

## **BAPTISM OF OUR LORD | JANUARY 10, 2021**

GENESIS 1:1-5 | PSALM 29 | ACTS 19:1-7 | MARK 1:4-11

The Cologne Cathedral was built over the course of six centuries. It stood as the tallest building in the world for a few years. And it was destroyed in a few minutes.

In the early 2000s, the German artist Gerhard Richter was commissioned to replace the gigantic stained glass window in the south transept of the church that were destroyed by Allied bombing during World War II.<sup>1</sup> After considering depictions of famous martyrs like Maximilian Kolbe and Edith Stein, Richter settled on something more abstract. He selected seventy-two colors used in the cathedral's original windows, ran them through a random number generator, and filled the space with squares colored at random.

Is it beautiful or ugly? Is it static or a rainbow? Is it chaos or precision? Is it old or new? The answer is *Yes*. Not a bad way to think about creation.

In today's reading from Genesis, the authors imagine the creation of all that is from the very beginning. The story begins with "a formless void when darkness covered the face of the deep." Alter's translation that we read today calls it "welter and waste." The important Hebrew word here is *tehom*, which we would call "chaos." Creation does not begin with a blank canvas. God's creation emerges from chaos. And it still does today.

Chaos is what we swim through whenever we experience suffering in our lives. Chaos is life unordered, life unbounded, life uncared for, life drawn away from God. We live in the middle of chaos. Sometimes chaos is experienced as a public trauma, and sometimes it's felt as a private wound. Sometimes it's viscerally present in our lives, and sometimes it's dormant. But even when we can't see it, it's churning away beneath the surface. God creates out of chaos, but chaos never really goes away.

In Jesus's baptism, he joins us in the middle of all that chaos. Before Jesus begins his ministry, before he gets involved with the suffering of the world, he goes to John the baptizer as a sign that he is not just going to sit on the side like a lifeguard and periodically count heads, but Jesus is actually going into the middle of everything with us, plunging into the face of the deep, up to his neck in the welter and the waste of our world.

The Spirit of God that moved over the waters in the beginning is the same Spirit that moves over the chaos of our lives today through our baptisms. Baptism changes us. When we baptize people we're not just giving them an insurance policy in case they die or throwing them a party. But we're extending God's invitation to them to walk with us toward the kingdom of God, to be freed to live in newness of life.

One of my favorite parts of presiding at baptisms is watching people's faces when we ask them, "Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God, the powers of this world that rebel against God, and the ways of sin that draw you from God?" It's pretty intense. But life is pretty intense, too. And God knows we have lots of forces we need to be freed from.

One of the forces baptism frees us from is exceptionalism. Exceptionalism is a form of idolatry that supposes that we are somehow categorically different from and superior to other people. That we float above the chaos and are exempt from the welter and waste of the world.

The deadly riot at the Capitol last week was exceptionalism made manifest. It will be tempting for some to look back on what happened and write it off as the result of a tactical mistake made by law enforcement or the result of an electoral system riddled with inefficiencies, both of which may be true to some extent, but what it also reveals to us is what happens when our civic life becomes corroded by the idolatry of exceptionalism.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Schjeldahl, "Many-Colored Glass," *The New Yorker*, accessed January 7, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/05/12/many-colored-glass-peter-schjeldahl>.

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We saw the exceptionalism of rioters who demand law and order for others but believe their own actions should be met with unqualified sympathy. We saw the exceptionalism of seditionists who bemoan the use of identity politics and go on to engage in its most noxious forms. And we saw the exceptionalism of domestic terrorists who think that their actions justify themselves no matter the consequences. There was a revealing interview on PBS Wednesday evening with a rioter who, when asked whom he trusted (Journalists? The courts? The president? Your friends?), responded, “Me.” And why wouldn’t he? He’s exceptional. He’s not responsible to anyone.

But more important and more harmful are the elected officials who cynically use the language of American exceptionalism as a cover for their irresponsibility. Who believe that American democracy is a gift of God that makes us a unique force for good in the world, and then spend years stretching that democracy to its limits with the false belief that it will just snap back into place once they’re done. But it doesn’t just go back to the way it was. There’s a cost. And if you stoke misinformation and conspiracy theories, don’t be surprised when people take you both literally and seriously.

Watching the chaos, it was hard not to think about this nation’s asylum seekers and refugees, in particular the refugees who came to America not long after the Cologne Cathedral was bombed, who left their homes for the promise of safety and freedom from authoritarianism. If you’re wondering what any of what happened on Wednesday has to do with church, remember that the evil we saw on Wednesday is the reason why some people are members of our congregation. We often forget that after World War II, one out of every three displaced people was a Lutheran.<sup>2</sup> One out of every six refugees was a Lutheran. So as far as I’m concerned, fighting authoritarianism is a pastoral care issue. How difficult it must be for our refugees and asylum seekers? How difficult must it be for them to see so much American carnage in what you were taught to believe was a city on a hill?

There was very little that happened this week that we hadn’t seen before. Just bigger. Just closer to the halls of power. Just more shocking. But if there is any lesson to be relearned from this week, it’s that it’s the people who believe wholeheartedly in their own exceptionalism who cause the most chaos in the world. It’s the people who believe they’re above the welter and waste of the world who end up creating even more of it for others to sift through. It’s the people who believe that “when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything,” who end up violating the body politic. As the radical 1960s musical “The Fantasticks” puts it, “Plant a radish. Get a radish.” Sow chaos, reap chaos. Worship exceptionalism, inherit the whirlwind.

The truth is our baptisms don’t free us from the chaos of the world and our own ability to create it. They only promise us the ability to trust God’s presence in the midst of it. They help us resist the forces that defy God and live with integrity. So when we celebrate baptisms, ministry in a chaotic world is what we’re inviting people into. If you want to follow God’s call on your life or if you want a child to follow God’s call on their lives, it’s going to mean going places that are difficult and challenging both in the world and in our selves. Baptism doesn’t protect you from the welter and waste of the world. It only means that you never encounter those situations without God being there to meet you.

And when we encounter Jesus in the chaos of the world and the chaos of our ourselves, we have reason to trust that God’s Spirit moves over the waters just as it did in the beginning. The words that God said about creation in the beginning and the words God the Father says about Jesus at the Jordan are the same words God says about us in the chaos of our lives. That we are embraced by divine grace.

New creation emerges from the chaos and from God’s Spirit moving over our lives. Not because we are exceptional or better than others, but because even in the welter and waste of the world, the Spirit of God makes us more like Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> Ralston Deffenbaugh 12/01/2008, “Ethical Decision Points in the History of the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service,” accessed January 7, 2021, <https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/423>.

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