

12th Sunday B Stormy Waters and Pope Francis

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The readings this weekend are exquisite and revolve around one of the Church's favorite symbols, water. I would like to begin by sharing with you the difference of meaning between a sign and a symbol. Signs can only have one meaning. On the road, you see a yield sign, it means yield. You see a stop sign, it means stop. Symbols on the other hand can have multiple meanings. The best symbols can almost have an infinite number of meanings. Water is one the best symbols in our civilization. Water can mean life. Water can mean death. Water can mean trouble. Water can mean cleansing. Water can be symbolic for the unconscious. Water can mean birth. Water can mean rebirth, as we have in the sacrament of baptism. Water can mean so many things.

I have shared with you on occasion an old Jewish take on the opening line of Genesis. You remember: the spirit of the Lord hovers over the primordial chaos of creation symbolized by stormy water. The Hebrew words, you may recall, are the wonderful words *tohu wa bohu*. Remember this? *Tohu wa bohu*, welter and waster, primordial chaos, it is the disorganized paint on the creator's palate, if you will, symbolized by stormy waters. You probably have seen a painter's palette before with bunches of globs of paint, in many places mixed together to make new colors, etc. The divine artist says, let there be light and there is light. Let the ocean and land be separated, and it was. Let there be creatures in the landscape and let there be mankind to govern this creation in God's image and likeness, and it happens.

One of the most wonderful aspects of the creation story is that God creates and he calls what he creates "good". The Hebrew Midrash I like so much creates a cosmology out of this whereby so long as creation is in right relationship with God, you don't even see the paint that makes up our creation. Once things go awry and out of relationship with God, the paint begins to smear back into globs of goop, the *tohu wa bohu*, the primordial chaos comes back.

And so, in the days of Noah, humanity was no longer in right relationship with God. What happens? The stormy waters descend on creation and everything turns back to what existence looked like in the first sentence of the bible, primordial chaos. The interesting thing about this Jewish interpretation I like so much is that, it isn't God's fault really that creation melted back into primordial chaos. Humanity does this to itself by not being good stewards of creation.

Here is a way to read the new encyclical the Holy Father gave us this past week. When Pope Francis speaks of how the so called third world has become the filthy dumping ground of the so called first world effecting the atmosphere and environment in a perilous way that affects us all, I read this as a wakeup call to recognize that sinful choices are smudging the masterpiece of God's creation. Biblically minded people expect the waters to rise, as they seem to be doing. And so, in our first reading from Job, God is asking Job who is he to question the divine plan? Listen again, and see if you can't catch the references to *tohu wa bohu*.

“The Lord addressed Job out of the storm and said:
Who shut within doors the sea,
when it burst forth from the womb;
when I made the clouds its garment
and thick darkness its swaddling bands?
When I set limits for it
and fastened the bar of its door,
and said: Thus far shall you come but no farther,
and here shall your proud waves be stilled!” (Did you catch it?)

Enter our Gospel reading. The disciples are in the boat which is symbolic for the Church. With regard to Pope Francis’ encyclical, this boat could also be symbolic for humanity as a race. We are sailing through the ocean of life and the waves and wind are starting to pick up. Soon we are in a storm and we are afraid that we might sink. Notice that Jesus is asleep when this happens. There is a disconnect between the disciples and the Lord. It isn’t until they wake the Lord and point out their predicament that Jesus then returns creation back to normal. He chastises them for not having enough faith which is the same thing as saying, you have all the power and grace in your life to allow yourself to be saved rather than drown in the waves. I believe this is essentially Pope Francis’ invitation to the world with regard to caring for the poor and for our environment.

The good news we should hear this weekend is that our Lord is the master of the universe and can help us create order out of whatever chaos we find ourselves in. There is work, however, that we must do so to cooperate with God’s grace. And so we ask ourselves: what are the areas in our lives that used to be in right order and in right relationship with God and now has somehow somewhere in life become disordered, perhaps so much so that the wind and waves are threatening to sink our ship? Notice that Jesus doesn’t promise to make the *tohu wa bohu* disappear in life. After the storm, the disciples are still on the ship, sailing on the same water that was violent moments before. What Jesus does promise us however is that the stormy waters of life will become manageable if we take the time to wake Jesus up in the back of our boat, in the back of our mind, and in the forgotten places of the soul. We can go through life, one cup of coffee to the next, and still be spiritually asleep, for weeks, even years. Pope Francis’ encyclical should be best read as a wakeup call for the human race. Jesus invites us to wake up our spiritual side. We need faith if we are going to make our way through life.

And so let’s ask ourselves, where are the places in our lives where God’s order has been transformed into chaos? Water is a powerful symbol. It can mean life. It can mean death. It can mean trouble. It can mean birth. My friends, as baptized disciples of Jesus, water means something more. We respond to chaos with faith.