

The Interpretation of God's Word
Susan R. Andrews
Friday, July 7, 2006

Out of the Chaos
Based on *Genesis 1:1-2; John 1*

Dedicated to Gladys Elizabeth Glendening Andrews,
Presbyterian Woman par excellence 1916–2006

It was, and is, chaos—this gift called life, this place called world, this community called church. And chaos is where God lives and moves and expresses being—God's being, your being, the church's being. Now, for Presbyterians (for decently and in order Presbyterians) chaos is not a comfortable place to be. But sisters and brothers, chaos *is* a creative place to be, and creating life—abundant life—is what all of us who bear Christ's name are all about.

Westminster Presbyterian Church in Spokane, Washington, was one of the most chaotic places I visited when I was Moderator of the General Assembly. It was a rather dingy, ramshackle building, and unlike many of our congregations, Westminster had neither the money nor the interest to pour mission dollars into fresh paint and high tech renovations. They were simply too busy being the church. Stuffed into one corner of the building was Christ's Clinic—a bustling oasis of healing in a poor, immigrant neighborhood where more than 500 neighbors (most without health insurance) are treated by dozens of volunteer nurses and doctors. For \$15 a visit.

But before you reach the clinic, you pass two rooms overflowing into the hallway. Clearly in violation of fire codes. One is the food cupboard and the other is the clothing closet, offering sustenance to the least of these whom Christ loves. And then, we finally reached the small fellowship hall where Christ's Kitchen was in full swing. There 40 women (of all shapes, sizes, colors and theological stripes, and many of them welfare recipients) were gathered, studying scripture, praying and sharing their stories—but only to center themselves for the task of the day, which was to learn small business skills. Each week they make the gourmet food in the church kitchen that brings each of them a small income. And then they practice the skills that can help them become independent and alive as women who can survive in a chaotic world. (And, by the way, I am happy to tell you that I encouraged them to apply for a Thank Offering grant. They now have a brand new industrial kitchen—paid for by your love and your pennies.)

As we prepared to leave this astounding place, Westminster's commissioned lay pastor (CLP) quietly described for us the worshiping congregation that supports all the hubbub in the building. Westminster is a community comprised of the poor, the rich, the educated, the drop-outs, the immigrants, the mentally ill, gays and straights—a veritable stew of humanity who gather each week in order to be re-created, and to be sent to feed the physical and spiritual hunger of a chaotic world.

Chaos is as central to our scriptures as is creation and covenant. In the second verse in *Genesis*, we read that it was out of a dark formless void that God created the world—a void that was being stirred and agitated by a chaotic wind. Now, whether you believe that all that we see was created

in seven days or whether you believe that in a moment of scientific genius, God exploded with a big bang, starting a billion year's process of exquisite unfolding (in other words, whether you are a creationist or evolutionist), the point is the same.

God, our chaos-loving, chaos-breathing, chaos-living God created *life*—your life, my life, the world's life. And though order has begun to emerge, the chaos has never gone away. According to biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, the purpose of these first two verses in *Genesis* is to proclaim—with vivid promise—that, indeed, the chaos of this world and the chaos of our lives are part of God's plan, and that chaos can be, and usually is, claimed for God's historical purposes.

The wonderful congregation that I have served in Bethesda for the past 17 years is full of National Institute of Health scientists. And so I have learned to be very careful when I talk about physics, chemistry or biology. Even so I usually end up with articles from scientific journals in my mailbox the morning after I have tiptoed into scientific territory underlining my naiveté and stupidity when it comes to thermodynamics. But here I go again. The world of quantum physics can actually help us understand our biblical text for this evening. For far from seeing chaos as the opposite of order, quantum physics has learned that chaos which “disturbs our equilibrium can actually help create new forms of order” (William M. Easum, *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers*, Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1995).

Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers is a book on change within the church; the author comments

Chaos, or disorder, is desirable because it is the start of something new. Organizations, over time, do not have to wind down and go out of existence if they embrace the chaos and learn a new way to achieve old things (p. 25).

Sounds like good advice for our beloved Presbyterian Church as we swirl around in a chaos of confusion and conflict!

Actually, our creative God has always made something new whenever chaos seemed to be taking over. It was out of the angry turbulence of the flood, that God repented and promised never again—sealing the deal with a chaotic burst of color sweeping across the sky. It was out of the chaotic oppression of slavery, that God parted the Red Sea pushing a motley crew of co-creationists through the waters of the past into the glorious freedom of the future. Miriam and the women celebrated a chaotic re-creation, as the terror and beauty of wilderness stretched before them. It was through the inevitable violence of war woven at every turn through Hebrew history that God kept calling God's people to obedience and hope, never abandoning us even when we seemed to love darkness more than light. It was in the provocative chaos of the prophetic word that God sent Deborah and Jeremiah and Amos and Ezekiel and Isaiah to shape us up, and calm us down, and create vision as the antidote to violence. It was through the chaotic curiosity of Eve, and the uppity defiance of Puah and Shiprah, and the reckless laughter of Sarah and the wracking sobs of Hannah and the foolish bravery of Esther and the uprooted loyalty of Ruth that God kept stirring the waters of life with promise and power and presence. And it was out of the

shattered shards of the exile, that God dragged us back to our roots, back to our purpose, back to the call to be a light to the nations and a people of compassion and hope.

But it was out of the turbulent confusion of a maiden's womb, that God most emphatically spoke—confronting chaos, celebrating chaos and using chaos for good. For as we have heard, “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and Word was God.” And with emphatic, enthusiastic creativity, God entered the chaos of a broken world with a new creative Word—a fleshy word, full of grace and truth, a fleshy word that spoke the world into new life, not with law, but with love; not with violence, but with vision; not with shoulds and oughts; but with promise and possibility.

And Jesus—far from resisting chaos—entered it joyfully, creatively, compassionately, knowing that chaos is the womb of possibility. Knowing that chaos, and not order, is where God lives most of the time. Jesus stirred up the acceptable order of things by turning water into wine; by troubling the waters in order to heal the blind man; by shaking up the establishment and rewriting sacred texts; by talking to and touching women; by playing with children and ignoring adults; by eating with sinners and welcoming the outcasts; by healing on the Sabbath and disrupting the sanctity of the Temple; by welcoming questions; and by transforming the certainty of law into the imagination of parable.

And in one of my favorite stories in the gospels, Jesus finds peace in the midst of stormy chaos by turning the wind into a lullaby, and falling asleep, head resting on a pillow in the back of the boat. It was of course out of the chaos of crucifixion—the hatred and torture and death of human sin and brokenness—where Jesus most completely found new order, new hope and new possibility. And even as the sky darkened, the earth quaked and the sacred curtain in the temple tore in half, he was re-creating the cosmos—speaking into creation a brand new world. He spoke a stunning re-birth of all creation that turned life as we know it on its ear—and changed us, his disciples forever.

Don't forget that our chaotic, creative God did not stop with that stone rumbling away from the tomb on Easter morning. Fifty days later, with dancing flames, a wondrous wind and a cacophony of voices, the Word continued to create as we, the church, were born out of the chaos of Pentecost. We were commissioned to become the resurrected body of Christ on earth, just as we were called, commanded and christened to be creative chaos in the name of Christ until the work of creation is complete, until full shalom—peace and justice and dignity and fullness—becomes the only form of order that our imaginative God will bless.

And so this evening, as we begin this journey of community this week here at the Gathering, I invite each of us and all of us to become companions in chaos, shaped and ordered by the Spirit to be the stuff of creativity in God's name. And, I invite us to embrace three distinct energies that always swirl around within creative Christian chaos:

Defiance

Creative Christian chaos always includes defiance—defiance of darkness; defiance of injustice; defiance of complacency; defiance of violence and hatred and despair. The Word became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth—and in us—to defy the evil, sin and brokenness of God's created world.

One of my favorite stories of defiance comes from the early days of the Civil Rights movement. Martin Luther King was a young preacher—26 years old—who had suddenly been thrust into the front lines of the fight for freedom and human dignity for black people in America. And he was feeling unprepared, scared and powerless. Already the threats were coming in. He was harassed and jailed for going 30 miles an hour in a 25 mile an hour zone. And one night around midnight, while his wife and young daughter slept a few feet away, Martin received a phone call. It was the Klan calling: “Nigger, we are tired of you and your mess now. And if you aren’t out of this town in three days, we’re going to blow your brains out, and blow up your house.” In a sermon, King reflected on that night, saying that while he thought the cause he was fighting for was just and right, he was starting to lose courage. King said he heard the voice of Jesus, encouraging him to continue the fight, reassuring him that he would never be alone (story from Philip Yancey, *Soul Survivor*, New York: Galilee Trade, 2003).

Sure enough three nights later a bomb was thrown on the front porch of the King home. Though there was smoke and broken glass, miraculously—providentially—no one was injured. Chaos and hostility followed King throughout the rest of his life, but he refused to retaliate. He refused to build walls of hatred. Instead the Spirit that was poured into his heart that dark lonely night gave him the peace of Christ—a painful peace that sustained him even in the ugliest times, a defiant peace that propelled him through the chaos of conflict and danger toward the dream and the vision of abundance for all of God’s children.

Delight

And so, dear friends, creative Christian chaos always includes the dimension of defiance. But equally important to the life-giving possibility of chaos is delight—the same kind of delight that God experienced in the unfolding work of creation, the same kind of delight that led God to say, with utter delight, “It is good. It is very, very good!”

When I visited South Africa two and a half years ago, I had the privilege of preaching in Alexandria, the black township outside of Johannesburg. As we drove into the community, the sharp contrast with the white neighborhoods we had just left was startling. Tin and cardboard shanties were crammed together connected by rutted dirt roads teeming with garbage and sewage, small children running around with bare feet and tattered clothing.

But there, in the midst of this oppressive poverty was a small tidy brick building—the new Presbyterian Church that was built with General Assembly mission dollars. The women were already there when we arrived, preparing the feast we would have after worship, tidying up. They proudly wore their starched white blouses and black skirts, the uniform of those who sing, pray and lead most of worship. Everywhere I looked in the midst of such chaotic oppression, I saw delight—a spotless sanctuary, robust laughter in the steamy kitchen, affection at every turn.

When it came time to preach, Makei Masongo, the pastor, stood up to serve as my interpreter in proclaiming the Word. I started off with my carefully prepared manuscript, Makei translating my crafted words as best he could. Soon, however, I realized that the people were laughing. But what I was saying was not funny. So, then I knew that Makei was preaching his own sermon. So, I simply threw away my notes and began to match his rhythm and energy with my own stories

and my own joy. Never have I sweated so much during a sermon, and never have I so enjoyed proclaiming the creative, chaotic word of God!

Following the sermon, the women got up to sing, rocking and harmonizing and tapping their hymnals with unadulterated joy and delight. And I began to rock and sing and move with them. Makei started to grin. And then he offered me the best compliment of my whole moderatorial year. In front of the whole congregation, he said, “Susan, you must be part Zulu woman!”

My friends, ever since that day, I crave chaos and energy and delight in worship, and I simply can't stand still even when we are singing a pious, proper Protestant hymn. Worship is a place where the chaos of God is embraced and experienced and passed on. And if we are going to be companions in creative Christian chaos, we too must dare to be delighted—with our souls, our bodies and the agility and imagination of our minds.

Discipleship

And so creative Christian chaos embraces defiance and embodies delight. But ultimately, as companions in chaos, our primary call is to re-order the world through discipleship. As those who are baptized into a Living Christ, as those who have willingly submitted to Jesus as Lord, and received power and purpose to be assertive servants of grace, we have defined ourselves primarily and always as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Alice Winters has been our mission co-worker in Colombia for the last 40 years. Alice is a minister of Word and Sacrament. But long before she was a pastor, she was an elder. And long before she was an elder, she was an attorney and a disciple of Jesus Christ. And long before that, she was a little girl growing up in Presbyterian Sunday school. When our denominational leaders asked Alice to leave Colombia a few years ago because life had become so dangerous, she simply refused to do so.

Now, in the Columbian church, 85 percent of the pastors are under the age of 35. And in a culture where death and violence is an everyday existence, these pastors have had to risk their lives to stand up for peace and justice for the 4 million refugees displaced by the violence in that country. Alice has taught biblical studies in the Presbyterian seminary in Baranquilla for more than 30 years. Combining the evangelical joy of the New Testament, with the prophetic social justice message of the Hebrew scriptures, Alice has shaped a transformational vision for the leaders of the small but mighty Egleisia Presbyteriana de Colombia. Alice is single, but she has mid-wived an entire church.

One of my most abiding images of the year I traveled will be Alice praying and witnessing to a crowd of 200 utterly poor and destitute women and children in Medellin, Colombia. They had been waiting in the heat, stuffed to overflowing, in an upper room of a ramshackle community center paid for by your mission dollars. We crawled up rickety steps and squeezed through the crowd to the front. Yes, they had been patiently waiting for two hours to hear a comforting word from this gringa from the United States, the Moderator of the PC(USA)'s General Assembly. Well, I was overwhelmed. What could I say to them, these beautiful, emaciated faces clutching tiny children in hope and need? My heart broke even as I stumbled through a message of grace and promise.

But it was Alice who truly blessed them. With her arms defiantly reaching toward heaven, she prayed in passionate Spanish, imploring, beseeching Almighty God, offering extravagant praise for the glorious gift of life, and promising that she—that we—will never stop creating for those women a hope filled future. Friends, we dare not let Alice, those women or our gracious God down.

Sisters and brothers, the defiance and delight of discipleship came alive for me one Sunday in my second year of seminary. The joy I have found in serving Jesus started in the darkness and despair of chaos. I was serving as the chaplain's assistant at Wellesley College and one morning I had been asked to read the Hebrew scripture text in worship. It was that depressing passage from the third chapter of *Genesis*—the story of the curse of Eve and Adam. I found myself growing angry as I read the words, particularly the words about Eve being subject to the authority of her husband. After all I was trying to figure out how to be a woman with authority in a patriarchal church, and these words didn't help. I sat down after the scripture, and found myself turning inward. With tears streaming down my face, I cried out silently in my soul "No, if this is the kind of punishing and judging God that you are, I want no part of you."

And the God of my childhood simply died. I was left with dark, deep emptiness, and I began to shake. Sensing my distress, a woman sitting behind me placed her hand on my shoulder. And at that very moment, I heard a voice, a warm, rich, tender voice speaking in my heart. It was Jesus recreating me out of the dark chaos of doubt, saying "If any one is in Christ, that person is a new creation. The old is past and gone and the new has come."

And then I knew that whatever judgment or discrimination or doubt had been hindering my call to be God's image in the world, that barrier was past and gone, and a new identity awaited me. And that was the day that I was born all over again, born to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, a companion of chaos in the continuing work of the Spirit.

In the week ahead, we will be considering the gift and the call of creation – the opportunity we all have to embrace the chaotic freedom of God's grace and to find order within it God's shimmering vision of shalom—the justice and joy of Jesus—the gifts of God, for the people of God, all to the glory of God.

The late William Sloan Coffin revealed in the chaos of faith. He once said: "I love the recklessness of faith. First you leap, and then you start to grow wings."

My friends, this week let us leap. And then together let us grow wings and fly.

May it be so—for you and for me. Amen.

Note: Manuscript is property of Presbyterian Women. Permission is granted (without request) for members of the organization to read or share the text at PW events or for interpreting the Gathering.

For uses that are outside of PW, reprints or including the work in a cost item, contact Presbyterian Women, 888/728-7228, ext. 5688 or email sgillies@ctr.pcusa.org.