

Dancing on the Distant Shore of Chaos ¹

Exodus 15:1-6, 11-13, 17-18, 20-21; Romans 8:31-35, 36-39

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Oh, how we danced!

Not so much on the night we were wed.

We were wed at the Mount Dearborn Church
in Great Falls, South Carolina.

The reception followed in the Mount Dearborn Church Fellowship Hall.

There wasn't much dancing in those days
in the Mount Dearborn Church Fellowship Hall.

Maybe that's changed now.

Maybe liturgical reform has taken hold
at Mount Dearborn Church
as it has in other places.

The people of God are beginning to remember again
how we once danced as an act of worship...
danced as an expression of joy...
danced as thanksgiving before God.

Like the time Miriam and the other women
took out the timbrels and danced.

When they reached the far shore of chaos
they danced.

It was an act of worship.

It was an expression of thanksgiving.

It was an edict of endearment.

We didn't dance at the Mount Dearborn Church
on our wedding day;
but, oh, how we danced
in our courtship:

socks in the gym at Great Falls High;
penny loafers in the Bowery at Myrtle Beach;
barefoot in the pavilion at Ocean Drive.

We were there,
Martha and I,
and we're of the age to have been at the beach
when beach music was being born...
dancing
and dancing

and dancing...

dancing to tunes by

Bill Haley;
Chubby Checker;
Little Richard.

Those were the days.
We thought they'd never end.
They were our days
of innocence.

We didn't know it at the time, of course,
but we were dancing
on the near shore of chaos.
Chaos, for us, hadn't happened yet;
but it was about to begin.

We were still in the glory days
that followed the second world war.
Our world and our church
have not regained
what we imagined to be the innocence of the 1950's
when *our* world was safe
and the church was booming

Back then, we danced and danced:

Bebop-aloumop-alop-bamb-boom...
Tootie fruitie, alrootie.

As in the opening recollection
of Pat Conroy's novel, *Beach Music*,²
Conroy's character, Jack McCall, retells the story
of the night he fell in love with Shyla Fox.

Jack McCall is retelling the story to Laura,
the only daughter
and only child of Jack and Shyla.
He's told the story to Laura so often
Laura can fill in details
and correct her father in his own story.
The story as Jack McCall retells it to his daughter
is of high school seniors in the 1950's
dancing and dancing
on the porch of a beach house

just minutes before
it was washed to sea in a storm.

For the novelist,
the scene is a not-very-subtle symbolic picture
of dancing on the near shore of chaos.

The world of those high school seniors
was, indeed, about to collapse
into upheaval and turmoil...
explode, more like.

The upheaval and turmoil centered,
for the novel,
in Shyla jumping to her death
from the Silas Pearlman Bridge
which spans the Cooper River high
over the Charleston Harbor.
Between the beach party and the suicide,
Pat Conroy's novel weaves its way,
sometimes skillfully and
sometimes not so skillfully,
through one drama after another.

Some of the dramas
are as cosmic as the Holocaust
and the Vietnam War
and some are as personal
as alcoholism and dysfunctional families.

It is comparatively easy
to do as Pat Conroy has done
and describe what it is like
to dance on the near shore of chaos...
to describe
what it is like to dance
when chaos is about to begin
and then to describe in graphic detail
what it is like when chaos sets in.

It is less easy,
it seems to me,
to describe what it is like
to dance on the distant shore of chaos...

to describe
what it is like to dance
when chaos will have come to an end;
but that is the subject of today's Old Testament lesson;

and that is the subject of this sermon:

to tell how once our people danced on the far shore of chaos
so in retelling the story
we might be dreaming of dancing again
on the far shore of chaos,

no matter the form of chaos.

“The Lord is my strength and my might,”
sang Moses in his poem.

“Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously,”
sang Miriam as she and the women danced,
and danced,
and danced.

Through this poem and song of the parting of the Red Sea,
dancing on the distant shore of chaos
has become a vision...
a dream of how the people of God
shall be
when, at last,
the people of God are set free.

Many scholars agree,
this poem and song of Moses and Miriam
is the oldest portion of scripture in existence:³

“The Lord is a warrior...”
went the poem.

“Horse and rider he has thrown into the sea,”
went the song.

Think of it.

The poem and song
are the oldest Bible there is.

As we have them now,
the poem and song
follow the telling of something that happened once
a long, long time ago.

More than that,
in the telling of it,
it is the story of something that happens now.
Most of all,

in the hoping of it,
it is the story of something that shall surely be.

The vision is of the promise of God unfolding...
a vision with roots run deep...
deep...
deep in the memory of God's people.

You remember the story that precedes the poem and song
of which the poem and song are a retelling?
Of course you do.

God said to Moses,
 "Tell ol' Pharaoh
 to let my people go."

Moses asked God,
 "When Pharaoh asks who sent me,
 what shall I tell him?"

God said to Moses,
 "I am who I am,
 Tell Pharaoh I Am sent you."

Moses said to Pharaoh,
 "The God who is said
 to let his people go."

Ten plagues later...
and Pharaoh let the people of God leave Egypt
after 400 years of slavery.
The plagues were to let Pharaoh know
the God who is is serious.
All Pharaohs must be told
that the God who is is serious.

But...on second thought,
Pharaoh changed his mind.

Having let the people go,
Pharaoh sent his army with horse drawn chariots
in hot pursuit,
to trap the people of God
with no way to cross the mighty Red Sea...

the mighty Red Sea,
otherwise known as the Sea of Chaos.⁴

You get the picture.
The people of God
trapped on the near shore of Chaos
with the hordes of Pharaoh closing in.

The God who is said to Moses who was,
“Tell the people to go forward...
hold forth your staff
and tell the people to move...
to move...
to move forward...
move into the raging Sea of Chaos.”

That’s always the way of it.
Consider the chaos in your life and in our life together.
The command is always a summons to move into the midst of it.

Like in the Presbyterian Church (USA)
when the lines of division are drawn,
and the seeds of schism are sown.
More personally and much more painfully,
it’s like when the preachers, one after the other,
are called away,⁵ and
the congregation must move headlong into the chaos.

Let me say it again.
This is more than the story of something that happened once
a long time ago.
This story of something that happened once
has become a vision...
a vision of something that happens now
and more,
it is a vision of something that is going to happen.

You know the story?
Of course you do.
According to the story as it has been told to us
and as we must tell it to our children,
by a strong east wind
that blew all night long,
God parted the Sea of Chaos
and the people of God walked safely through
to the distant shore...

chaos all about on every side...
but we walked on dry land all the way through.

When the army of Pharaoh in their horse drawn chariots
tried to pursue,
they got stuck in the mud

and the waters came crashing in.

Poor Pharaoh.
Poor Pharaoh's men!
Poor Pharaoh's horses!!!

They're no match for the God who is.

Don't waste too much time
worrying about the fairness of it all.

As I said:
What happened is important;
The memory of what happened is even more important; and
The telling of it is most important of all.

It is in the telling of the story
that we see now
how the people of God
are led now
safely through the Sea of Chaos
to sing and dance on the distant shore.

Cataloging chaos is no problem.
Chaos gets cataloged every morning for us
in the morning paper
and again every night on the evening news
and again many Sundays from this pulpit...
this pulpit and others like it
for those congregations who are willing to move headlong,
with faith,
into chaos
rather than try to use the faith
to pretend there is no chaos.

It seems we're always standing
on the near shore of some chaos or other.
What could be more chaotic, to take the most obvious example,
than warfare on one front

against an enemy that cannot be found;
and on another front
where, at best, the war was waged for motives based
on faulty information,
or, at worst, was waged for selfish gain.

God said to Moses,
“Tell ol’ Pharaoh
to let my people go.”

Generations later,
with a different take on a similar issue
Jesus said,
“Pray for your enemies.”

What could be more chaotic, to take another example,
than facing an election
with the electorate bitterly divided ,
with each side paralyzed with fear and anger at the other,
and all the while we are mostly governed by those
who are nothing so much as they are mediocre.
Understanding chaos is not very hard at all.

God said to Moses,
“When Pharaoh who governs you asks who sent you,
tell him I am who I am...
tell him I Am sent you.”

Years later,
with an altogether different take
on the very same issue,
Jesus said,
“You shall know the truth
and the truth shall make you free.”

What could be more chaotic, to take yet another example,
than not having enough jails
to keep the underclass from rising up
to take what belongs to us?

Understanding chaos is not hard.
Getting through chaos to justice and hope for all is the great thing.

God said to Moses,
“Stretch forth your staff
and lead the people through.”

Many generations later Jesus said,
 "I was hungry and you fed me...
 thirsty and you gave me drink...
 naked and you clothed me...
 if you have done it to one of the least of these,
 you have done it to me."

What could possibly be more chaotic, to take more personal examples,
 than the rapid pace of change...
 change in schools...
 change in church...
 change in women's roles...
 change in men's roles...
 change in views of acceptable lifestyles...
 change in delivery of health care...
 change in neighbors...
 change in moving from age to age...
 change when there is a divorce...
 change when there is illness...
 change when there is a death....

Understanding chaos is not very hard.
Getting through chaos on solid ground is the great thing.

God said to the east wind,

 "Blow, mighty east wind, blow...
 blow back the waters of chaos
 so that my people can walk through."

It has become a vision
of what shall surely be.

Many, many, many generations later the apostle, Paul, said,
 "I am sure
 that neither death nor life,
 nor angels,
 nor rulers,
 nor things present,
 nor things to come,
 nor powers,
 nor height,
 nor depth,
 nor anything in all creation,
 will be able to separate us
 from the love of God
 in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It is a fresh take
on the same vision.

When the people of God got through
to the distant shore of chaos,
Moses recited a poem that he had written:

“The Lord is my strength and my might,...
he has become my salvation...
Pharaoh’s chariots and his army...
he has cast into the sea to be swallowed in chaos....”

When the people of God got through
to the distant shore of chaos,
Miriam and the women rose up to sing and dance:

“Sing to the Lord,
for he has triumphed gloriously.”

It has become a vision of what shall surely be.

Well, what do you think?
Shall we dance?

Notes

1. This sermon, with minor adaptations, has been preached in many settings. As it appears here, it most resembles the form in which it was presented at morning worship for Shandon Presbyterian Church in Columbia, South Carolina, where I am interim pastor.
2. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1995.
3. Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation Series (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1991), 161.
4. Ibid.
5. Pastors Timothy Hoyt-Duncan, Susannah Cook, and Lewis Galloway, all much beloved and each for positive reasons, left Shandon Church in the space of less than a year. With the exception of John Cook, Associate Pastor for Campus Ministry, the entire pastoral staff of Shandon Church is filled with interim and part-time pastors.