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OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON

Chaos. Order. A sermon by Nany S. Taylor, Senior Minister

Based on the Song of Deborah, Judges 5

Chaos. Disorder. Confusion. Turmoil. That's how the book of Genesis opens. It opens upon chaos: a soupy, agitating mass of disorder and darkness.

There's a commonly held notion that God created out of nothing, created *ex nihilo* ...but that's not the story told in Genesis. Genesis tells the story of a God who imposes order upon pre-existent disorder.

The King James Version renders Genesis 1.2 as "the earth was without form and void." But that's way too tame. Hebrew scholars say it should read something like this "the earth was wildness and waste" or this "the earth was welter and waste". In other words, in the beginning was disorder: heaving waters, deepest darkness, thumping threat, roiling menace.

Moreover, in the Bible, chaos is a malevolent, shape-shifting force, ever encroaching, never finally defeated. It can be tamed and restrained. Like a lion tamer with chair and whip, it can be staved off. But chaos is a force with a will. It morphs and adapts, mutates and pivots, ever seeking new ways to assert and insinuate itself.

It is upon this – upon chaos and turmoil - that God imposes order: day and night, the rhythm of the seasons, the separation of the waters – sea from ocean, rivulet from river, pond from lake, marshland from bog. God imposes the emergence and definition of land – continent, island, and peninsula; hill and valley, tundra and desert, canyon and forest.

Even with all this ordering achieved, in the biblical world view, the overcoming of chaos isn't a

"once and done." Not at all. No. Chaos is a perpetual threat. Therefore the imposition of order – the staving off of chaos – is a full time job: God's and ours.

On one level, chaos is the weeds that overcome your garden and choke your roses.

Or, chaos is the kitchen sink and kitchen counters piled high with dishes and pots and bowls and utensils, that haven't been cleaned in months. It is the food that has spoiled, and the flourishing of flies and maggots. It is spreading stink and foulness. How did this happen? No one did the dishes! No one staved it off! Lacking the imposition of order, rot and grubs are an irresistible life-force.

However, in the eternal battle between chaos and order much more is at stake than a dirty kitchen. In our Bible – throughout the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation – God is intensely interested in the ordering of human life, human society.

Chaos is not merely the absence of social order. Biblically speaking, the absence of social order is also the absence of security and well-being; the absence of social harmony and stability. Biblically speaking, security and well-being, harmony and stability are what God wants *for* us and *from* us. These are what God wants us to provide each other. They do not happen without the imposition of order.

Humanly speaking, chaos is the result of greed unchecked and cruelty unrestrained. It is the fact of slavery under Pharaoh. It is the stinging, flesh-twitching cruelty of the whip. It is the empty belly. And, at the end of the day, not even the dignity or the hope of wages, just overwhelming weariness and devastating despair.

After God imposes order on the chaos of Creation, God imposes order on human chaos. How? With the Ten Commandments. They are a staving off of chaos. “Here you go, human. Here are laws to live within. Do not kill. Do not covet. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness against your neighbor.” The Ten Commandments are the imposition of order upon human society. But not just any order. Order with justice. Compassionate order. Order, in fact, with a bias for the poor, the fail, those who will be devoured by unchecked greed and unrestrained cruelty.

Without such laws it is wild and wooly out there. Without the imposition of order, it is welter and waste out there, and the survival of the fittest. Without such laws, it is a lawless land wherein might-makes-right, it’s dog-eat-dog, and every-man-for-himself. And the weak? The weak are expendable.

Without laws to protect and guard human life and human dignity, there is the chaos of slavery. There is Hitler and Nazism, segregation, separate and unequal; white supremacy; forced human migrations: desperate families without home or homeland, destitute, utterly vulnerable.

But God expects more from us than that. While the survival of the fittest is fine for beasts of the field and the fishes of the sea and the fowls of the air, God expects more from us than that. After all, we humans – the species with the very large brains – we are made just a little lower than the angels. (Psalm 8) We are made to be creators and co-creators with God. Which means, we are made to stave off the chaos ... to instill upon human society order, fairness, justice, morality.

Meet Deborah. Deborah was an early Israelite leader. Deborah’s story is told in the biblical Book of Judges. Deborah lived during the Iron Age, roughly eleven hundred years Before the Common Era. Deborah had it all. She was a charismatic leader. She was wise. She was a prophet. She was a warrior. And, she was a Judge. Deborah was amazing ... think Wonder Woman amazing.

By day, Deborah set up shop under a palm tree. Israelites came to her for sage advice, or to settle disputes, to ask her help and aid. It was also under her palm tree that Deborah summoned military generals and gave orders to the troops.

When her people were being attacked or threatened, Deborah exchanged her judge's gown for a warrior's weapons. Think Wonder Woman Cuffs and the Lasso of Truth and the Royal Tiara.

Deborah arose to leadership at a time of moral confusion and social chaos. It was an era rife with partisanship and violent clashes between neighboring tribes. Each one vying for a larger piece of the pie. Things were falling apart. Spiritual decay was rotting the society from the inside out. The peasant class was especially vulnerable.

It was Deborah's vocation to wring order from the chaos, to impose justice upon the bedlam, security upon disarray. It was Deborah's vocation, on behalf of God, to impose order, just order, order which mandated, among other things, protections for the weak and vulnerable.

After a particularly spectacular triumph, Deborah wrote a song and sang the song in a rollicking ceremony of celebration. The song memorialized the triumph and occasioned celebration. Her song is a freedom song. Like any freedom song, it bolstered courage, inspired participation, fostered community, strengthen a sense of collective identity and, not least, it enshrined the story of the overcoming of chaos, of the victory of justice and compassion so that the story could be told and retold and passed down generation to generation.

Deborah's leadership is a single episode in a great trajectory in the battle between chaos and order. The trajectory begins with the creation: with God's imposition of order upon the agitating chaos at the beginning of time. It moves into the Exodus and the giving of the law – the Ten Commandments – a way ordering Israelite life. During this period, Moses and Joshua are the human mediators of order and, for the most part, they do pretty well. After the death of Joshua there emerges the Period(s) of the Judges, which is followed by the Period of the Kings, the monarchy. Each iteration of human leadership, in each generation and epoch and era, has the same divine purpose: wresting moral order from immoral chaos, wresting compassion from cruelty, fairness from greed.

After all, we are made just a little lower than the angels.

Maybe you have noticed, recently, that our nation has become a harsh and unbearably cruel place for too many people. Maybe it feels to you, as it does to me, as if the moral center has collapsed in on itself and we have reverted to a dog-eat-dog, might-makes-right world. We shouldn't be surprised by this. It's predictable. Such is the state to which human societies revert when there is no overarching moral authority working tirelessly to stave off the chaos.

Maybe it's too much to expect that there's another Deborah out there, a single mighty hero or heroine, who can save us from ourselves.

But what if the church imagined itself, fashioned itself as a kind of Deborah? A moral force. A people and a place committed to wringing order from the chaos around us.

Maybe it is the church's vocation at just such a time as this to overwhelm "the welter and waste" of human society with harmony and concord.

When your friends or neighbors, your co-workers or family shake their heads and say to you: "The world has gone to hell in a handbag!" You can say: "Yes, but there's a church, corner of Boylston and Dartmouth, descendants of Deborah, who are fighting for the right, for good; a people for whom there is no justice without mercy, or mercy without justice; a people who count compassion a virtue. Maybe they're not winning, but every day they give witness to the God of Israel, the God who freed the enslaved, and who lifted women into leadership; whose work it is to stave off the encroaching chaos with order and dignity, kindness and compassion."

Tell them: "We're not giving up." Tell them: "We've been monitoring this ancient battle play out for thousands of years: – this battle between chaos and order, between good and evil, between cruelty and compassion." Tell them, "As for us, we are the descendants of Deborah. We will not admit defeat. We're still engaged. We're fighting for the right."