

## THE SPIRIT OF GOD AND CHAOS

Almost hidden in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis is a verse of the greatest moment. Sandwiched between that grand opening statement: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth” and the familiar description of the seven days which follows there appear those obscure words of verse two. “And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.”

It is an eerie picture, like some dismal primordial swamp, a wasteland of nothingness, a vast abyss—the unformed mass of materials created by God but not yet separated out and molded by him into earth, sky and sea. “The earth was without form and void, with darkness over the face of the abyss.” It is a difficult verse to translate, must less to explain. Literally it means ‘a trackless waste and emptiness,’ a kind of uninhabited and uninhabitable wilderness with no sign of life or of human visitation. John Milton paraphrased it:

... a vast immeasurable Abyss  
Outrageous as the Sea, dark, wasteful, wilde,  
Up from the bottom turn'd by furious windes  
And surging waves, as Mountains to assault  
Heav'ns high, and with the Center mix the Pole.  
(P.L. VII, 211ff)

A vast sea, black, unruly; a tumult of godless gook—in short, the purest chaos.

No wonder we rush past the verse, not stopping to become acquainted. We want to hurry on to the place where God speaks and it is done, and he sees that it is good. We want the light separated from darkness, heaven from earth, land from sea. We want the flowers and singing birds, and the furry animals running through the fields. From the hellish chaos of verse 2, good Lord deliver us. Yet there the verse stands as a probing reminder that behind creation, behind the work of God, beneath the beauty and order in which we delight, lies this godless chaos. “And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.”

But the verse continues, “And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” Like a dove hovers over its young, so did the Spirit of God brood over the waters. That is the imagery. Again Milton catches it well:

. . . but on the watrie calme  
His brooding wings the Spirit of God outspred  
And vital virtue infused and vital warmth  
Throughout the fluid Mass.

Thus did the mothering Spirit of God bring order out of disorder, infuse life, nurture, mold, and calm the demon tempest until the earth was born. The Spirit of God subdued the chaos, ruled the unruly, and upon the trackless waste brought forth order, life, beauty, creation. . . . “And God saw that it was good.”

That was the beginning, but only the beginning, of a ceaseless struggle between the Spirit of God and chaos—for chaos, once subdued, refused to keep its place. Again and again it raised its mutinous head, calling people back from the peaceful rule of God—to disobedience, to anarchy, to rebellion, to the abyss. Yea, before the creation story was finished the serpent raised his wily head with his insinuating, “Hath God said?” Yes, and always—to this very day—buried within the unfathomed depths of the human heart there lurks the ungoverned tempest—a smoldering volcano waiting to erupt, open to the suggestion of doubt, the temptation of anarchy, rebellion, despair.

No, not just waiting, but actually erupting,—repeatedly, continuously—turning the order of God’s creation into a sea of turmoil. Is not this precisely the picture set forth in the second Psalm?

Why are the nations in turmoil?  
Why do the people hatch their futile plots?  
The kings of the earth stand ready,  
and the rulers conspire together  
against the Lord and his anointed king  
‘Let us break their fetters,’ they cry,  
‘let us throw off their chains!’  
(Ps. 2:1-3)

Thus do the pages of history unfold the story of human rebellion—of deliberate blindness, self-seeking, arrogance and pride—until the whole world becomes again a seething tumult, a boundless sea, enraged and vicious . . . “with darkness over the face of the abyss.”

## I.

Now, against this ominous backdrop let us take a fresh look at the story of our Lord's baptism, for therein is the story of God's sending forth once again his creative Spirit. . . . Two men are standing in the River Jordan. The river's wetness still drips from the one. As we read in the Gospel of Mark:

And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and was baptized of John in Jordan. And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him: and there came a voice from heaven, saying, Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

Once again the dove of God's Spirit, once again his creative word, yes, and once again his divine seal of approval, the voice from above saying that it is good: "Thou are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

But listen carefully and ponder for a moment. Is it not more than a little strange that the heavenly words of God recorded here are taken from that very Psalm, the second, that described the tumult of the nations. The people may hatch their futile plots, and the rulers of the earth conspire together, but God has enthroned His king in Zion, saying, "*You are my Son. Ask of me what you will. I will give you nations as your inheritance, the ends of the earth as your possessions*" (Ps. 2:7-8). Thus will he still the tumultuous sea.

The other words of the divine voice: "my beloved, in whom I am well pleased," are taken from elsewhere in the Old Testament, from Isaiah, chapter 42, which describes the gentle, dove-like work of the coming Servant/Son of God:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
*my chosen one in whom I delight,*  
I have bestowed my Spirit upon him,  
and he will make justice shine on the nations.

Isaiah then goes on to describe the gentle working of the Messiah:

He will not call out or lift his voice high,  
Or make himself heard in the open street.  
He will not break a bruised reed,  
or snuff out a smoldering wick;  
He will make justice shine on every race,  
never faltering, never breaking down,  
he will plant justice on earth,  
while coasts and islands wait for his teaching.

## II.

Give ear, O people of the earth, for here is the gentle dove of God's Spirit—one who can still the hellish chaos without and within, who broods even now upon nations in tumult. Listen to him who says at the beginning of his ministry,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me;  
he has sent me to announce good news to the poor,  
to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind.

(Lk. 4:18)

Listen and follow him on his way. Go with him to Capernaum where the demoniac shrieks at the top of his voice, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" And Jesus rebukes him and says, "Be silent and come out of him." And the demon departs and the man is quiet . . . "The Spirit of God hovers over the waters."

Or go to another place and see a paralyzed man lowered from the roof. "Man, your sins are forgiven you," he speaks. And the man rises to his feet, takes up his bed and goes home in peace, praising God. . . . "The Spirit of God hovers over the waters."

Or go with his disciples in a boat on the lake. While Jesus sleeps, a heavy squall strikes. They begin to ship water and cry out in danger, "Master, we are sinking." And he awakes to rebuke the wind and the sea. The storm subsides and all is calm . . . "The Spirit of God hovers over the waters."

Or go into the country of the Gergesene, or visit Jairus' daughter, or the woman who hemorrhaged for twelve years. . . . "The Spirit of God hovers over the waters."

Finally, go with him to Jerusalem. Watch with him in Gethsemane. Follow him to Golgotha. There, my friends, behold the struggle of his soul with chaos, a battle to the death with all the forces of the deep. There the faithful Servant/Son in whom God is well-pleased confronts the deepest powers of destruction. There he faces the raging of sin, there the abyss of darkness, there doubt, self-will, death. But he bows to the Father's will, forgives his assailants, grants peaceful paradise to a thief, and finally lifts his voice and in the very words a Jewish child prays at his bedside says, "Father into thy hands I commend my spirit." Three days later the risen Christ calms the spirits of his fearful disciples, fills them with peace, and sends them forth to the nations with his gospel of

grace and the assurance of his presence with them to the end of the ages. . . . “The Spirit of God hovers over the waters.”

### III.

Centuries later the battle is not o’er. The nations still seethe in tumult.

Outrageous as the Sea, dark, wasteful, wilde,  
Up from the bottom turn’d by furious windes  
And surging waves, as Mountains to assault  
Heav’ns high, and with the Center mix the Pole.

Our world after two millennia is still too much like that. It is a world of aggression, extortion, tyranny, senseless violence. We still cannot rest from the fear of germicidal and even nuclear warfare. We do not know where the terrorists will strike next. Our unimaginable scientific advances and our unfathomable computerized technology have only advanced the scope and dimension of the threat of chaos. So even in this brave new world there persists the trackless waste, the fathomless void.

And what is true for the nations is also true for the individual, for what is the nation but the individual writ large. The smoldering volcano erupts in the senseless killings we see in the news and the violence on our roadways. Yes, and the chaotic depths in the hearts of us all surface in thoughts, deeds, words. We belittle, maim, destroy, sometimes, as I have said, we simply ignore one another to death, and make our sufficient contributions to the boiling pot of world agony. “And the earth was without form and void, with darkness over the face of the abyss.”

And yet, still the Spirit of God is there hovering over us, brooding, caring. Not yet has God given up on his creation, nor on any nation of the world, nor on any of us his creatures. His promise is to any of you who wrestle with demons and forces of the deep. If you open your hearts, if you listen to the word of the Son in whom he is well-pleased, if you receive his Spirit, and if you earnestly pray, he will continue his creative work in you, subduing chaos, molding you, giving form and light and life and love and peace.

Yes, and there’s more than that. The same Spirit of God that descended upon our Lord at his baptism was imparted by him to his disciples, and at Pentecost it descended upon the whole Church. That selfsame Spirit that was present at creation and at the baptism of our Lord now rests upon his Holy Church. But it was not given for our enjoyment, that we might bathe in its pacific calmness. It was given to enable us to go

forth into the abyss of the world, and there to care, and there to brood, and there ourselves, with prayer and the word of God's peace, to hover upon the chaos of human need in whatsoever form we find it. So there we must go and there we must stay until by the grace of God the Spirit of God brings forth a new creation.

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