

Healing Mass – September 16, 2017  
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA  
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

What do you do when the water is everywhere?

What do you do when the chaos is swirling, and the power is out, and you're not sure what to do next?

These are not theoretical questions. In recent weeks, millions of our brothers and sisters, not far from here, have faced these questions.

In Texas – how do you deal with the chaos which is created when 50 inches of rain fall on Houston? The water was everywhere. Help seemed to be nowhere.

On tiny islands in the Caribbean – where do you find shelter when a wall of water is coming toward you?

In Florida - what do you do when the lights have gone out, and the swirling winds of Irma are knocking down the world as you knew it?

The stormy waters of chaos are as contemporary as the latest headlines. And the stormy waters of chaos are as ancient as the oldest memories of humanity.

Ever since human beings started telling stories, almost every culture has a legend about storms. Almost every human religion has narratives about floodwaters. Almost every group of people has a tale about a swirling storm which destroyed everything – well, almost everything. And yet, the point of the ancient stories is that the chaos does not get the last word.

It's a story as old as the Book of Genesis, Chapter One, verse two. When God starts the work of creating, at first the earth is described as a formless waste, a swirling chaos of water.

But God will not allow the stormy chaos to get the last word. So God breathes life into the earth, and starts to create order out of chaos. God puts the chaos in order: light here, dark there, stars here, moon there, land here, water there, fish here, animals there.

The story of creation, our creation, is the story of a God who finds a way to literally bring us out of the chaos.

And just when you think the chaos has been beaten, it shows up again. The rains fall, the winds

come back, and Noah and his family, and the animals enter the ark two by two. Once again, the earth is swallowed in darkness and chaos. But God has no intention of allowing the chaos to have the last word.

So at the end of 40 days, as we hear in today's first reading, Noah dares to hope. Noah dares to start looking for a sign that the chaos is giving way to God's holy order. Noah dares to open the window, just a smidge, to see if a future can be glimpsed.

If you were listening carefully to today's first reading, you may have noticed that Noah, and his family, and every creature in the Ark, had to *wait* as they hoped. The raven flew. But there was no sign of the chaos giving way. The dove flew. They waited. It came back. Nothing. The dove flew again and came back. They waited again. Seven days. Again and again. Waiting. Watching. Hoping. Is there a future without chaos? Has the storm really subsided?

Of course, as we heard, the story of the storm ends with rejoicing (except, perhaps, for the animals who made it through the storm and then got sacrificed!)

And at the end of the story, there is God's promise: the chaos will never defeat you.

Now, listen very carefully to God's promise. God promises Noah that the chaotic storms will never destroy the whole earth again. But notice – God does not promise that there will never again be a storm. God does not promise that we will never experience the chaos again.

The other evening, I was watching TV news and they were interviewing a Coast Guard helicopter pilot who was busy rescuing people off the Florida Keys. At one point, the pilot said, "I wish I could have protected these people from this chaos. But since I couldn't, the best I can do is to show them the way through the chaos." A rather articulate answer from that Coast Guard fellow! The chaos comes – but *we can be shown the way through the chaos*.

Isn't that what God does? Yes, God promised Noah that the chaotic waters would never swallow up our future. But later on, as the people of Israel were departing from their slavery in Egypt, they came face to face with *another* watery problem. Pharaoh's army behind us – the water of the Red Sea right in front of us! Has God brought us out here to drown?

No. What God does is to show his people that *there is a way through the water*. The swirling sea does not swallow us.

Chaos comes.

God shows us the way *through*.

Some of us are here today because chaos has come to our lives. Some of us are here today because the storms in our lives seem ready to swallow us. Some of us are here today because we are suffering – suffering in body, mind or spirit – and we are wondering what the future holds. Or, perhaps, we are wondering if there is any future at all?

Some of us are here today because disease, illness and chronic pain have flooded our lives, or the lives of someone we love. For some of us, the light has gone out, the darkness is real. And we ask, “Is God there? If so, where?”

It is no accident that Jesus, our ‘God made flesh,’ regularly confronts storms on the Sea of Galilee. Remember - with a wave of his hand, with a word of command, Jesus *could* have insured ‘perfect beach weather’ for himself and his disciples.

But the storms *come*. In the Gospels, perhaps Jesus allowed the storms to come because he was trying to teach those disciples, and us, something very important.

The storms do come. Chaos happens. And what does Jesus do every time? He shows us that *there is a way through*.

Imagine the chaos of the blind man’s life. What must it have been like to live in that darkness, stumbling through life, stubbing every toe, unable to see, unable to see light, unable to see a future?

Yet this man feels the touch of Jesus. And, like Noah, this man has to *wait*. The way through the chaos is not made clear all at once. The healing is not instantaneous. God’s plan is not immediately made known. The blind man comes to see... but slowly. He comes to believe... but over time. He comes to trust... but step by step. His life is changed... but he had to wait on God, and God’s future.

Like Noah in the flood, like Moses in the sea, like Jonah in the whale... this blind man discovers that God indeed is going to show him a way through the chaos. And the Jesus who walked on water and calmed storms from his place in boat, calms the chaos that had engulfed this suffering man’s life. He receives assurance that there is a way through, all from the touch of Jesus’ hand.

In this sacrament of anointing, that same healing hand of Jesus reaches out to us. In this sacrament, the hand of Jesus is at work, raising us up, guiding us through, opening the window and assuring us that the stormy chaos will give way to a future full of hope, an eternal life where everyone is made whole.