



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Order”

Genesis 1:1-10, Mark 5:1-20

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Introduction to the Prayer for Illumination:

It is a touchy time in our nation right now.

Back in 1999, I preached a sermon called *The Fitting Word*. I said in that sermon that proclaiming the Gospel is speaking the right word, at the right time, and in the right way. Say what is true, say it at the right time, and say it in a way it can be heard. My prayer is that I am able to do that today.

Prayer for Illumination:

Holy God, may the words of my mouth be true, be timely and be helpful. Amen.

Sermon:

Before Christmas, a friend told me he wanted to hear positive and hopeful news. He knows we are in a pandemic and need to stay safe, but he wanted to think about other things than living with this lurking virus.

What he said struck me because I was already there. When he said that, I was already way past thinking about how to adapt to the pandemic and was thinking about what can be ahead for my family and this church. I've been through enough in life to have learned that it is important not to get stuck in the moment. When things are going great, don't get stuck into thinking that



everything is going to always be all right. And when times are rough, don't get stuck into thinking it is not going to get better.

As far as the pandemic is concerned, things are going to get better. That doesn't mean, of course, easing up on restrictions. Today is not *that* day. As health professionals predicted, we are now seeing record numbers of infections and deaths. But what is also happening right now is that vaccines are being distributed and administered. Whatever the logistical problems are, and no matter how it could be done better, the vaccinations will only accelerate and

at some point

we will see infection rates drop,

and at some point after that

the restrictions will be lifted.

With that being my conviction, and with the question of our Advent Series, "Why Wait?" still in my heart and head, I decided to preach sermons at the beginning of this year that would focus on how followers of Jesus can find purpose, meaning and joy *whatever* the circumstances of the day.

Today, I am sticking to that plan *even given the disturbing news of this past week*. That doesn't mean I will ignore what we've gone through as a nation since Wednesday. It can't be ignored. We all saw the chaos of some incited protesters becoming rioters and breaking into the Capitol building resulting in five deaths. Order was restored. Since then, we have heard heated debates about what happened, who to hold accountable and how to not only restore order but also *maintain* order.

I am what Jen Brothers will become at 4:00 o'clock this afternoon: an ordained minister of Word and Sacrament. I am not a political commentator.

Well, I am a political commentator on my own time. Listen to Mille and me at home and we sound like co-hosts of a program on the *Anderson News Network*. But when I stand in this pulpit, I do not do so as an advocate of a political party or even as a citizen of a country. As a follower of Jesus, my ultimate allegiance is to God's realm.

In that role today, I want to *step back*—not *step away*, because what is going in our country cannot be ignored—but *step back* in a Sabbath-moment-way to try to get some theological perspective before tomorrow hits and we all go back to trying to figure out what is going on, who needs to be held accountable and what needs to be done.

In stepping back, I want us to think about "Order." As I did with happiness last week, I want to distinguish the sort of order that is *imposed* on us from the outside and the sort of order that begins within. I want to ask the same kind of question I asked last Sunday of happiness. *Is it possible to know an inner calm even in the face of chaos around us?*

So, just for a while, let's turn off the voices of whatever media we turn to for information and perspective, and let's listen for the Word of God. Hear first this passage from Genesis and a little later a story from the Gospel of Mark.

Genesis 1:1-10



In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³ Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

⁶ And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” ⁷ So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. ⁸ God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

⁹ And God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. ¹⁰ God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

Did you hear what happened? Talk about *words having consequences!* We saw this past week in our nation’s capital how words can inspire **chaos**. Well, our Genesis passage tells of God’s words bringing *order* out of **chaos**.

You heard it. God says, “**Let there be,**” and suddenly the waters recede so land can appear, light pierces the darkness, and life beyond chaos begins.

This passage about creation is echoed in our passage from Mark where Jesus’ words have consequences. Listen for the ordering and life-changing Word of God:

Mark 5:1-20

They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. ² And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. ³ He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; ⁴ for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. ⁵ Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. ⁶ When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; ⁷ and he shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.” ⁸ For he had said to him, “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!” ⁹ Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” He replied, “My name is Legion; for we are many.” ¹⁰ He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. ¹¹ Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; ¹² and the unclean spirits begged him, “Send us into the swine; let us enter them.” ¹³ So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.

¹⁴ The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. ¹⁵ They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. ¹⁶ Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported



it. ¹⁷ Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. ¹⁸ As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. ¹⁹ But Jesus refused, and said to him, “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.” ²⁰ And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

A man possessed by demons has disrupted the peace of a town. Efforts have been made to restrain him. He has been chained and shackled. But the broken chains and shackles show that the efforts to constrain this powerful man have not worked.

Were the townspeople wrong to try?

With no other evidence than this man seems a danger to himself and others, I would say, “No.” Now, we don’t know if there was something better that could have been done. I mean, if this story were told today, we might have a debate about whether excessive force has been used. Maybe the de-escalating efforts of a therapist, social worker, or pastor might have worked better. We don’t know.

What we do know in general—what we know philosophically, historically and theologically (those of us who are not anarchists anyway)—is that every community of any size needs to have some kind of order imposed upon us.

We Presbyterians have good theology to back this up. John Calvin agreed with Martin Luther in saying that the Law, which is for the sake of Order, has a negative use. Luther and Calvin did not mean “negative” in the sense of being “bad,” but rather in the sense that the Law has a *constraining function*. There is a “No,” “Don’t do that,” “Don’t cross that line,” spirit to Law. This restraining spirit of the Law is what makes life together possible. Good Law constrains the worst of us to free the best of us. And it defends the rights of those who cannot defend themselves alone—the powerless, the poor.

Law is necessary to maintain order.

But, of course, not all versions of Law and Order are equal. Just because some version of imposed order is necessary doesn’t mean that every imposed order is good.

Though we can have high ideals about Law, we should guard against what the Law can become.

- Think of dictatorships and fascist governments and the oppressive order they imposed,
- think of Jim Crow order imposed in the south,
- think of rules and regulations in our country that work against the common good,
- think of any order that grossly benefits the selfish interests of the few in power.

We can go back to our passage to see an oppressive order. When we look at the man possessed by demons, we see *chaos*, but we *also* see order. The man’s life is in chaos, but the demonic forces that have taken over his thinking and his life have things just the way they want them. They thrive within the life of this man they manipulate to do their will. That is why when they see Jesus approach them, they beg Jesus to leave. He is going to mess up what they have got



going. Whatever Jesus represents—whatever truth he has to tell, whatever light he has to bring—is a threat to these demons which have taken over this man’s mind, heart and life.

“Leave us,” they beg of Jesus. “Leave us,” they beg of all that Jesus represents. “Leave us,” they beg

of selfless love that sacrifices for the sake of others,
of God’s justice that defends the powerless,
of God’s mercy and kindness that refuses to return evil for evil,
of God’s truth that undercuts demonic ideology,
of God’s reconciliation where revenge has no place
and where there is no winning without healing.

They want none of that.

But, of course, Jesus doesn’t go anywhere. What happens next is what happened at creation. The God-in-Jesus *speaks*, and order is brought to the chaos of the man’s life. The man is freed of those demons that have been doing the thinking and acting for him. As the passage describes it, he becomes clothed (which means he has been restored dignity), he becomes calm, and he comes to his right mind (he can think for himself again).

There is an interesting sidenote here. Demonic powers that take over peoples’ thinking and actions—

think of ideologies that twist truths for singular aims,
think of personality cults where followers lose their identity in their messiah—
it turns out that those demonic powers are infectious.

The demons move from the man to pigs and the result is violence. The pigs rush mindlessly to their death.

Let’s go back to the man. The text says, *he is calm*. Order has been restored... within him.

Remember when I said that John Calvin described even good Law as “negative” in its function of restraining evil doing? Well, when he said that, he wasn’t done talking about the Law. He went on to say that there is also a positive and encouraging use of the Law. It is a Law that begins within. It is an *inner compulsion*.

A compulsion to do what is right because it is right,
a compulsion to treat others with respect and dignity
because that is what love does.

Calvin believed this compulsion comes of God. It comes of some kind of conversation where one is reshaped within. He called it the “*Law of God’s Love*.”

I think even many who are not Christian but are moral and ethical would agree with what Calvin is saying even if they don’t trace the source to God. And they might agree that communities



are best served when they are led by people who have an internal sense of moral order that then shapes the Law that is imposed on the community. These leaders begin with this inner compulsion to promote human dignity, demand justice while showing mercy, and keep self-interest in check so as to promote the greater good.

A *good* system of external Law that is of the first type, the imposed-upon-a-people-type, is crafted by leaders who begin with an ordered inner life.

Let's go back to the story of the passage. When the townspeople see the man dressed, calm and in his right mind, look how they respond. They are *spooked*. As the demons did, they beg Jesus to leave. Maybe whatever *Law and Order* they were trying to protect when they shackled the man is also threatened by the presence of God's kind of order. It would not surprise me if the demonic possession of the man did not come to him *from within the town*. Dysfunction in a family might be manageable until a member of the family starts acting out. Dysfunction in a political movement might be manageable until those who have been *pulled in* can no longer be *reined in*.

The man liberated from his demons doesn't want to go back to that town. When Jesus is about to leave, he asks to go with him. "No," Jesus tells him. "Go back home. It is possible to be someone who can be calm even when facing chaos. And besides, the town needs calm people who can think for themselves."

I think followers of Jesus can find calm right now.

In saying that, I know this is a serious chapter in the life of our country and much is at stake. I am certain that whatever gets worked out, there will not be a single one of us who is going to be happy with all that is done or what results. I am certain I will be upset about something; I mean, inner calm doesn't mean not caring. I also have no delusions that we are going to find a way to suddenly fix ourselves. We've grown immature as a nation as our demonizing, polarizing and truth twisting ways reveal.

But that said, as with the pandemic, I am confident and hopeful. We are going to get through this.

I have two bits of advice. First, this week in this moment of heightened emotions, monitor who it is you are listening to, and if that person is *screeching*, even if you agree with them, find someone else to listen to. Because right now we need those who have calm within to speak to the chaos around us.

Second, do not wait for chaos to be calmed in the nation before finding order within. Right now,

- we can center ourselves on God's love,
- we can remind ourselves of the virtues that should guide us,
- and we can commit ourselves to making a witness without insisting that we have to win or be seen as right.



If you want to draw attention to yourself, create some buzz, maybe even earn some praise, there are easy ways to get attention by adding accelerant to the social fires. But I believe that those who will make the most positive difference in leading communities out of chaos will not be the self-serving firebrands, even if they happen to be right about some things. It will be those who are calm because of a calm within, and who do not make their efforts personal or self-serving because they truly are seeking the greater good. It will be—and I know how old I sound in saying it—it will be *the most mature among us*. Can that leadership begin with you and me, no matter our age? Can we be a part of the Spirit moving over the face of the deep? Can we show how moral calm can be as infectious as demonic powers?

Charge and Benediction:

Go from this moment of worship and find what is true and speak it at the right time and in a way that it can be heard and be helpful. And go knowing that the grace, mercy and peace of the Triune God is moving over the chaos right now bringing order.

