

**DANCING ON THE DISTANT SHORE OF CHAOS**  
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Exodus 15:1-6, 11-13, 17-18, 20-21  
Romans 8:31-35, 36-39

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Oh, how we danced!  
Not so much on the night we were wed.  
We wed at the Mount Dearborn Church in Great Falls.  
The reception followed in the Mount Dearborn Church Fellowship Hall.  
There wasn't much dancing in those days  
in the Mount Dearborn Church Fellowship Hall.  
Maybe that's changed now.  
Maybe liturgical reform has taken hold  
at Mount Dearborn Church  
as it has in other places.  
The people of God are beginning to remember again  
how we once danced as an act of worship...  
danced as an expression of joy...  
danced as thanksgiving before God.

Like the time Miriam and the other women  
took out the timbrels and danced.  
When they reached the far shore of chaos  
they danced.

It was an act of worship.  
It was an expression of thanksgiving.  
It was an edict of endearment.

We didn't dance at the Mount Dearborn Church  
on our wedding day;  
but, oh, how we danced  
in our courtship:

socks in gym at Great Falls High;  
penny loafers in the Bowery at Myrtle Beach;  
barefoot in the pavilion at Ocean Drive.

We were there,  
Martha<sup>1</sup> and I,  
and we're of the age to have been at the beach

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<sup>1</sup> My wife, Martha N. Lowry.

when beach music was being born...  
dancing  
and dancing  
and dancing...

dancing to tunes by:

Bill Haley;  
Chubby Checker;  
Little Richard.

Those were the days.  
We thought they'd never end.  
They were our days  
of innocence.

We didn't know it at the time, of course,  
but we were dancing  
on the near shore of chaos.  
Chaos, for us, hadn't happened yet;  
But it was just below the surface and it was about to set in.

We were still in the glory days  
that followed the second world war.  
Our world and our church  
have not regained  
what we imagined to be the innocence of the 1950's  
when *our* world was safe  
and the church was booming

Back then, we danced and danced:

*Bebop-aloumop-alop-bamb-boom...  
Tootie fruitie, alrootie.*

As in the opening recollection  
of Pat Conroy's novel, *Beach Music*,<sup>2</sup>  
Conroy's character, Jack McCall, retells the story  
of the night he fell in love with Shyla Fox.

Jack McCall is retelling the story to Laura,  
the only daughter  
and only child of Jack and Shyla.  
He's told the story to Laura so often

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<sup>2</sup> Doubleday, 1995. 9 ff

Laura can fill in details  
and correct her father in his own story.  
The story as Jack McCall retells it to his daughter  
is of high school seniors in the 1950's  
dancing and dancing  
on the porch of a beach house  
just minutes before  
it was washed to sea in a storm.

For the novelist,  
the scene is a not-very-subtle symbolic picture  
of dancing on the near shore of chaos.

The world of those high school seniors  
was, indeed, about to collapse  
into upheaval and turmoil...  
explode, more like.  
The upheaval and turmoil centered,  
for the novel,  
in Shyla jumping to her death  
from the Silas Pearlman Bridge  
which, until it was recently replaced by the Ravenel Bridge,  
spanned the Cooper River high over the Charleston Harbor.  
Between the beach party and the suicide,  
Pat Conroy's novel weaves its way,  
sometimes skillfully and sometimes not so skillfully,  
through one drama after another.  
Some of the dramas  
are as cosmic as the Holocaust and the Vietnam War  
and some are as personal  
as alcoholism and dysfunctional families.

It is comparatively easy,  
it seems to me,  
to do as Pat Conroy has done  
and describe what it is like  
to dance on the near shore of chaos...  
to describe  
what it is like to dance  
when chaos is about to begin  
and then to describe in graphic detail  
what it is like when chaos sets in.

It is less easy,  
it also seems to me,  
to describe what it is like

to dance on the distant shore of chaos...

to describe  
what it is like to dance  
when chaos will have come to an end;

but that is the subject of today's Old Testament lesson;  
and that is the subject of this sermon:

to tell how once our people danced on the far shore of chaos  
so in retelling the story  
we might be dreaming of dancing again  
on the far shore of chaos,

no matter the form of chaos.

"The Lord is my strength and my might,"  
sang Moses in his poem.

"Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously,"  
sang Miriam as she and the women danced,  
and danced,  
and danced.

Through this poem and song of the parting of the Red Sea,  
dancing on the distant shore of chaos  
has become a vision...  
a dream of how the people of God  
shall be  
when, at last,  
the people of God are set free.

Many scholars agree,  
this poem and song of Moses and Miriam  
is the oldest portion of scripture in existence:<sup>3</sup>

"The Lord is a warrior..."  
went the poem.

"Horse and rider he has thrown into the sea,"  
went the song.

Think of it.  
The poem and song  
are the oldest Bible there is.

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<sup>3</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (from the Interpretation Series), John Knox Press, 1991. 161

As we have them now,  
the poem and song  
follow the telling of something that happened once  
a long, long time ago.

More than that,  
in the telling of it,  
it is the story of something that happens now.  
Most of all,  
in the hoping of it,  
it is the story of something that shall surely be.

The vision is of the promise of God unfolding...  
a vision with roots run deep...  
deep...  
deep in the memory of God's people.

You remember the story that precedes the poem and song  
of which the poem and song are a retelling?  
Of course you do.

God said to Moses,  
**"Tell ol' Pharaoh  
to let my people go."**

Moses asked God,  
"When Pharaoh asks who sent me,  
what shall I tell him?"

God said to Moses,  
**"I am who I am,  
Tell Pharaoh I Am sent you."**

Moses said to Pharaoh,  
**"The God who is said  
to let his people go."**

Ten plagues later...  
and Pharaoh let the people of God leave Egypt  
after 400 years of slavery.  
The plagues were to let Pharaoh know  
the God who is is serious.  
All Pharaohs in every age must be told  
that the God who is is serious.

But...on second thought,  
Pharaoh changed his mind.  
Having let the people go,  
Pharaoh sent his army with horse drawn chariots,  
in hot pursuit,  
to trap the people of God  
with no way to cross the mighty Red Sea...

the mighty Red Sea,  
otherwise known as the Sea of Chaos.<sup>4</sup>

You get the picture.  
The people of God  
trapped on the near shore of Chaos  
with the hoards of Pharaoh closing in.

The God who is said to Moses who was,  
**"Tell the people to go forward...  
to move...**

**hold forth your staff  
and tell the people to move...  
to move...  
to move forward...  
move into the raging Sea of Chaos."**

That's always the way of it.  
Consider all the latter-day chaos the church is facing  
as we play out our life together in our culture.  
What could be more chaotic  
than having would-be scholars  
dust off the Gnostic Gospels,  
make unfounded accusations about conspiracies to hide them,  
and then turn their fanciful theories into wild news stories about Judas  
or, worse, into wildly popular fiction about Jesus and Mary Magdalene?  
Maybe it's all a flash in the pan,  
but what we need is a vision of what it would be like,  
to use the image of one observer,  
to have millions of people flocking to read  
Mathew, Mark, Luke and John.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Brian McLaren, "Faith on the line: Judas, Dan Brown, and Jesus," Presbyterian Outlook, Vol.188, No. 18, May 22/29, 2006, p. 8, c. 2006 Religion News Service.

But it's not just the church in culture.

By all accounts,  
the Presbyterian Church (USA),  
our beloved denomination,  
is on the cusp of yet another division.

We're fighting over views strongly held  
between which the valiant efforts of many  
to find a way forward in which we can remain together,  
seem likely to fail...will fail save some miracle of divine origin.

Please pray for our General Assembly.  
It will be meeting in Birmingham in a few weeks  
and needs a vision of what it is like  
on the distant shore of this bickering chaos  
as they and we charge headlong into the chaos.

Let me say it again.

This is more than the story of something that happened once  
a long time ago.

This story of something that happened once  
has become a vision...  
a vision of something that happens now  
and more,  
it is a vision of something that is going to happen.

You know the story?

Of course you do.

According to the story as it has been told to us  
and as we must tell it to our children,  
by a strong east wind  
that blew all night long,  
God parted the Sea of Chaos  
and the people of God walked safely through  
to the distant shore...

**CHAOS ALL ABOUT ON EVERY SIDE...**

but we walked on dry land all the way through.

When the army of Pharaoh in their horse drawn chariots tried to pursue,  
they got stuck in the mud

**and the waters came crashing in.**

Poor Pharaoh.

Poor Pharaoh's men!

Poor Pharaoh's horses!!!

They're no match for the God who is.

Don't waste too much time  
worrying about the fairness of it all.

As I said:

What happened is important;  
The memory of what happened is even more important; and  
The telling of it is most important of all.

It is in the telling of the story  
that we see now  
how the people of God  
are led now  
safely through the Sea of Chaos  
to sing and dance on the distant shore.

Cataloging chaos is no problem.  
Chaos gets cataloged every morning for us  
in the morning paper  
and again every night on the evening news  
and, since I know William,<sup>6</sup>  
I know it gets cataloged again many Sundays from this pulpit...  
this pulpit and others like it  
for those congregations who are willing to move head-long,  
with faith,  
into chaos  
rather than try to use the faith  
to pretend there is no chaos.

It seems we're always standing  
on the near shore of some chaos or other.  
What could be more chaotic, to take the most obvious example,  
than warfare on one front  
against a taunting enemy that cannot be found;  
and, on another front,  
where there is no end in view  
and the innocent are paying the greater price..  
Count among them far too many of our own brave men and women.

God said to Moses,

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<sup>6</sup> Dr. William Pender, Senior Pastor and Head of Staff of Oakland Avenue Church, is away on Sabbatical leave.

**"Tell ol' Pharaoh  
to let my people go."**

Generations later,  
with a different take on a similar issue  
Jesus said,  
"Pray for your enemies."

What could be more chaotic, to take another example,  
than a bitterly divided electorate  
with both sides paralyzed with fear, bitterness, and anger at the other,  
and, all the while, were mostly governed by those  
who are nothing so much as mediocre.  
Understanding chaos is not very hard at all.  
Getting through it and remaining hopeful is the great thing.

God said to Moses,  
**"When Pharaoh who governs you asks who sent you,  
tell him I am who I am...  
tell him I Am sent you."**

Years later,  
with an altogether different take  
on the very same issue,  
Jesus said,  
"You shall know the truth  
and the truth shall make you free."

What could be more chaotic, to take yet another example,  
than not having enough jails  
to keep the underclass from rising up  
to take what belongs to us?

Understanding chaos is not hard.  
Getting through chaos to justice for all is the fearsome thing.

God said to Moses,  
**"Stretch forth your staff  
and lead the people through the chaos."**

Many generations later Jesus said,  
"I was hungry and you fed me...  
thirsty and you gave me drink...  
naked and you clothed me...  
if you have done it to one of the least of these,

you have done it to me."

What could possibly be more chaotic, to take more personal examples,  
than the rapid pace of change...  
change in schools...  
change in church...  
change in women's roles...  
change in men's roles...  
change in views of acceptable life-styles...  
change in delivery of health care...  
change in neighbors...  
change in moving from age to age...  
change when there is a divorce...  
change when there is illness...

change when there is a death....

Understanding chaos is not very hard.  
Getting through chaos on solid ground is the great thing.

God said to the east wind,  
**"Blow, mighty east wind, blow...  
blow back the waters of chaos  
so that my people can walk through."**

It has become a vision  
of what shall surely be.

Many, many, many generations later the apostle, Paul, said,  
"I am sure  
that neither death nor life,  
nor angels,  
nor rulers,  
nor things present,  
nor things to come,  
nor powers,  
nor height,  
nor depth,  
nor anything in all creation,  
will be able to separate us  
from the love of God  
in Christ Jesus our Lord."

It is a fresh take  
on the same vision.

When the people of God got through  
to the distant shore of chaos,  
Moses recited a poem that he had written:

"The Lord is my strength and my might,...  
he has become my salvation...  
Pharaoh's chariots and his army...  
he has cast into the sea to be swallowed in chaos...."

When the people of God got through  
to the distant shore of chaos,  
Miriam and the women rose up to sing and dance:

"Sing to the Lord,  
for he has triumphed gloriously."

It has become a vision of what shall surely be.  
In this time that William is away,  
we on the home front have been charged  
with catching a vision for what God is calling Oakland Avenue Church  
in the next chapters of your life together.

Well, what do you think?  
Shall we dance?

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