

**THE BLOSSOMING OF GOD'S PEOPLE; GENESIS 1:1-31-2:3, MATTHEW 28:16-28; TRINITY SUNDAY/6.11.17; THOMAS H. YORTY; WPC**

The machinations in Washington this past week have provided, once more, the now familiar disruption that makes it seem like the new normal is abnormal.

It's as if we'd wandered into an endless hall of distorting political mirrors. We struggle to remember what a proportioned, bi-partisan system of government looks, sound, and feels like.

Pundits trying to find parallels in history point to the Know-Nothing Party of the 1840s and 50s, also known as the American Party whose members were opposed to immigrants and the Roman Catholic Church. Others say Watergate, the scandal of the break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters and the cover up by the Nixon administration of the president's involvement is a parallel.

Yet, the Know Nothings amounted to nothing and, as James Clapper, who served in major intelligence posts under Democratic and Republican presidents said Thursday, "Watergate pales compared with what we're confronting now. I am very concerned," Clapper continued, "about the assault on our institutions coming from both an external source (Russia) and an internal source (the president himself)."

Nicholas Kristoff writes, "Presidents have spun and twisted the truth in the past, some have even lied to protect themselves and their legacy but we've never had a president, like the current White House occupant, whose proclivity to distortion and lying appears to be on autopilot."

The consequence of both parties in Washington falling short of the high calling of the offices to which they have been elected, like that house of mirrors, is that it can make you feel sick. Indeed, Sister Joan Chittister the wise nun from Erie, Pennsylvania advises us to take care of ourselves in the current political climate. We are increasingly subject to depression she notes citing statistics. More than one commentator has observed that our political travail goes beyond liberal and conservative intransigence and is an erosion of the moral and spiritual principles upon which the Constitution stands.

Full disclosure. It also needs to be said the current political climate is not brewing in a vacuum but a society in which many have been forgotten and left behind. In that sense, we all share some responsibility for the current state and fate of our 243 year old democratic experiment. Can it withstand both abuse and abdication of power?

To use the mirror analogy in another way, we could say that Washington reflects the body politic. The forces at work there are the forces at work here; in the towns and villages and cities across the land.

It can all seem disorienting and discouraging. The old boundaries of decorum and standards of conduct lay like the ruins of an ancient city. Where is the compass that points to true north? The cement that holds together a pluralistic and diverse nation? The vision that sustains a free and democratic society?

Today's biblical readings offer understanding deeper than the political winds and remedy beyond the short-term gains we too often settle for. It is Trinity Sunday. The reading from Genesis describes a Creator deity; a Spirit like a wind hovering over the waters. The reading from Matthew depicts Jesus commissioning his followers to go into the world with the message of life.

What does this have to do with taking care of ourselves? Everything. We are reminded by Genesis that in the beginning there was no order or form to anything; disorder and chaos reigned. Then behold! Out of this, God creates a vast and intricately designed universe that operates by laws of nature so precise and dependable that Isaac Newton compared it to the spinning wheels, cylinders and springs of a great clock.

Even Einstein, who pushed beyond Newton's probing, discovered deeper anomalies and paradoxes. He said the origin of the entire enterprise could only be explained by an intelligent Creator.

If you accept, for the sake of argument, these propositions that are the foundation of modern physics, you will agree with Immanuel Kant that whatever name we use to identify the cause, the effect, or result, is the establishment of pervasive, eternal moral order. The Genesis account even corresponds to the sequence of evolution:

First, day and night; then sky and waters; sea and dry land; vegetation; accompanied and governed by celestial bodies that 'rule' day and night; then beings that inhabit water and sky; and finally creatures that dwell on the earth and culminate in human life.

Psalm 8 is appropriately paired, by the lectionary, with today's readings – a shorter poem of the first two chapters of Genesis.

We're talking about finding 'true north,' the glue that holds everything together in these disorienting and depressing times. Let me come back to that image of the wind "hovering" over the water. Our daughter in law, each year, hangs flower baskets from the front porch. This year two birds discovered that one of the hanging flower baskets was ideal for a nest in which to lay and hatch eggs.

While the birds were constructing their new home, I noticed the one I assumed to be the mother, who seemed to spend most of her time in or near the flower pot, hovering over the place where she was carefully laying twigs and stems and that would make for the nest on which she would sit atop her eggs, then hover over to feed her newborn chicks.

The verb "rahap" in the Hebrew from the second verse of Genesis which some translations poorly translate as 'swept' actually means 'to hover watchfully'; the poet's choice of words here is brilliant and makes all the difference – when the biblical writer refers to the Spirit 'rahap', of 'hovering' the ancient reader was given the image of a mother bird hovering over her nest, deeply engaged in the act of creating life.

I pause at this juncture to acknowledge what is going on here in the biblical story:  
in the midst of what the Hebrew says in verse 1 is the “tohu wabohu” or the formless void and darkness pre-dating creation, the Spirit of God – the noun for which is feminine – like a mother bird – the Spirit of God enters in.

What are we to conclude about such a completely unexpected act?

It does not seem much of a stretch to conclude that the order that was created out of disorder has its origin not by chance or happenstance but in the brave and determined will to create life, to multiply and extend and finally perpetuate its own well being, goodness and abundance – precisely where there was nothing but abyss.

That this narrative, in the oldest portions of an ancient text, would parallel the contours of the most advanced scientific discoveries about the origins of life is not only a miracle but a signal – if we are paying attention – it is information, data, knowledge, we might even call it an answer not just to the question of our own origin but to the other great questions of life: with Whom do we inhabit the universe and what is our purpose?

It is important to note that Israel fashioned this account while in exile in Babylon. As they were held captive in a foreign land they rejected the prevailing creation myths of the surrounding Babylonian culture. Myths that depicted Babylonian gods engaged in violent and gruesome battle, the debris of which constitutes the planets and stars. But the Hebrews rejected the notion that we were created by an act of violence. Rather, they concluded, even while living in exile under a foreign conqueror, that the experience of their long history was of a loving God of justice, of righteousness and a God slow to anger who brought life into being and charged them to be a blessing to the world.

Turn with me to Matthew. It is the other end of the arc of creation, the arc of life, the arc of love that brought us into existence; Jesus stands before his followers and commissions them to go into the world to spread the message of his victory over death and disorder that has become their victory over death and disorder.

Like the creation of the cosmos, this moment in the history of God represents a wager that life created and accompanied by the Divine Presence, yet operating according to the given laws of nature and the choices of us, his free agents, would perpetuate the abundance and goodness from which it came.

Sending twelve human and flawed followers into a world under the rule of an authoritarian regime threatened by the presence of these now Pentecost/Spirit filled free agents looks, from any rational perspective, like a fool’s errand. No less at risk or likelihood of failure than sending a bolt of light into the deep chasms of chaos and darkness and causing mere molecules to adhere, gather momentum and adopt purpose that would result as Psalm 8 ponders in the mystery and grandeur of human life.

Let me offer an example of sending a bolt of light into the dark chaos of the world. Clotilde Perez-Dedecker met with our Racial Justice and East Side Exploratory group last week. She reviewed with us the remarkable work she and the Community Foundation are doing with the recently released Racial Equity Study. The study quantifies the deficits or gaps between Western New York's white population and people of color from education and economics to health care and longevity to equity from owning a home and net worth.

The research makes clear that a fair and equitable Western New York would not only be a more productive and harmonious community but also a vastly more economically robust and resilient community.

The notion that the third poorest and most segregated city in the nation can rise up from the forces of bias and bigotry that have held and still hold us back seems like a far-fetched notion indeed!

Just like the "Say Yes Buffalo" program, also initiated by the Community Foundation under Clotilde's leadership which was created to strengthen our local economy by investing in the education of our city's future workforce. Talk about another long shot. Yet, we have now witnessed the increase of graduation rates by 15% and a 17% reduction in the gap between white and black graduation rates.

The origin of this program was like hurling a bolt of light into the darkness of a broken educational system that had seen a revolving door of superintendents, a divided board and endless warfare with the teacher's union.

When the Community Foundation board heard the proposal to launch this pipe dream of cooperation in a jungle of predatory players one wise, elder statesman, a conservative businessman, said to Clotilde and all the board, "You're asking us to bet the ranch on this project." Clotilde took a deep breath and said, "Yes." The board wise member said, "I can't imagine anything more worthwhile for us to do."

Bold vision to bring order out of chaos; audacious hope where there is only despair and defeat – that's what happened at the very beginning, the 'genesis' of creation in the very structure of the stars and planets in their courses and cycles;

That's what happened from the time Abraham and Sarah were called to establish a nation against all odds;

And that's what happened when Jesus sent his followers into a hostile world to proclaim the defeat of death and chaos and to preach life.

Taking care of ourselves and our neighbor, our cherished democracy and a world in turmoil can seem, especially these days, like a losing battle.

But the Creator of life placed his bet on us long before the present stagnation and abuse of power in Washington.

It's a bold vision. That spark of light at the moment of creation is in each one of us. Can you imagine anything more worthwhile for God's people to do? Amen.