

Coping with Chaos

Colleagues,

Robin sent over this slice-of-life for me to send on to you today. It's powerful.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

GOD SAID

"Wild and waste" is the way the Bible I was reading translates "tohu va-vohu" in the Hebrew text of Genesis 1:2. "When the earth was wild and waste darkness over the face of Ocean, rushing spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters—" In the footnote it adds "indicating emptiness."

What amazed me, as if I had never seen it before, was the sense of God's ordering, which merely by a word, eliminated the chaos. "God said."

I thought about wild, wasting emptiness and wondered if it might be another way of expressing sin. It's as if we're trying to reach around God, assuming God is keeping the best stuff behind God's back, and when we open our hand to see what we've retrieved, we're overwhelmed by the wild, wasting emptiness that sin eventually is for us. Tohu va-vohu.

I inhabit two very different spaces these day – both of which seem prone to tohu va-vohu. The first is our upper middle class household with three teenagers and two dogs. The other is the inner city congregation I pastor.

In the first, as our children and their enormous energy bounce

around trying to figure out who they are independent of my husband and me, we see them careening dangerously close to wild, wasting emptiness that will have permanent consequences in their lives. And so we try to stand in the gap, keeping them from *tohu va-vohu*-ing themselves into non-existence before they even get to adulthood. We also feel the effects of the wild, wasting emptiness as our relationship with each other lurches forward.

In the second, the inner city parish, it's as if there's a huge tear in God's ordering of the universe and *tohu va-vohu* has spilled out all over north St. Louis covering everything and everybody with wild, wasting emptiness. Everyone has breathed it into their lungs, finds it impossible to keep their clothes and shoes free of it. Some have even turned and said "Wild, wasting emptiness is all there is and so we give ourselves to the chaos."

And yet human beings fight the rips in God's order – Million Man March, Million Mom March, Habitat for Humanity – trying to keep chaos from rushing in. Register our guns, care for our families, fight back entropy.

God said. How can words make any difference in these difficult situations? Don't we need fire to fight fire? It seems that we usually only trade one set of tyrants for another in revolution, but what else can we do? God said. It's too easy. It's too weak. It's too amorphous. We need a hard line strategy to pull ourselves back from the brink of destruction.

It's taken me a month to get beyond "brink of destruction" – a hellacious month I might add. I've come back to these words over and over again; hoping "the answer" would appear. Theologically, I know it's time to bring Jesus into the mix, but somehow, at this juncture, imposing Jesus seems less than honest and less than helpful. Yet ultimately I know he's the answer to what's

gnawing at me.

When I finally stopped running in fear of the *tohu va-vohu* in my life, I realized that I have experienced three distinct moments of “God Said” through Christ in the last couple of weeks.

The first is a moment that happened at our weekly men’s lunch/Bible study. Rooster and John almost got into a fist fight as John tried to get the men to sit down and listen BEFORE they ate and Rooster challenged him about having any authority to make such a request. John then proceeded to tell the story of the prodigal son from Luke interspersed with snatches from his own life that matched the prodigal’s story. John told how he’d drunk and drugged so much that he ended up homeless, living in shelters or under bridges. He told of mornings, waking up shaking so bad that he had to drink a pint just to stand up. Rooster nodded, laughed as he related to John’s pain, listened like I’d never seen him listen before.

John told us that he finally realized how far he’d walked away from God. The pressure of God’s judgment on his life was so great that he knew it was time to turn around. John told how the life, death and resurrection of Jesus had changed him and brought him to a new life that wasn’t always easy, but was infinitely preferable to the way he had been living.

After lunch, Rooster came up to John and offered him a dollar (which John refused) because what he had said touched his heart so deeply that he had to respond. They shook hands, Rooster thanked John for his words and said he’d be back.

The second moment was at a Full Gospel Businessmen’s Fellowship breakfast. A friend said I needed to visit these men and speak to them about our ministry. I was skeptical at best, not looking forward to meeting a bunch of men I didn’t know, who may or may not appreciate female clergy, and who had no reason to help a

mainline ministry (we're "dead," you know, according to most charismatic groups). But when we walked into the meeting, we were welcomed with open arms. After breakfast I was asked to speak. I told of our work on the north side and then at the end of the meeting they gathered for prayer. They asked me and the other pastor there, as well as anyone who felt the need, to sit in a circle and the men stood around us, praying. It felt like I was in the middle of Luke 8 when the woman who had hemorrhaged for twelve years was healed as she touched the hem of Jesus' garment as those men laid hands on me and prayed, some in tongues, some in English (one in Spanish). I felt power flow into me, peace settle in my soul as we all trusted together that Jesus had indeed sent the Holy Spirit into our midst to heal us.

The third moment came yesterday as I thought about the chaos, the wild, wasting emptiness that seems to engulf my life these days and I realized, like Job, that I might be tempted to curse God and die as so much of what I've held dear seems to be hanging by a thread, but I knew I wouldn't. Job had the privilege of speaking with God and having his life restored to him. I have the privilege of having God come to me, for me in the flesh and having not my old life restored, but new creation life born within me. The Word has touched me from the inside out and I am no longer the same. Though I still crater at times in the face of adversity, there is never that devolution into the abyss, which used to be my response to chaos. Curse God and die is no longer an option.

The power of God Said is in this poem by W.S. Merwin that I found in the front of Anne LaMott's latest book "Traveling Mercies".

Listen

with the night falling we are saying thank you

we are stopping on the bridge to bow from the railings

we are running out of the glass rooms
with our mouths full of food to look at the sky
and say thank you
we are standing by the water looking out
in different directions
back from a series of hospitals back from a mugging
after funerals we are saying thank you
after the news of the dead
whether or not we knew them we are saying thank you
in a culture up to its chin in shame
living in the stench it has chosen we are saying thank you

over telephones we are saying thank you
in doorways and in the backs of cars and in elevators
remembering wars and the police at the back door
and the beatings on stairs we are saying thank you

in the banks that use us we are saying thank you
with the crooks in office with the rich and fashionable
unchanged we go on saying thank you thank you

with the animals dying around us
our lost feelings we are saying thank you
with the forests falling faster than the minutes
of our lives we are saying thank you
with the words going out like cells of a brain
with the cities growing over us like the earth
we are saying thank you faster and faster
with nobody listening we are saying thank you
we are saying thank you and waving
dark though it is