was in danger of being eternally swallowed, the place of eternal God forsakenness. St. Peter, along with the apostle's creed says that Jesus descended to hell itself, the furthest limit of *tohu wa bohu*, and on the third day rose from the dead. If you connect the dots, that makes all of humanity the people of Nineveh I suspect, called to a universal mandate of conversion.

You can meanwhile see the idea of *tohu wa bohu* in our first reading from Job, God is asking Job who is he to question the divine plan?, listen again

The Lord addressed Job out of the storm and said:
Who shut within doors the sea,
when it burst forth from the womb;
when I made the clouds its garment
and thick darkness its swaddling bands?
When I set limits for it
and fastened the bar of its door,
and said: Thus far shall you come but no farther,
and here shall your proud waves be stilled! (Did you catch it)

And so we have our Gospel reading. The disciples are in the boat which is symbolic for the church. They are sailing through the ocean of life and the waves and wind start to pick up. Soon they are in a storm afraid that they might sink. Notice that Jesus is asleep when this happens. There is a disconnect between the disciples and the Lord. It isn't until they wake the Lord up to point out their predicament that Jesus then returns creation back to normal. He chastises them for not having enough faith which is the same thing as saying, you have the power in your life to allow yourself to drown in the waves or survive.

I like the version of the story in Matthew when the boat is being tossed about by the stormy waters and Jesus is seen walking towards them on the waters. Biblically minded people should immediately think of the opening lines of Genesis with the Spirit of Lord transcending the stormy waters creating order out of the chaos. In this version, Peter asks Jesus, can I get out of the boat and transcend the stormy waters of life too. Jesus says, sure, by all means! Peter gets out of the boat and, lo and behold, Peter is able to transcend the stormy waters of life...for a little while...before he begins to sink. He cries out Lord save me, and isn't this our prayer in life when the stormy waters start overtaking our ship.

And this ultimately becomes the good news we should hear this weekend, that our Lord is the master of the universe and can help us create order out of whatever chaos we have found ourselves in. And so we ask ourselves: what are the areas in our lives that used to be in right order and in right relationship with God and now has somehow somewhere in life become disordered, perhaps so much so that the wind and waves are threatening to sink our ship? Notice that Jesus doesn't promise to make the tohu wa bohu disappear in life. After the storm, the disciples are still on the ship, sailing on the same water that was violent moments before. What Jesus does promise us however is that the stormy waters of life will become manageable if we take the time to wake Jesus up in the back of our boat, in the back of our mind, in the forgotten places of the soul. We can go through life, one cup of coffee to the next, and still be spiritually asleep, for weeks, even years. Jesus invites us to wake up our spiritual side. We need faith if we are going to make our way through life.

As so we ask ourselves, where are the places in our lives where God's order has transformed into chaos? Can we surrender our lives to the Lord who alone renews the face of the earth?