

19th Sunday of Ordinary Time A “Tohuwabohu”  
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My friends, to understand what is going on in the Gospel, we must start at the beginning! And so, the bible begins, "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland and darkness covered the abyss while a mighty wind swept over the waters." The early Jewish and Christian sensibility regarding the first sentence in the bible involves an interesting Hebrew term that is found there. You have heard this from me before; however, repetition is how we master concepts. And I think with everything going on in the world today, this is a helpful concept to cover again. The Hebrew for "formless wasteland" is ... tohu wa bohu, literally welter and waste. It is a great word that rolls nicely off the tongue, tohu wa bohu. Let's all say it together... Tohu wa bohu, welter and waste, formless wasteland, it all basically means the same thing, primordial chaos. Parents can have a lot of fun with this word. Moms can now walk into their children's bedrooms and say, look at this tohuwabohu, clean up your room right now!

Some background on this concept: Early Jewish preachers, in order to safeguard God's omnipotence, interpreted this first verse of the bible as saying: in the beginning, God first created the tohuwabohu ex nihilo, out of nothing, and then from the tohuwabohu, God created the universe. Tohuwabohu can be understood as the paint on a painter's palette. The paint on a palette is without order. The artist has the ability to mix and blend globs of color, brush it on a canvas, and then in a kind of a miracle, create something wonderful. The image I get is the old PBS show with the artist Bob Ross, remember him? He could take a blob of paint on a big brush, squish it on a canvas, and immediately there would be mountains, a lake, and happy little trees. He was remarkable. The art God creates, however, includes time and space, stars, planets, and living creature. The art God creates includes humanity, made in God's image and likeness, created to co-create with God from within the painting itself, creating order out of chaos, like an army of Bob Rosses.

As one Jewish commentator argued in an ancient Midrash, "the Lord created the world in a state of beginning. The universe is always in an uncompleted state, in the form of its beginning. It is not like a vessel at which the master works to finish it; it requires continuous labor and renewal by creative forces. Should these cease for only a second, the universe would return to primeval chaos", [Simchah Bunam of Przyscha].

Human beings, created in God's image and likeness, are co-creators, or co-artists with God working inside the creation. Biblically minded people can then take notice that when human beings sin in the Old Testament, there are huge cosmological consequences. The painting gets smudged. What was ordered becomes disordered, and the tohuwabohu comes back. When human beings live in right relationship with God, all of creation is in harmony. When God's co-artists rebel and are not in right relationship with the Artist, the entire universe becomes disturbed and the primeval stormy waters of Genesis return.

And so, in Noah's day, when all of humanity rebelled against God's right order, what happened? Stormy waters! God tells Jonah to go by land. Jonah disobeys and goes by sea. What happens? Stormy waters! Jonah gets swallowed up by the tohu wa bohu. When the Hebrews followed Moses to the Red Sea, they were able to pass through the waters because they are in right relationship with God. The bible tells us that Pharaoh's company was not in right relationship with God and what happens? Tohu wa bohu! Stormy waters! In the first reading, Elijah understands this biblical insight. Elijah does not encounter God in storms and earthquakes, things indicative of a disturbed creation, but in the right relationship and calmness of a world at peace. In the Gospel today, the disciples were in a boat that was being tossed about by the waves, for the wind was against it. They have entered into the stormy waters!

And doesn't life feel that way many times, like we are being tossed about by life, like we are not in control? And when it could get no worse, during the last watch of night, dawn comes with Christ the Light walking on water. For biblically minded people, we should immediately think once again the first chapter of Genesis, darkness, stormy primeval waters, and the Spirit of the Lord hovering over the waters. The disciples think they are seeing a ghost. But Jesus was not a ghost. We are dealing with the incarnate God, humanity in perfect relationship with divinity, and therefore in perfect relationship with the stormy waters of life. Peter sees Jesus transcending the storminess of life and he wants to transcend the storminess of life too. And don't we all have the same prayer when our lives get stormy? Peter asks Jesus if he can transcend the storminess of life too. Jesus says "come". What happens? It says that Peter was able to walk on the stormy waters. He was able to transcend the storminess of life so long as he focuses on Jesus. What happens when Peter begins to lose faith? Tohu wa Bohu! Peter begins to sink into nothingness.

My friends, the moral of the story is when we are focused on Jesus as a people of faith, we can transcend the storminess of life. When we are not focused on Jesus as a people of faith, we can begin to sink back into the nothingness from which we were created. Peter cries out "Lord save me!" And isn't this our prayer when our lives are being swallowed up by stormy waters. Notice that the Gospel says "Immediately" Jesus reaches out and catches Peter, not after a few minutes or a few days, but "immediately". Christ can be a powerful ally for those who cry out to him in faith. What I find interesting is that Jesus has to get into the boat before the stormy waters become manageable. Similarly, as Christians, the storminess of life is unbearable without Jesus in our boat. In the Eucharist, we can invite Jesus into the boat of our hearts. When we receive Jesus into our hearts, the storminess of life becomes manageable.

Notice that the primeval waters do not disappear in the Gospel reading, they only become manageable. They become ordered. When we are in right relationship with Jesus, the storminess of life can be weathered. After all, Christians, God does not want us to sink into the nothingness from which we were created. As the Apostle John argued, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life." (Jn 3:16).

For biblically minded people, God's masterpiece did not originally include death. Death is the dissolving of creation back into nothingness. God's co-creators, made in his image and likeness created death. Through sin, mankind punched a hole into the canvas and allowed the ultimate tohuwabohu, death, to enter into human history. Out of love, God didn't abandon his artwork but rather entered into it by sending his Son. When Jesus unites his divinity with our humanity, the Artist becomes the artwork, and dies for our sins so to repair the destruction at its very source. Jesus needed to enter into the stormy breach that humanity created. This stormy breach of sin and death is like a black hole, a massive whirlpool in the primeval chaos that can destroy our souls. Because of the cross, Christ is now there to catch us at the event horizon. This is what the paschal mystery is all about.

My friends, what are the areas of your life that is being tossed about by stormy waters? What are the areas of your life that is being tossed about by tohuwabohu? What areas in our lives are smudging God's masterpiece? Is it an addiction? Is it in a stormy relationship with your kids, parents, co-workers or spouse? Is it in the stewardship of your money? Is it in your career or perhaps worries about what is going on in our world today, lots to worry about there. My friends, what are the areas of your life that is being tossed about by stormy waters? My friends, the invitation is to accept the embrace of Jesus like St. Peter. After Jesus and Peter got back into the boat, the wind died down.