

Epiphany of the Lord (The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles)  
ISAIAH 60:1-6; PSALM 72:1-7, 10-14; EPHESIANS 3:1-12; MATTHEW  
2:1-12

Baptism of the Lord; First Sunday after the Epiphany  
GENESIS 1:1-5; PSALM 29; ACTS 19:1-7; MARK 1:4-11  
January 7, 2024

***From Chaos to Cosmos: Considering the  
Constancy of a Continuing Creation!***

**The Priestly writer who composed the first chapter of Genesis tells the ancient reader in eloquently articulated detail the great mythological story of the first creation account, an epic tale borrowing heavily, stealing perhaps, from Babylonian narratives such as the Gilgamesh Epic. Yes, the creation stories were birthed back in the day by a sister faith inspired by another religious mother! Plagiarism is perhaps the oddest form of linguistic, literary flattery, unless you happen to be the president of Harvard! Sad and complicated story! Rather than creating *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, the writer indicates to us, inferring that there was indeed a planet earth, a vast orb existing as a formless image, a globe consumed by, apparently embroiled in a massive whirlwind, struggling mightily to emerge from a forcefield driven by a great magnetic vortex, a void of undefinable, indescribable, indiscriminate, emptiness, all veiled under the cover of immense darkness, cloaked in the impossibility of its visibly pitch-black confusion. Just use your wildest imagination! Rather than describing this empty planetary space as “without form and void,” other translators have chosen the schizophrenic idea of chaos, causing me to reminisce about the old sitcom Get Smart, with agents Maxwell Smart and his gorgeous partner 99—also inspiring a great song by Toto, by the way—CONTROL always trying to disrupt the criminal enterprises carefully planned, subversively concocted with stealth and subterfuge, by the diabolically evil KAOS, kind of art imitating life as we read what**

appears on the surface to be a biblical version of good versus evil. No, not that simple! **Yes, chaos, masquerading as mass hysteria, totally out of control, but actually, in this biblical depiction, describing the ordered, unalterable, metronomic laws of science calling to mind the mysteries of quarks, black holes, and big bangs, all highly coordinated, more than sophisticated, these synchronized movements unfolding as if in slow motion. These mysterious dynamics, only recently discovered in terms of the span of time, millions of years in the making, appear on a first glance to indicate a disorganized space devoid of substance, lacking any semblance of balance, without a trace of recognizable equilibrium, not a hint of cohesiveness, but all this bedlam the exact opposite, all the polarities combined to perform in concert, coming together to create. No feng shui here, except! This organized chaos was another world, out of this world, other worldly! Yes, all creation, once the magic and miracle happened, was described by God as not just good, but very good, very goodness seizing the order of the day.**

**Despite a bleak, sterile environment, ironically this chaotic mass was filled with flurries of activity. In this creation tableau moving waters ebb and flow without any banks, boundaries or borders, an oceanic tide devoid any syncopated rhythm, only the crashing sounds of random rogue waves haphazardly bashing an imaginary coastline, restlessly, recklessly, unleashing an angry tempest and fury of an unbound, unbridled, ocean that invisible shores could not hold back, could not contain in any way, never kept at bay, somehow all bizarrely under control as if choreographed, orchestrated by a divine maestro conducting a symphonic creation against the backdrop of a harsh and starkly barren environment all hidden by the stirring, swirling, waters, but surely soon to beautifully emerge out of the deep, as if by the warm embrace of a protective cocoon. This creatively poetic writer says that the wind of God “swept over the waters,” and from there it reads like a piece of cake, belying the**

**complexity and intricacy, the very slim odds, of this planet coming together and producing life. Oh my!**

**The unfathomable depths covered an unimaginable, uninhabitable world, as if safely cocooned in a womb, the water breaking, an embryo all just desperately, impatiently, waiting to be born, the labor pains of the evolving universe giving birth to all that is and all that will be. Yes, the seascape begrudgingly gave way to a landscape revealing the first glimpses of a forming planet, a global sphere, a biosphere, of inestimable beauty and grace, teeming with every life form. In the Genesis writer's mind, it must have been perceived as if like a nonstop tsunami, an unrelenting hurricane beyond the shaking of the foundations of the worst named storm we have ever experienced! Surf's up! Talk about high tide! All together a testimony to the mirage of what appeared to be a lack of desperately needed order. Into the whirlwind of this chaotic randomness, the writer of this book of beginnings tells us that God amazingly, even miraculously, entered the chaos, the miracle of evolution taking hold in the forming cosmos in a grand suspension of time, culminating with a creative spark, perhaps triggered by a seismic shift of tectonic magnitude, literally of universal proportions, all creation continuing to unfold in the midst of this moving method molding the madness. From chaos to cosmos seems to reflect a divinely hatched blueprint planned from the foundation out of absolutely nothing, an orchestration of unimaginable brilliance, beauty and depth, the human creature biblically placed at the center of it all, no doubt representing the hopes and dreams of divine imagination.**

Sadly, as we continue to read these early chapters of the first book of the Bible, the Yahwist writer in the second chapter framing the second creation story soberly and stoically, perhaps regrettably, reveals a sad tale of woe, a sad state of affairs. We read that the human being, rather than continuing the process of amazingly incredible evolutionary

discovery, embracing the creative power of God, humanity shrinkingly recoils, regresses in the worst ways possible. Yes, the human creature takes the straight line, the easiest routes that would become dead ends, yes choosing what would become the well-worn paths of least resistance, the least common denominators of our existence. The human creature devolves, insecurely morphing into the very chaos creation had mightily strived to overcome, stunting if not stifling, suffocating, these holiest of creative processes that the Holy One sought to establish as foundational principles. It is as if there were a divine struggle enabling, even empowering, God to continue the eternal creative process, resistance suspending if not vanquishing the rhythm of an emerging cosmos in an ever-evolving creation equation. Yes, human beings managed to mess up the eternal ecosystem, pollution, global warming, climate change, all the tip of an iceberg, proof positive of our destructive abilities ironically perceived as advancements.

The Yahwist writer tells the story of the escapades of Adam and Eve, driven by the psychoses of unresolved shame infused with the writer's cultural obsession on sex as evil, as a weapon, a curse rather than a gift, complete with the introduction of the Satan figure who would spawn an unnecessary concept of hell, claiming residence of the ungodly place of fire and brimstone prepared for the devil and his legion of angelic demons. And then to top it all off for the reader, the demonic murder of Abel by his jealous and angry brother Cain. We read in gory detail Cain's wrathful response to God's selective blessing, accepting one offering and rejecting the other. Cain takes out his hostility by slaying his innocent sibling, leaving him dead in the field. From this time forward the reader of the biblical narrative would engage conflicted and confounding texts that point to the human struggle between the negatively dark reality that so often diminishes our humanity against the backdrop of the hopes and dreams that dawned in this new day, empowering the human to somehow amazingly overcome any

impediment, any obstacle, and even come close to fulfilling a divine worldview that touches holiness and reflects peace and harmony, goodwill, the grace and mercy that only comes when we are at our best, meaning when we are fully human, the proof of our pudding illustrated when we are most vulnerable, transparent, honest, yes, with God and neighbor and with self, fully loving, freed from all our bias and prejudice. The gap between who we are and who we long to be and who we can be is central to our human struggle. The Apostle Paul describes our dilemma in his ongoing conflict, a battle raging within himself between who he wants to be as a person and a person of faith and who he is, what he wants to do and what he does. It is the story of everyone! The wide expanse of space, the great divide between the danger and dread of chaos and the glory of cosmos is the difference we myopically experience every day of our lives. Far too often we not only stand at the edge of the abyss, but eagerly, or so it seems, willfully, perhaps even gladly, gleefully, dive into the very tempting clutches of our worst inclinations, threatening the potential, the capacity, of our best selves, sucked into the vortex of all that seeks to diminish our humanity as if on a search and destroy mission. Yes, evil is real. Call it sin if that helps! As the Psalmist (Psalm 2) lamentingly inquired for the ages, "Why do the heathen rage?" John Shelby Spong would suggest that the cause is rooted in the failure, the inability, of humanity to emotionally mature, that human beings have not yet fully evolved, our immature actions revealing our pathetically inclined plight that surfaces on more than occasion!

Yes, the story of our survival as a species, an inherent instinct driving our motivation, seems to have its location in our finding ways to overcome our pedestrian ambitions, far removed from the good, even very good, life God desires for us. We are instinctually equipped to thrive, not just survive, all of us delightfully, powerfully, created to succeed beyond our wildest imagination. That blessing is the story of the Bible from cover to cover. What we discover in its pages, is that

even in our worst condition, our worst moments, the circumstances and situations that threaten to overwhelm and destroy our civility and even ourselves, that we are a resilient lot, always a remnant surviving our perils, our own self-inflicted destruction, somehow bouncing back, reflecting the resiliency and hope that is instilled within all of us as living and breathing images of the Divine. For the most part our lives are lived somewhere in the middle, not necessarily on the edges, somewhere between the polarities of our creatively visualized desires and our present predicaments, somewhere between the Yin and the Yang, to use an intuitively insightful Chinese metaphor. We are always living in an interim reality. No matter the dire nature of our unique scenarios, an inner voice, call it the holy and still speaking Spirit of God, continues to nudge us and affirm that a better day is ahead, and that life is always worth the living. We continually turn the page of our unfolding story! “The sun will come out tomorrow,” to quote from the musical Annie! In the words of the late basketball coach Jim Valvano, “Never give up, no, never give up!”

**As I pondered this wonderfully crafted narrative describing the amazing primordial beginnings in the book of Genesis, I began to wonder how the images of chaos and hope interplay as both images guide our life and work. Perhaps this is one among many challenging struggles inherent within all of us, but if we are honest with ourselves, and yes, with each other, perhaps we must confess, are forced to admit to a certain chaotic twist that drives all our ambition and initiative, the motivation in all our methodology, as we simply try and sort out the complexities of this life we live. We learn to work well under pressure, to even thrive, especially when we are forced to face encounters that contain more than a hint of what seems like out-of-control dynamics dominating our surroundings. Sometimes all the challenges that seek to consume us give us a certain calm, a peacefulness, an uncanny ability to focus, to create cosmos out of chaos. I for one do not keep a tidy desk, ironically finding organization**

in my disorganization. It can get rather messy, but I know where everything is and when an item needs immediate attention. I also could not help but think about this thing called the “congregational way” that drives our polity, the way we do church, including the way we do our search processes. Indeed, what a delightfully messy system, what a chaotic governance we have created denominationally and congregationally. Our processes really are organized chaos, the most confusing and confounding exercises and we would have it no other way. It is exciting while stressful and anxiety producing, a joyful journey creating a certain level of insecurity, revealing every area of individual and congregational vulnerability. It is truly bane and blessing and all mixed together, chaotic but creative, our own cosmos emerging in our routines. No doubt very rewarding! Or so we all hope and pray!

**For those of us in the Christian faith tradition, the scriptures we call our own bring further resolution to the randomness of an unscripted movement, the seismic shift from chaos to cosmos, from hopelessness to hopefulness, bringing further clarity into view, as we learn of the way of Jesus as a better way, yes, the best way to focus, to order our lives. Jesus, according to a tradition that is steeped in mythological imagination, was born and yes, baptized, into the midst of extreme chaos and his life, as a citizen under the thumb of Roman rule and occupation, reflected absolute bedlam at every turn. Condemned as a common criminal, Jesus’ execution by crucifixion was the apex reminder of the chaotic world in which he lived, his small band of followers a threat to the juggernaut of prestigious patriarchal empire demanding that he conveniently disappear, necessitating his quick though inconvenient death. An outsider not privy to the mystery found in the passion narratives might conclude from these ancient texts that chaos prevailed at the cross, a most reasonable conclusion, though those of us who believe by faith, uniquely Christian faith, those among us who are buoyed by our hope in things not seen, have a different, perhaps a counter-intuitive, take, a**

**different viewpoint, a different tale to tell.** We ironically, strangely perhaps, embrace the polarities of the passion finding life in the midst of death. Jesus died the same way he lived, showing supporters and naysayers alike that death had no hold on him, that it is never the final act. As always, it is a matter of perspective! Where you sit or stand determines what you see! In Jesus' life and teachings, his mission and ministry, yes, even in his death, indeed we discover ways to bring hope to life, to achieving "our best life now," to quote a book title by Joel Osteen, something I swear I thought I would never do in any imaginable context. Yes, our desire and our movement individually and collectively, that is, as a beloved church community, a family of faith, is to make hope a reality, fully realized in our daily routines, in all the adventures this life holds for us each and every day we are blessed to live it, a tangible part of our human being and doing. In Jesus, we see an individual completely and totally in touch and in tune with the will of God, incarnationally immersed in transcendent mystery that or who came to be "covenantally" and intimately known by name among the Israelites as Yahweh, but now even more intimately, personally, relationally known to the max degree as Abba, Father, a parental figure reflecting the very essence of the best of parenting love. Perhaps no other human being has ever experienced the presence of God in the way that Jesus did, so up close and personal that you could taste, touch, see, hear, and feel that mysterious pull, divine Holiness a magnetically mysterious incubator and progenitor of awe and wonder, a harbinger of a new day dawning, a new way of expressing the old faith tradition. It could be said, easily argued, that Jesus exuded the very Spirit nature of God-presence. This living, breathing, Spirit pulsed, pouring from every pore in his body. We learn in Jesus that incarnation is not only available, but is inherently imbued in the human, part and parcel of our humanity.

Not only was this humble Rabbi able to intuitively grasp the import of the hopes and dreams of the ages, a faithful hope that he precariously



and preciously held in his hospitably welcoming and inclusive vision for all humanity, but Jesus had at his disposal an unlimited capacity for what the late John Shelby Spong describes as “wasteful love,” the ability to give of oneself, to empty himself, to the point that self was no longer visible or viable. Jesus extended the widest invitation to drink deeply from this well, bread and wine then and now a wonderful metaphor of this level of consumption. When we are able to conceive and then even manage to accomplish that level of this radical expression of loving, great things indeed, we have the amazing capacity to become all that we can be, a most worthy goal allowing us to catch a glimpse of what it means to be created as part of the cosmos, stamped in the divine image, *imago Dei*, far removed from the chaos that diminishes our humanity. **In Jesus, we learn that social justice is the way, the only way to truth and life, toward a better and brighter future, a future baptized in God’s loving grace, God’s gracious loving. Yes, his way or the highway is about love, the thing that is the essence of God, not a ticket to paradise! In Jesus there were no boundaries between human beings, no classes, no status, nothing that would separate or segregate. His egalitarian principles and convictions move us from chaos to cosmos, to creation, revealing every time what is possible when the peoples of the world, this global village we all occupy, find their commonality, holding tightly to their oneness, embracing their unity in diversity, while diminishing, even destroying, all the disagreeability that seeks to separate and segregate, to divide and conquer. Martin Luther King, Jr. once prophetically misquoted Theodore Parker, declaring, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Therein is our hope, our present and eternal hope! Day by day our task, our job, our goal, our annually renewed resolution, is to become while building this utopian home that is more than an aspiring image, yes, to create cosmos out of chaos, to continue the work to make Isaiah’s prophecy of the peaceable realm more than a pipedream, to embody ancient poetry that unfortunately can be benignly read as mere words on a page. It is this mythic arc**

**that takes us from the chaos of formlessness and the great void staring blankly back at us, moving us to the cosmos of all that is perceptible, possible in the world, from the chaos of our warring madness, to a local and global civility intended from the foundations of the earth, yes, a planet at peace, all our hopes and dreams manifest in the potential of divine creation. Our baptism is a constant reminder, a sign, of our commitment to follow Jesus wherever he leads, and to lead the way forward with social justice for all! No wonder on the sunny side of the flood, God is reported to have sent a rainbow, a beautiful, multicolored arc, as a sign of hope and peace and goodwill. Wow, what a wonderful multifaceted, multipurpose, symbol for the ages! The word of the biblical writers is thus a succinct one, "Never lose hope!" As we enter another new year, we keep our eye on the prize and our hand to the plow, until the hopes and dreams of all the years are met in us and throughout the world both day and night!**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and brings cosmos out of chaos, every time, all the time, fulfilling the one and only hope of humanity, peace on earth, good will to all. Amen and amen!**

