Into the Chaos
Genesis 1:1-19

During this season of Advent and Christmas, we're tracing the theme of light through Scripture, and what light tells us about the character of God. We'll move through the psalms, into Isaiah, to John 1 on Christmas, finally ending in Revelation on December 29.

But today we start at the beginning. Before we get to the light, we have to start in the darkness. As my favourite Advent theologian, Fleming Rutledge, says, "Every year, Advent begins in the dark." In the Western hemisphere at least, Advent begins as the days are at their shortest. We wake up and go to sleep in darkness. The sky remains mostly cloudy and grey. Advent begins in the dark. And, at the beginning of all things, life began in the dark.

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void." *Tohu wa bohu* in the Hebrew. We don't know what this literally looks like, but some of the synonyms attached to these words are *confusion, emptiness, desolation, wilderness, a place of chaos.* Verse 2 goes on: "darkness covered the face of the deep."

In the beginning, there was chaos.

Now, there's been a lot of debate over the centuries about how we interpret the creation story. Is it an historic, scientific account? Is it a myth?

Well, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann would suggest that it's neither. The writers of Genesis 1 and 2, the ancient Israelite theologians, tell the creation story in a peculiar way. They resist a "scientific" view of creation that assumes the world contains its own mysteries and can be understood without any reference to a divine being. And they also resist a mythological perception that places all the

emphasis on the divine being and denies any significant value to creation itself.

Genesis 1-2 is neither scientific textbook nor mere myth, but, says Brueggemann, a "*proclamation* of God's decisive dealing with his creation." And the way God deals with his creation is through covenant. "This," Brueggemann continues, "is the presupposition for everything that follows in the Bible. It is the deepest premise from which good news is possible. God and his creation are bound together by the powerful, gracious movement of God towards that creation."

The creation account isn't just an abstract statement about the origin of the universe. It's a theological text. It's meant to tell us something about God, something we need to hear, something God's people needed to hear when it was first written.

And most scholars date the writing of Genesis back to the sixth century B.C., during which the people of Israel were in exile. This exile was challenging their belief in a supreme and powerful God. Were the Babylonian gods more powerful that God? Could God save his people from this exile? Had God been thwarted?

Genesis is written within that context. So the theological message is clear: even when life is chaotic, God works his purposes out of chaos.

Out of chaos, God created. And the first thing he created was light.

Light to dispel the darkness.

Light to give life.

Light to reveal the rest of creation.

Because then of course God keeps going with creation. He separates the sky from the waters. He gathers the waters together and pulls up the land from their midst. He sprinkles the land with plants of vast

variety, plants with bright flowers and long, gnarled vines, and seeds that somehow become food, and not just apples, but peaches and pears, because why stop at apples?

God creates lions and gold finches and blue whales and penguins. One imagines the delight with which he tells the angels of his plans for a proboscis monkey, and the "wait, watch this" as he stretches out the nose of an elephant.

Out of the chaos, God creates a world of such immense intricacy and beauty that millions of years later we're still discovering new things about it. We still marvel at sunsets. We still gasp with delight when we see a whale do a back flop. We're still amazed when a butterfly bursts its cocoon. And we still watch transfixed as rockets blast into space. Out of the chaos, God created a world of order. Where everything hangs together, works together, relies on each other. It's astonishing. And it's beautiful.

And then the crowning moment of creation comes. God creates humans. A being with whom, says Stan Mast, God could relate as God relates to God in the mystery of the Trinity. I love how Stan puts it: Why were humans created? For the love of God.

So these beings were made in God's image. If you look at Genesis 5, which lays out the lineage of Adam, we get an idea of what this might mean. Verse 3 says that when "Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth."

One commentator I read suggested that we can therefore understand the idea of image, of likeness with God, as the relationship between a parent and child. There are some similar features right from the get-go. But as we grow, we also begin to become more and more like our parents – whether we like it or not. We copy the things they do, we use

the same phrases, we adopt the same mannerisms. We grow into their likeness, even as we are our own person.

And so being made in the image of God doesn't mean we're exactly like God, but that we were created with the potential to mirror divine attributes. And charged, then, with having dominion in creation – of living in the world in such a way as to promote flourishing and promote life, of creating something beautiful out of chaos.

The only problem is that we tend to get overwhelmed by the idea of chaos. There's too much. Too much to sort through, too much to navigate, too much to process. We'd rather we could just shove our mess under the bed, have the authorities step in, find the quick and easy solution to make the chaos stop.

We want to figure out how to carry on as if there was no chaos to begin with. We want order – structure, rules, obedience, dependability. And that's a good thing. God created an ordered world. Order is good for us. But the order God placed in the world is an order that leads to true flourishing. It isn't the simple order of peace and quiet.

I'm reminded here of the famous Martin Luther King quote: "True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice." Peace - the order that leads to flourishing - can't be found by ignoring chaos, or just tamping it down. That creative, full-of-flourishing, full-of-beauty kind of order occurs when we enter *into* the chaos and work for flourishing.

When we think of God creating the world, we think, "We'll, it was as easy as simply speaking something into existence." Doesn't seem to have taken much out of God. But I think it's interesting that God designated the seventh day as a day of rest, because it means the other

six days God…worked. He was intimately involved in the creation process.

His Spirit moved over the Waters.

And he created by speaking a Word, which, when we look at John 1 and Colossians 1 and Hebrews 1, suggests that Christ was also present – and intimately involved – in the creation. God gave something of himself to create the world in all its beauty and flourishing and order.

One of the ways we speak about the Trinity is as a dance, the three members weaving in and out of each other as they exist in Oneness and Threeness. Creation, we could say, is a result of this dance.

And the dance didn't stop when sin entered the world and everything went wrong. God didn't abandon his creation. He didn't give it up to itself. He didn't scrap it for something else. He tended to it, loved it, and sent his Son to die for it. Sent his Son straight into the epicenter of chaos, to hell itself, in order to redeem his creation, to bring a new order into the world, from which comes life and life in abundance.

The Spirit now hovers over and within us as it hovered over the waters of the deep at the very beginning of time, giving us visions of new creation, stirring our hearts to want to seek that new creation, and using us to bring new creation forth even as we wait for that final, ultimate, perfectly ordered world of flourishing.

The dance continues – and we have been given dancing shoes. As those made in God's likeness, those invited into the dance, we are called to step into the chaos, to see the abyss, the wilderness, not as something to be feared, but as deep waters from which life can be called forth, to see the darkness as the place that makes light possible.

To see chaos as potential, the place of new birth, of change, of life.

To go towards the chaos - not to add to it - but to discover what we might learn, how we might be transformed, how God might be creating something new and good.

That's not an easy thing. It generally goes against the grain of what we want to do, to step into chaos. It takes something of us, requires something of us, to step into chaos. It is therefore something we should do in humility and trust. We are, after all, not God, even as we image him. We transform and are transformed only in as much as God is transforming. But we know God has gone into the chaos – we know God is in the business of re-creation. So we can be bold to follow him where he leads us.

What does that look like?

Well, as a church, I'd say we've been leaning into the chaos for the last few years…maybe the call for us, as we grow increasingly weary and discouraged, is to intentionally guard against that discouragement and wonder about what new thing might come of all this.

Maybe going into the chaos looks like having conversations with people who think very differently from you about any number of topics, and refusing to simply retreat to our well-worn assumptions, but to ask thoughtful questions, and really listen for the answers.

Maybe for some of you, leaning into the chaos means that you stop shoving aside the tension in your marriage, and instead pull it out between you and start picking at it, little by little, in an effort to re-create what once was beautiful and good.

Maybe it's taking that step towards a new career, or going back to school, or deciding to take a year off, even with all the uncertainty of finances and future prospects, because this is what you feel called to do.

Maybe it means getting involved in local politics, or community organizations, and having the courage to share your gifts or skills or ideas to try and make our communities a better place for everyone who lives within them.

And maybe – maybe right now leaning into the chaos for you means acknowledging that there is in fact too much for you to carry alone, and you need to take a step back and rest, you need to ask for help, you need to acknowledge that you can't create order on your own.

Because in the ordered world that God created, we need each other. As the Trinity interweaves in the dance, so too do our lives connect and interlink with one another's. We were made for the love of God. And we love God by loving his people.

So yes, there's a lot in our world that feels chaotic. A lot we wish we could set to rights. A lot we would rather ignore. But we serve – we image – a God who went into the chaos and created something beautiful. A God who is with us in the chaos. A God who conquered the chaos, that we might have life. A God who is sovereign over all things, and who invites us into the dance of the new creation.

What will your dance look like?

Would you pray with me?

God, thank you that you went into the chaos
and created a world of such unimaginable beauty, it takes our breath away.
And thank you that when that world feel into sin,
you did not stay away, but once more entered the chaos,
sending your son into this world out of love for this world.
We await the day when Christ will come again,
and creation will be made new.

Until that day, help us to go into the chaos,
to seek flourishing and justice wherever we are able,
imaging you, the Creator and bringer of life.
May we faithfully live out our role as image-bearers,
so that in everything we do, we bring praise to you.
Thank you for this world, for each other,
and for the gift of your Son,
in whose name we pray,
Amen.