



Last week I began a series of messages titled *The Journey to Advent*. To explain a bit more about what this series is intended to do, it is this – as I mentioned last week, my idea is based on the Lessons and Carols service that we observe on Christmas Eve. That service traces the length and breadth of Biblical history to show why the Incarnation was needed. In this series, I hope to do the same, to demonstrate why advent and the manger was needed. It lays the foundation for Advent, so to speak.

Last week we began our series with the story of Jacob wrestling through the night with God. This week we will continue a bit along the same theme of wrestling, but today we will center on our culture's wrestling with the chaos that seems to be so much a part of our lives; the chaos of violence, hatred, and uncertainty. Sunday's horrific shooting at the First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs, Texas once again brings into sharp focus the terrible disease of chaos and violence that is now so epidemic in our culture. *What in the world is going on?* we often ask each other, and ourselves.

This morning's message is *Why Chaos Never Wins*. I have two Scripture texts for this message, but originally had just one, which was a single verse from the book of Judges. I thought the starkness of that verse really set the tone for one of the reasons why Advent was so needed, as it summed up a very chaotic period not only in the history of God's people, but seems to speak for quite a bit of human history. As the last verse of that book, it is a rather dreary and depressing summation of the state of things. Upon reflection, however, it just seemed so depressingly negative to talk only about the difficult state of the world at that time and today. I am not a negative person. I believe in hope and optimism, so I can't offer only bad news and negativity without the balance of hope. After all, isn't hope what we need? Who needs more bad news and negativity? The second, and longer Scripture text, then, is from the book of Revelation, a beautiful passage, one of my favorites and one that I often use at funerals. I love the passage, and use it at funerals because it offers a great message of hope. It is a powerful reminder of the thread of God's work that weaves its way throughout history, making its way to the manger and the Incarnation and on through to the fulfillment of God's bringing a new heaven and new earth, as spoken of in the book of Revelation.

So, this morning, I want to survey the past and current state of our world, which is a rather depressing historical state of affairs. The verse from the book of Judges reminds us that chaos is nothing new, as it records a time when the social fabric was frayed and unraveling, and the overwhelming

amount of chaos is plainly seen. Now we see a great deal of chaos happening in parts of our world – through much of the Middle East, parts of Africa, portions of Latin and South America, and in segments of our own society as well. But we will not wallow only in that portion of the message, as I will then offer a message of hope and good news as well. Follow along, please, as I read the first of our Scripture texts for the morning.

Judges 21:25 –

In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.

Very often, that verse from Judges is one that is used as a basis for an *oh woe is us* kind of message. I think you know how those kinds of sermons go – *the world is in terrible shape. When we were younger things were right, people lived right, and now we have thrown it all to the wind and we're quickly going down the drain.* Basically, they are sermons that could be written by just putting together a bunch of sad, depressing Facebook posts. Those types of messages overlook a few facts. First of all, as we all should know – if we do not already know – that the *good old days* were not always that great. We have selective memories when it comes to the past, and we too often idealize the past. Every point in history has had its share of struggles and difficulties, and much of history has had incredibly difficult struggles. That is not to minimize the troubles our world currently faces, certainly, but it is important to remember that we are so much better off than most people throughout the course of human history. What is troubling, however, is that the consequences of our present chaos are greater than at any other point in history. We are capable of destroying our world, and not just through a cataclysmic event brought about through weaponry, but through a much slower, but just as inevitable process, such as environmental degradation.

I want to trace the roots of our chaos to three things, and then speak to why that chaos will not win.

1. Disillusionment.

I am not an alarmist, but I do believe there are alarm bells all around us, and one of the alarm bells is the amount of disillusionment that seems to overwhelm our society at the present time. I am a member of the Baby Boomer generation, and one of the characteristics of our generation has been that of hope and optimism, especially in the 60s. That hope and optimism became imperiled, first with the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr.; was further weakened in our social struggles over the Vietnam War, Watergate, a stagnating economy, and other problems; which lead to the great sense of hope and optimism dissolving, and bringing many people to turn inward to their own lives. In the following years, we have passed the growing pessimism on to new generations, and they have seen it deepen. In the 80s, that disillusionment grew deeper when we witnessed scandal after scandal among televangelists, and then the disillusionment increased even more as we learned of the abuse scandal in the Catholic Church. Then, as we progressed into the 90s, our politics became ever more divisive, bringing us to the point where the divisions are now so deep that there is a growing inertia related to our ability to solve our larger problems. I think we can say that all of our institutions have created a crisis of confidence within us. It becomes tempting, then, to want to escape. And what better way to escape than to go sit in a movie theater and forget the world for two hours. But that reminds us of the overwhelming amount of harassment that has come to light. All of this has led to what I sometimes call the *Great Turning Inward*, as many people have now turned further into their own lives in reaction to their disillusionment. That disillusionment can then turn to –

2. Hopelessness.

When disillusionment reaches a certain point hopelessness then sets in. I fear that we have many, many people who are now at this point. Many people have become so disillusioned that they believe the world will never get better, that things will never change, and they give up hope. I have witnessed many people over the years who sink so deeply into disillusionment that they make their way into hopelessness.

When people arrive at the point of hopelessness, chaos increases, because too many people give up on seeking to make a difference in the lives of others. The disillusionment and hopelessness then leads to what we now see in increasing amounts, and that is –

3. Rage

We often talk about the amount of anger that is swirling around our culture, and there is a lot of anger. It is not anger, however, that concerns me as much as the amount of rage that is present. Anger and rage are different. Anger can be good and even healthy at times. We sometimes speak of *righteous anger* and *righteous indignation*. Those are the kinds of anger that propel us into action, seeking to change the ills of society. It is this kind of anger that we see all throughout the Scriptures. In the Old Testament we read of the prophets, who, at times, expressed great anger at the injustices they witnessed. The classic example, to me, is that of the prophet Nathan confronting David. David, as we all know, had become involved with Bathsheba, and in order to be able to marry her he arranged to have her husband, Uriah, killed in battle. There was, in this tragic story, much for Nathan to be angry about.

(1 The Lord sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, “There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor.

2 The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle,

3 but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

4 “Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him.”

5 David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, “As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this must die!

6 He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.”

7 Then Nathan said to David, “You are the man! This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul.

8 I gave your master’s house to you, and your master’s wives into your arms. I gave you all Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more.

9 Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites.

10 Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own.’

11 “This is what the Lord says: ‘Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity on you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will sleep with your wives in broad daylight.

12 You did it in secret, but I will do this thing in broad daylight before all Israel.’”

13 Then David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the Lord.” II Samuel 12:1-13a)

In the New Testament, the classic example of righteous anger is Jesus cleansing the Temple (*12 Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned*

the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. 13 “It is written,” he said to them, “My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’” Matthew 21:12-13).

In Ephesians 4:26 Paul reminds us in *your anger do not sin*. Paul understood that there is a place for anger, but it should be tempered in a way that does not make situations worse. There are many things in this world that ought to make us angry, such as injustice, violence, abuse, and the silence that allowed it to go unchecked.

I understand that I have painted a grim picture this morning, but as I said at the beginning, that is not where I want to leave us, so follow along as I read our second Scripture text for today –

Revelation 21:1-7 –

1 Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.

2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.

4 ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

5 He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

6 He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life.

7 Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.

1. Thought.

I very deliberately included the words *thought* and *prayers* this morning. I have followed with interest, and some bewilderment, as the phrase – *thoughts and prayers* – has become somewhat of a flashpoint in recent months, as some people push back against the idea of thoughts and prayers in favor of action. Now, here is what I think – I don’t think that to offer *thoughts and prayers* carries with it the automatic implication that nothing else is offered. To offer our thoughts and prayers does not mean nothing else is being done or will be done. That idea is indicative of the way in which we now turn everything into an either/or proposition. Why would anyone think that offering *thoughts and prayers* automatically means nothing else is going to be done? When someone replies to an offer of *thoughts and prayers* by saying something to the effect of *thoughts and prayers aren’t enough; we need action*, seems rather misguided and silly to me. I understand that some of those who are responsible for making policy in our country use that phrase as a way of abdicating their responsibility, but for most people, offering *thoughts and prayers* is an instinctual reaction to demonstrate care and concern and to also demonstrate a sense of unity. I can promise you that I always welcome the thoughts and prayers of others. Please, offer all of the thoughts and prayers you want for me; I will happily receive them!

To counter chaos, we begin with the way in which we think, as Paul writes in Romans 12:2 that we should *not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.* To renew our minds means we will not allow our thinking patterns to be shaped by disillusionment and hopelessness. We will think about the care of others, we will think about them in their time of need and

in their time of trial. We will think about those who are hurting, those who are lonely, and those who are oppressed. We will think, and we will pray.

2. *Prayer.*

Obviously, prayer is not a magic formula. I have, at times, seen people post messages that God is good because they have a new car. Well, good for them for being able to drive a shiny, new car, but God is not good because someone has a new car, and prayer will not magically deliver a new car to your driveway. God is good because, simply put, God is good. It is God's nature to be good, and God is good regardless of our circumstances or the condition of the world.

I am absolutely sure that the people in First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas were praying as hard as they could when that gunman entered into that church, but sadly, not all of them survived? Does that mean prayer does not work or that God is not good? Absolutely not! Free will means that there are times when innocent people will be victimized by the free will decisions of some people, but in spite of such tragedy prayer does matter, it does work, and God is good.

There is, I think, a lot of mystery about prayer, but I am convinced that one thing prayer should do is that it should open us up to the will of God, which should then lead us to –

3. *Action.*

A friend of mine recently said that he is often asked about hope? *How in such a bad time as this can a person have hope?* That is a very good question, and one that many people do ask themselves these days. He went on to say that he now thinks there is a better question, and that is *what is right?* Prayer must lead us to action, to doing what is right. Whatever we affirm about God and his goodness in our prayers is what we should emulate in our own lives. If we pray for God to bring peace and justice, we ought to be working for peace and justice. If we pray that God would reach people, we ought to be reaching out to those people. It's why our congregation – and other congregations – do what we do. It's why we go to the Diersen Center, the Serenity Center, and God's Kitchen; it's why we have Arriba Ninos; it's why we have Sunday School; it's why we have worship, and all the other things that we put our time and resources into.

The book of James reminds us that faith requires action, as James writes **14** *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? 15 Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. 18 But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. 19 You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. 20 You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? 21 Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. 23 And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. 24 You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone. 25 In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? 26 As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead (James 2:14-26).*

The writer of Judges wrote at a time of chaos; John wrote of his vision in Revelation at a time of chaos. There is always chaos taking place. Always. But chaos does not – and cannot – win. Chaos never wins. It's not that there is peace, and order, and faith, and hope, and love in the midst of chaos; there is chaos in the midst of goodness, and beauty, and order, and holiness. Chaos does, and will continue, to win some battles and skirmishes, but it will not triumph! I don't say that as a pipe dream or

in false hope, but in the promise of God.

Tanya has an interesting way of approaching her reading, especially when she reads fiction. I have witnessed her, many times in bookstore, opening a book and reading the last page. When I read fiction, I am completely different, as I will cover the words on the last page and only uncover them as needed to read each sentence. I don't want to read the end until I arrive at the very last word. Tanya, however, does not want to read a book that does not end well. In one sense, her approach is what we can do, especially when it comes to understanding the chaos does not win. I can confidently proclaim that chaos will not win because I have read the end of the book. The passage from Revelation that serves as one of our texts today reminds us that God is not only the author of the universe but the finisher as well. Chaos will not determine how and when the world ends; God will. God declares himself the *beginning and the end*, the *Alpha and the Omega*. Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet – the beginning and the end.

Do you believe that? Do you believe that? I do. Chaos will not win – faith, hope, and love are the ultimate victors!