

“Where Do We Begin?”

Genesis 1:1-3

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In the beginning, there was a cardboard box and packaging tape hung off one side, tattered and torn, flimsy and feeble, destined—to any rational adult—for the trash. But not for a child, little images of God with big imaginations of grandeur. My five-year-old’s voice echoed the Vox Dei, “Let there be ... Let us make ... Let us make for ourselves ... a vending machine.” (Yes, my kids are strange. Maybe it’s because we never let them get things out of vending machines in public or maybe it’s the engineering challenge, but this one always wants to make vending machines.) Anyway, being the good father that I am, I just roll my eyes. Meanwhile, he scurries off to the pantry to fill his arms with pre-packaged snacks to vend and then returns to subdue the hopeless brown remnant of cardboard. Again, always the playful and compassionate father, I prepare for the moment when the laws of physics kick in and my son ends up weeping over all the ways this project isn’t resembling the vending machine in his mind. And I look at the complete chaos in front of me and think, “Where do we begin?”

The Bible begins with “complete chaos.” Let’s read from Genesis 1.

When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

The NRSVUE says, “Complete chaos.” The Hebrew is a really fun phrase: *tohu vabohu*. I won’t blame you if you want to try saying it on your own: “tohu vabohu.” Sometimes it’s translated, “Formless void” or “Wild and waste.” In the science world, they talk about life emerging from “Primordial soup.” Which are all ways of saying, “tohu vabohu ... complete chaos.” That’s where I want to begin—with two brief observations about this text and then we’ll get to the good stuff:

1. Gen. 1 doesn’t begin with nothing. It begins with *tohu vabohu*. There is an old Christian doctrine—and like many old Christian doctrines, theologians like to sound smart by saying it in Latin. *Creatio ex nihilo*. It means that God created “out of nothing.” And I don’t dispute that doctrine. But it’s more of a philosophical doctrine than a biblical one. At least it’s not quite the picture Genesis 1 paints for us. In the beginning of

Genesis, there isn't nothing. There is *tohu vabohu*, formless void, wild and waste, complete chaos.

2. Gen. 1 doesn't really say anything new to the ancient world about the biological origins or structures of the material cosmos.¹ If you were to take ancient Egyptian and ancient Babylonian creation texts and try to draw a rough sketch of the material universe, you would end up with something pretty similar to what you get when you do the same with Genesis 1. Genesis 1 is not really speaking to us about the scientific origins of the material world. It is about something more important. Linguistically, textually, thematically, literarily, this little poem is a way of imagining and expressing other biblical stories, namely the stories of Exodus and Exile. In Genesis 1, God splits the waters ... sound familiar? In Genesis 1, God speaks ten times ... you might call them ten "commandments." There are seven days in this creation poem ... the same number of days as the building and consecration of the Temple. Ideas like "image of God" and a divine being "resting" in a temple, these are theological concepts in the cultures of Egypt and Babylon that the Genesis poet is taking and transfiguring, reimagining, even subverting. Genesis 1 is a word to slaves, to exiles, to those suffering in the *tohu vabohu* of Empire, and it's a word ... in Divine poetic time ... to those who bear witness to the crucified body of Jesus. It's a word for all who look out on *tohu vabohu* and ask, "Where do we begin?"

Genesis 1 is where WE begin as we look out over the *tohu vabohu*, the complete chaos, the wild and waste that we see in the world around us, in electoral politics, in places torn apart by warfare or by natural disaster, in this post-Christendom era of the American Church, and maybe even in our own lives and sense of vocation and belonging ... or is that just me?

Where do we begin? We begin with God. As the Apostle Paul says, "Be imitators of God."² So a vision of the Christian life begins with a vision of the character of God. But where does God begin?

Now I'm going to do a little faithful risk-taking. Because when we look out at the chaos, many of us like to hold onto a little phrase. You've certainly heard it, and probably—like me—used it:

"God is in control."

Here's what I want to say to us as we not only look out upon the *tohu vabohu*, but as we dare to lead in the name of Jesus. In the beginning, we don't see a God who is in CONTROL. We see a God who is CREATING. As activists, as leaders, as visionaries, sometimes we're tempted to imagine and to lead like we have a blank canvas and a whole palette of materials and we can paint our utopia *ex nihilo*. Naw. We've got a cardboard box and some scotch tape!

God is not in control. God is creating. And the work of creation, as we know, really doesn't feel like being in control at all. Creation is existing in the liminal space of hope and limitation, idea and reality, imagination and the laws of physics.

That's why it's helpful to know this story isn't about *creation ex nihilo*. When God creates, God takes the *tohu vabohu* and hovers ... and speaks ... and declares it good ... or good enough.

It's helpful to know that if Gen. 1 is about Exodus, creation is going to *feel like* juggling a hardhearted narcissistic Pharaoh and stiff-necked Stockholm-syndromed slaves and wandering in the complete chaos of wilderness ... and declaring it a good enough beginning of something new.

If Gen. 1 is about Exile, creation is going to *feel like* trying to convince disoriented and devastated exiles to build houses and plant gardens and seek the welfare of someone else's city, to do something new as strangers in a strange land.

Creation *feels like* asking a young woman for permission to become small in her womb and vulnerable in her arms and helpless on a cross as she weeps before you. And this was good enough for the Savior of the world, who didn't just hover over, but plunged into *tohu vabohu* from baptism to cross, whose very life felt uncomfortably like *tohu vabohu* to people who were just trying to manage and keep balance and survive under the weight of Empire's taxes and temptations and threats. A Savior who beckons us to join him not in a distant realm of clouds and harps comfortably above the complete chaos of the world, but who beckons us down with him into the waters of baptism and up with him, Cross on shoulder, onto Golgotha. Jesus tells us to meet him in the *tohu vabohu*.

So where do we begin? We begin by bearing witness to a God who creates rather than controls. Who takes the *tohu vabohu*, the slavery and exile, the broken and poured out body of Jesus, and infuses abundant possibility, makes a way out of no way, transfigures wounds of crucifixion into icons of resurrection.

Be imitators of the Creator. Give up on controlling and conquering and cajoling. Work with what you have. Risk faithfully into the creative process that is filled with frustration and vulnerability, stops and starts, hard hearts and stiff necks, disorientation and disillusionment and deaths of all kinds.

Because I can tell you this. Something beautiful happens when I stop rolling my eyes at the cardboard vending machine project and plunge myself into my child's vision. I learn from him the lessons of play, of creative imagination, and when I hover over the *tohu vabohu* of cardboard and scotch tape and packages of fruit snacks and granola bars and hear myself speak words of possibility to him and hold the rough pieces together ever so gently, I suddenly find myself as tenaciously devoted to this strange, messy project as he is. And he learns from me the lessons of good enough and the wisdom of our limitations. And he leaves space in his imagination for both order and chaos, light and dark, beauty and mess. And eventually, we look at one

another and smile and sigh, satisfied at the odd thing we've created together that shockingly does bear some good enough resemblance to a vending machine ... if only to us, if only for that short moment before it all falls apart.

And then we begin again.

Notes

1. These observations are mostly borrowed from biblical scholar John Walton, and can be found in his work *The Lost World of Genesis 1*.

2. Ephesians 5:1