

January 10, 2021 | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Genesis 1:1–5](#)

TITLE: **New Beginnings: Order Out of Chaos**

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Here we are early in the New Year. We can finally put last year behind us. No more 2020. We're at a new starting point—Year 2021—so it is appropriate to remember the first starting point—Year 0—God's creating of the heavens and the earth, when God called forth order out of chaos. And then Wednesday happened. Chaos out of order. In fact chaos called forth by the one constitutionally commissioned to protect order. What a way to begin a new year.

So here's where our Jewish colleagues are very wise. In the Jewish tradition, each day begins, not one minute after sunrise, but rather one minute after sunset. The sequence is always evening darkness through daylight—one day. Too often we think the sun sets at the end of an old day of missed potential. But in Judaism, sunset marks the beginning of a new day of untapped potential. Hence the wisdom of Genesis: there was evening, there was dawning—one day.

There is much we can learn from the opening words of Genesis. It speaks to us as individuals, facing whatever is before us in this New Year, and it speaks to us as a nation, confronting all that has been revealed about us in the last week. It is a message of hope—of light—yes, of God saying to us, “It is good.” So let's go back to the beginning.

Every act of creation requires a place to create. A potter needs a wheel and a surface on which to mold the clay. A writer needs a pen and paper; a composer needs a pencil and staff paper. A painter needs brushes, paint, and a stretched blank canvas upon which to bring art to life. So what was created on the first day of creation? Scripture talks about light and darkness, but remember, the sun, moon and stars weren't created until the fourth day. In effect God was creating a space for creation on the first day. The universe was formless and void, wild and waste; poetically a place of dark waters and chaos. God pushed the chaos back and established a place for something new: for life, for us. It wasn't done by chance or by whimsy. It was done because it was destined to be good.

Now, did the darkness disappear? Was the chaos destroyed? No. It was pushed back, but it remained close at hand, there on the margins of the blank canvas of creation. Chaos always feels close—the chaos of fear and anxiety, of self-doubt and worry, of mob rule, violence and darkness. But remember our Jewish roots. When the sun sets, the first thing we are supposed to do is light a candle. The candle pushes back the darkness and says “You shall not win. A new day of light is beginning. God is with us still.” Even now, if you feel discouraged or afraid, light a candle at dusk. Say a short prayer. Say “let there be light.” And know that God is good, all the time—and all the time, God is good, and mean it.

Each day is a blank canvas, gifted to us for us to fill. And the start of a new year is the perfect time to consider this blank canvas and set some goals and priorities for the days ahead. 500 years ago, St. Ignatius wrote his *Spiritual Exercises*, and a key part of them is the “daily examen” —a prayerful review of the day just past, looking for signs of God’s presence and grace. It is a practice of taking inventory—of naming assets, liabilities; and asking how might I strengthen what is good? Jesus always took inventory. Remember when he noticed that the huge crowd listening to him was hungry? The first question he asked the disciples was “How many loaves do you have?” (Mk 6:38) They took inventory and said, “We have five loaves and two fish.” To the disciples, it was a pittance before a crowd of 5000, For Jesus, it was enough for a miracle—but it only became enough once the disciples took time to stop, to imagine actually feeding the crowd, actually acting by God’s grace to care for others. The first step to filling the blank canvas of creation is to take inventory and to imagine doing something good with what you have.

The second step is to make sure you’re working with a level playing field. The artist’s canvas is stretched taut on its frame so the paint can be applied evenly. In the same way, the places in life where we seek to create things of beauty need to be level and fair for all concerned. This is hard, because our fleshly inclination is to look after our own interests first—to prioritize personal good over the common good. Yes, sin is real—but sin is less about breaking rules and more about believing you are an exception to the rules. Sin says: Stealing from work is wrong, but there is something I need and no one will miss this petty cash. Addictions are bad and self-destructive, but I can handle abusing prescription drugs, drinking at midday, or telling lies to my family to get what I need.

These sins of exception are at the heart of white privilege and all forms of racism. Many have pointed out the racist overtones in this week’s riot in Washington. National Guard and armored police were everywhere when people protested George Floyd’s death, but their absence was blatantly obvious on Wednesday as privileged white Trump supporters desecrated the capitol building, took their shameless selfies on the Senate floor, and provoked senseless losses of life that has stained our national honor. They evoked memories of mobs gathered around lynching trees, of slave masters raping women, of the American sin of white feet pressing down on the necks of Native American, Chinese, Mexican, and African bodies for over 400 years. We cannot create by desecrating. We need a level playing field; because until all are free, none are free.

Why do you think John the Baptist quoted Isaiah about mountains brought low and valleys lifted up? Why do you think Jesus called over the blind man by the side of the road—the leper shouting from the city gates—the woman with the flow of blood hiding in the shadows of the crowd—and then lifted them up to their full humanity, calling them beloved children of God? The canvas of creation must be a fair playing field and we all play a part in making this so. Remember: God’s creation didn’t eliminate chaos. God created a place for beauty and order to emerge whose boundaries push back chaos. Our lives find their spiritual purpose when we do the same—when we push back the chaos ever threatening from the margins and create that which is loving and good.

On Netflix right now, there's a powerful adaptation of August Wilson's play "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" starring Viola Davis and Chadwick Boseman. Boseman plays the trumpeter Levee—a young black man hoping for fame in a white world that constantly denies him power and dignity. In this tragedy, Levee lashes out against a colleague who happened to scuff his shoes, allowing the chaos of pain and injustice to wash over him in a senseless act of violence. We know that chaos is ever near. That is why we are to be ever vigilant—seeing each day as a new beginning—praying for grace and strength for the work before us. We speak up, act up, and persist, lighting candles that the darkness cannot overcome. And as we do so, with God, we say "It is good."

Order out of chaos. Resurrection hope. Earlier this week for this sermon I wanted to describe things that captured this idea. I thought about the hillsides around Mount St. Helens, destroyed by that volcano's eruption 40 years ago but now once more covered with green fields, wildlife and forest trees. And ironically I thought about the rebuilding of the capitol buildings after they were burnt in August 1814, the only time our capital had been occupied and partially destroyed by an enemy force. Back then, the British were cast out and the capitol re-built. May we have the courage to cast out the sinful extremism that led to the recent ransacking of those hallowed halls and re-build our nation's honor.

In the end, the best way to describe the new beginning before us – this new year, this new day of creation that is entrusted by God to us – is found in the phrase I used earlier: resurrection hope. The word 'resurrection' comes from the Latin word 'resurgere' to rise again. In Old English it was translated as "againrising." In German the word is "auferstehung"; in Dutch it is "opstanding" —both meaning to stand up again.

Popular Christianity sings and tells Jesus how much we love him while remaining silent about idolatry, injustice, and mob-violence. Biblical Christianity is far more muscular. It pushes back chaos, brokenness and despair. It makes a canvas for beauty, a level playing field that compassionately seeks justice for all. You may not feel up to this challenge – that it is too much for one person to do. But remember: When darkness falls and the sun sets, all it takes of us is to light one candle, and say a prayer trusting in the potential of each God-given new day beginning right then. For from that beginning comes resurrection—againrising—upstanding—rising again and again and again. That's what we do, we resurrection people. By God's grace resurrection hope makes order out of chaos. And yes, my friends, it is good. Thanks be to God.

AMEN