

Rev. Dr. Craig Howard
“From Chaos to Creation”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, January 10, 2021

2 Kings 5:9-15

So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha’s house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, ‘Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.’ But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, ‘I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?’ He turned and went away in a rage. But his servants approached and said to him, ‘Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, “Wash, and be clean”?’ So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, ‘Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant.’

Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’

I was raised in the Chicago area where Lake Michigan dominates the topography. Now, if you've never been to one of the Great Lakes, you probably have the wrong image of Lake Michigan. It's huge. A person cannot see across the lake to look into Michigan, or you cannot look up the length of the lake from Chicago up into Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In Chicago, you never say the words, "Go east." You always say, "Go towards the lake." We moved to Madison, Wisconsin. Marilyn and I found out that that city is divided by two lakes as well, Lake Mendota and Lake Monona. We arrived in Madison on

February 14th, 2006. I remember the day because the next day it snowed 18 inches. And on the next day, the temperatures dropped to minus 30.

Now, we had just gotten our cable TV hooked up in time to watch the University of Madison students trying to swim in the frozen lake. They were outside in these freezing temperatures. The students would cut a hole into the ice of the frozen lake. But before they could all dive in, it would freeze over again. Well, then coming down here to St. Louis, I learned what a river is. I was familiar with the Mississippi because we would have to cross the Mississippi River driving to Texas from Chicago in order to visit my grandmother. Now, my first year in the St. Louis area, the Meremec, the Mississippi, and the Missouri Rivers crested and overflowed. The volume of water shook me. I had never seen so much water outside of the banks of any body of water. I was unable to go to work one day because the water had flooded all of the streets and there was no access to the roads to get to my job.

Another water piece for me is cruising. You remember cruises? One of my favorite things to do on a cruise is to just sit outside on the deck at night wrapped in a blanket listening to the ocean waves. I've learned that water can be beautiful, and water can be dangerous. People travel great distances just to go to the ocean or the lake or the river. We are drawn by the water. We cannot live without it, and yet it can drown us too. People in ancient times saw water as the place of chaos and danger. Water was chaotic and creative, both life-giving and could cause death. In our first lesson, the great general Naaman was stricken with a skin disease. And in spite of his arrogance and stubbornness, he finally submitted to the advice of Elijah the Prophet and found healing in the Jordan River. In the poem, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, Langston Hughes writes, "I've known rivers: Ancient, dusky rivers. My soul has grown deep like rivers."

Our second lesson opens with John, the baptizer, receiving people who wanted to be baptized in the Jordan River. There are some things we know about John's baptism and then there are many things we do not know. We know that John stood in the Jordan River, but we do not know if John actually immersed the people or not. And we do not know what he said to them while he was baptizing them. We do not even know if he actually did the baptizing, or if one of his disciples did the baptizing while he said the words. But we do know that the people came to John because they wanted to change their lives. John's baptism had two components: repentance and forgiveness. To repent means to turn, to change direction and take a different path. Repent means to leave a self-serving, narcissistic path, and turn instead toward God. And in response, God will forgive. God will bring spiritual healing and welcome you into the baptized in God's kingdom. The people who came to John wanted to be baptized in water because there is something about entering the chaos and dangers of water that can bring change and transformation. It is as though water can disrupt our normative spirit. Many of us begin each day with a bath or a shower. Sure, it's for cleansing, but is also a way for us to kind of reset ourselves, reset our spirit for the new day ahead. Baptism and water is a refreshing renewal of life. From the chaos of water can come creativity. From death can come life.

Let me share a baptism story with you. In 2017, I was privileged to lead a group of African American pastors on an interfaith tour of the Holy Land. As part of our journey, we decided to be baptized in the Jordan River. Now I made it clear that as a Presbyterian, I could only be baptized once so I couldn't really be baptized in the Jordan. But I could reenact my baptism as a way of remembering the baptism as we talk about in the reformed tradition. You see, I had to go through all these gyrations just so I could get baptized in the Jordan. The trip to Israel itself was meaningful and fulfilling, and being baptized in the Jordan was the highlight. Perhaps it was the singing as we gathered together, or maybe it was busy with other people of faith, Presbyterians, United Methodist, Evangelical Lutherans, African American Episcopalians, and of course, Baptists. Or maybe it was knowing that Jesus had entered these same waters, and maybe the catfish were nibbling at his toes like they were nibbling at mine as I waited to be baptized. And maybe John's voice reverberated off the waters as ours did as we sang.

Take me to the water. Take me to the water. Take me to the water. I want to be baptized. Water cleanses. Water purifies water. Water refreshes. Water sustains us.

In my Holy Land group, were women and men, black and white, from different denominations and different parts of the country, but we all came together in the waters of baptism. In Genesis 1, the Bible says the spirit of God moved upon the face of the deep. I believe the creative power of the Holy Spirit gave us a new vision of unity and a new identity. We no longer saw our differences, but saw each other as sisters and brothers, as siblings and disciples of Jesus Christ. Sometimes we choose to go into the deep waters of life, and sometimes life just takes us there. Sometimes we're going along, anticipating things to stay normal when the abnormal appears. The unexpected diagnosis. The accidental fall. The loss of a job or reduction in investment returns. The coronavirus may visit our home or our family. Chaos and disruption are a part of life.

I am sure that none of us who turned on our television sets on Wednesday to see Congress go through just a normal motion of counting electoral votes, anticipated the chaos that broke out. Even as I saw things slowly building, I couldn't believe what was happening. I couldn't believe it when they broke through the barriers that were to keep the crowd a hundred yards away from the Capitol. I couldn't believe that they actually climbed the steps of the Capitol. It was incredulous watching people break windows and break through doors to enter the building. And when I saw the images of people defacing statues, occupying political leaders' offices and even taking over the Senate floor, I was dismayed. Like many of you, I said, "This is not America. This is not democracy. This is chaos. This is disorder". I had submitted my sermon title for today sometime back in December, "From Chaos to Creation". I said to my spouse, Marilyn, at the end of Wednesday, "My sermon just went off the rails". I can see the chaos. I wonder about the creation. In our Bible, the people voluntarily entered the chaos of the waters to find redemption and to experience transformation. I wonder what type of change the storming of the Capitol will bring to our nation? What type of creativity can come from this disruption and chaos? Some believe that we may now be able to sit down together, red and blue, liberal, conservative, black, white and all in between and try to find some common ground. Perhaps this chaos will force us to examine ourselves and ask what we are doing to promote justice and righteousness and peace. Maybe we can see ways in which we can work together now that we know how fragile our democracy can be and how easily all that we have worked for and believe can slip through our fingers. Did you notice all of the Christian symbols that were being carried by the rioters? Perhaps we need to examine the relationship between church and state--between our faith in Jesus Christ and our place in the government and the government's place in our church.

As baptized believers, we are called to be light in this world. Perhaps God can use us to be instruments of peace and unity in our community. Maybe even this church can be God's house of prayer and a refuge for all people in the community of Kirkwood. In baptism we die as Jesus did, but we are also raised to new life as Jesus was in baptism. God claims us through the covenant of grace as beloved children and members of Christ's body, the church, in baptism. We are washed clean from sin as we renounce the powers of evil and seek the will and way of God in baptism. We are called to a new way of life as Christ's disciples, sharing the good news of the Gospel with all the world in baptism. We experience the depths and the chaos of waters in order to be born again through the creativity of the Holy Spirit. As Christians, we are called to live into the fullness of our baptism as we live out our identity as Christ's disciples. God baptizes us in water, and God baptizes us in life. May our souls grow deep as a river as we journey through the fields and deserts of our lives together. Amen.

