

*God and the Chaos Monster**

Lamentations 3:22–24, 31–33; Mark 1:9–11; John 20:26–29

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I don't know if you can dedicate a sermon to a human being rather than to God, but I seriously doubt that insecurity is a big issue for God. For preachers, yes. Insecurity as a problem for God, no. This bacculaureate sermon is dedicated to a beautiful—even when bald—little six-year-old named Pepper.

Pepper never had a college commencement; she never made it out of first grade. She died at the age of six in 1984 of a horrible cancer that stalks little bitties. Her death on that Sunday afternoon in April was my first conscious encounter with the chaos monster. By conscious encounter, I mean I have stayed with this clash of faith and fear since 1984 and have not let the monster drive me into a premature closure through magic, superstitious religious belief, or the palliative of agnosticism.

I had become Pepper's pastor in December 1982. A telephone call came from a friend who was also a Presbyterian minister and, incidentally, an Austin College grad. He said, "Jim, a family from my church in McKinney has moved to Waco, and I would like for you to go visit them."

"Sure" I said. "Glad to do so."

"I'm not really doing you a favor," he told me.

"What do you mean?"

"They have two little girls ..."

I interrupted him, "Great! I have two little girls. I was made to be a dad of daughters."

There was silence, and then he continued: "Not like theirs, Jim. Their first—though she is beautiful and brilliant—was born with a severe birth defect and is dwarf-like. But it is the other one, the one named Pepper, to whom you need to go. She will probably die soon from cancer."

I telephoned and then went to visit the family, sure that I would be competent and capable for them. This is why, even today, I say, standing before you, about to turn fifty-nine, married thirty-nine years, ordained for thirty years, a father of two and grandfather of three, on my best day, I am still nine-tenths fake. Why do I say this? Because I am full of fear. The difference today is that I know it. Then, I pretended not to know.

Turns out, the McKinney Presbyterian pastor had done me a tremendous favor: He introduced me to Pepper, and I have loved her ever since. Her little life and big death have been a primary lens through which I have tried to see God with belief, yet be faithful also to my experience of the absurdity of the chaos monster.

I used to go to the ICU and rock Pepper so her mom and dad could get a break. She loved butterflies and drew me pictures of the little beauties. Then I would sing to her. *Little Pepper Haynes's gonna fly someday, fly someday... God's little butterfly...* The

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singing was silly, terrible, but she fiercely liked it and always giggled.

I never thought I would let her down. I certainly never thought I would run out on her, but I did. On that April afternoon in 1984, they called me to come to their home. Pepper had been brought home from Hillcrest Hospital to die.

I went, and, upon entering her room, I encountered the God who both delivers the needy and abandons the crucified. My faith has never been the same since. Even as I stand before you and preach, my faith dwells between the polarities of this divine contradiction.

Pepper was visibly shaking as I entered her room. Jay and Debbie, her parents, could see my immediate alarm. They tried to comfort me by telling me that the shaking was from heavy morphine usage. They were holding her as they all huddled together on the bed. Pepper looked like the images I'd seen of Jewish children who had survived concentration camps. Her mom and dad were comforting her with hugs and ice chips. I was able to stay in the room for ten minutes at most; then I abandoned her. I made up the excuse that I would go into the other room and hold her sister who was half the size of her six-year-old baby sister. I did go and gather her sister into my lap and sit with her, though it was an excuse. All I knew was, I had to get out of that room and away from that shaking. I was abandoning Pepper because it seemed to me that God was abandoning her, and, therefore, everything I had believed was being savaged. Her shaking death was shaking my faith to death. She died within an hour or so. Only then could I go back into her room.

Hemingway wrote: "Life breaks everyone. Some grow strong at the broken places." The only reason that I can come up with that could explain why some grow stronger and some don't is the visit of an angel in their life. An angel. Don't romanticize, and there's no need to be anti-intellectual, either. I am not witnessing to a fundamentalist form of faith. An angel is a messenger. And an angel can be a six-year-old who lets you rock her and sing funny made-up songs as she grins, yet goes about her work of dying.

Every one of you will have your angel, your messenger. For those who have ears to hear, hear your angel, and for those who have eyes to see, see your angel. You are being given a message. Some of you have already heard, but you are frightened to tell anyone; the others will be hearing your message.

Sooner or later, life breaks everyone. Simply breaks you. It might be by your own doing, the result of your own betrayals suddenly rising up to betray you. It might be that you are perfectly innocent. God makes life precarious, and the innocents do often suffer in this dangerous world. And this is why I believe that God, too, will have to give an account of God's self to God's creation. Perhaps the final cleansing of creation will be the bathing of God's own tears until God has passed through God's own peculiar judgment before us.

I wanted us to hear the beautiful verse in John's Gospel about those who believe without seeing. John's Gospel is usually a little too triumphalistic, a little too full of certain glory for me when it comes to Jesus as God's human face. But I think I have misunderstood John's witness and his take on God's glory. I now perceive John's witness as far more subversive than triumphal when it comes to power.

The verse about believing without seeing is not in any Gospel but John's. "You believe because you have seen me, but blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe." Why? Why are those who don't see the miraculous considered

blessed? I suppose it is because, for them, their faith comes without seeing, without validation. We believe only with the awareness that our belief is always in dispute, never imperialistic in its triumphs. Some of us find that we can believe only because Jesus himself underwent the experience of encountering the deafness of the universe, the chaos with trembling; Jesus himself encountered the question of abandonment.

I believe Jesus' baptism is about all of this, though a first read rarely makes the connection. It is why I wanted the baptism text read; I believe there is a connection. There is a connection between him and us that refuses to become discouraged. A connection between the start of his brief parade on that day of his baptism and your parade, which begins this weekend. A connection between his baptism and the chaos monster's absurdity, too.

Sooner or later, heaven no longer opens up. Sooner or later, heaven falls silent. Our parade lurches to a grinding halt. It did for Jesus, as well. Now, you can play those religious shell games that will give you all kinds of reasons to pretend you still have your miracle, that you are still seeing signs of heaven and hearing heaven's voice. And you can always find a preacher and a congregation that will vouch for your miracle. Any fool can fill a church. But at what cost?

The grand, undisputable sign that there is a God and that life is worthwhile and makes sense and always turns out all right—all this will disappear and fall silent. In every life—in your life—there comes a point where all is lost. Nothing is there but a trembling absurdity and faith devouring itself, divided between the God who delivers the needy and the God who abandons the crucified. This violent contradiction will stare you right in the face. Its silence is deafening, and, I guarantee you, you will be the one to blink first.

For me, there only is one miracle: we are loved by God. When Jesus was baptized, wasn't it an expression of this one, true miracle? I have never viewed the baptism of Jesus as exclusive of Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, agnostics, and atheists. On the contrary, I see his baptism as a portrayal of his brotherhood of us all. When I used to say evening prayers with my daughters, I tried to convey to them this notion that God's arms reach around the whole world to include all. I said the same prayer every evening: "Dear God, thank you for the high honor and privilege of being Shannon and Shalyn's dad. Thank you for their baptism, which is a sign that they belong to you, and not only them but all children, whether baptized or not. In Jesus' name, Amen." I wanted them to sense the connection between their baptism and their neighbor.

Who knows all the reasons for the baptism of Jesus? For me on this evening with you, it is enough to believe he was baptized to show his willingness to be drenched in the swirling contradictions of full, human life.

On that day, Jesus sees and hears, according to Mark, the sounds of the heavens torn open, the Spirit appearing something like a dove, a voice declaring the pleasure of God. Jesus hears and sees validation, surely something like you are experiencing this weekend, everyone surrounding you with hoorays and pride, producing pleasurable hope. And appropriately so, for you and all who love you.

But don't forget that this same Jesus would be the one who later in life cried out in agony to God, "Why have I been abandoned?" That protest on the cross was not his baptism speaking but his protest to his baptism and to God. And for him, too, the silence was deafening.

Of course, in that beautiful prayer about the experience of holy abandonment, in

which Jesus legitimizes both the presence of God and the absence of God, he takes our own lives even more into his. For when we cry out such a prayer of painful abandonment, calling for God to get God's good in gear, we are praying his prayer, which, of course, was the prayer of his own Jewish people in their lament literature in the Older Testament.

There are times in life when we see, hear, and feel the miracle of God's presence, pleasure, and joy; as, assuredly, there comes the day when all is lost, and the authentic, genuine, religious experience of God is one of abandonment. Because Jesus was baptized into the experience of no exemptions, no free passes, from the chaos monster, I can say this evening in worship with you: "I believe though I have not seen." I can profess Jesus as my Lord and Savior because, first, I profess him as a brother, my brother who endured and endures the chaos absurdity with me.

Had you been present and had a video camera at the baptism of Jesus, I believe that later, on the replay, you would have simply seen a human being joining other human beings like us. No sounds or sights of heavenly voices, no thundering affirmations. Just a human being participating in a public religious ceremony that anyone might say was plebeian and meaningless. But the next time we are in the contradiction of chaos, all miracles gone, the silence deafening, the nauseating absurdity spinning us, let us remember, there is someone at our side who has joined with us and will never run out on us. He joined with us, not to grant God's love, but to take our suffering and dying and righteous protest into God's love and keeping.

The chaos monster of life still gives me the shakes. We cannot and ought not deceive ourselves. Innocents suffering, the strutting of death and oppression, are all absurdities in God's world. Suffering will remain an absurd, irrational fact, and, worse, the final word, unless we join with God in becoming weak in power in order to become strong in love and give ourselves to the calling message.

And what is that calling message? It will be something like the one spoken by the mysterious fox to the little boy in Antoine de Saint-Exupery's classic story, *The Little Prince*. When at long last the secret message is told, it is this: "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."

Your angel will say something like that. "Blessed are those who believe without seeing."