

Epiphany 3  
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## **Patterns of Chaos**

Signs of change are all around and people are not comfortable with it.

I read an article this week about a book written by a Baptist who traces the rise of Christian nationalism. He set out to figure out why such a vast majority of Evangelical Christians voted for Donald Trump and continue to support him.

He traces the history back to the social upheavals of the 1970's. Conservative Christians of that time saw those changes as indicative of the erosion of a Christian identity at the core of our nation, a slippery slope that would slide us right out from under what was understood as divine protection. Some would have phrased it (and I heard this as a kid,) that God had called forth the United States to send the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Indeed, the 3 decades before the 70's had seen Christian missionaries go forth from this nation unequalled in the history of the church. The 70's marked the beginning of the questioning of that mentality.

What this author calls for is a return to Protestant Reformation thought, especially from his own Baptist tradition, that fought against the fusion of Church and State that undergirded the Medieval social structure, wrenching finally, the domination of the conscience from the political structures of the day, and carving out space for people to freely answer to God directly. Now, ironically, Christian Nationalism seeks to reinstate a fusion of church and state, to go back, not just to pre-1970 times, but even to the 1800's, when White supremacy was generally accepted as God's ordained plan for humanity. He claims that the Christian conservative right has gone so far as to be willing to give up democracy in exchange for control, returning ironically to the very autocratic systems they first fought so hard to escape.

Ultimately, he says, it is reactionary, a yearning for a past golden age in the midst of the chaos of today, and I think he's right. In my thinking, this is hugely problematic in many ways. I believe in freedom of conscience. I believe in plurality in society, in religion and in politics. I believe in justice born of love. For example, (and there are many) I don't think the Evangelical wing of the Church has an answer to the crisis facing the island nation of Tuvalu, who will see their south Pacific paradise sink beneath the waves in the next 50 years because of rising sea levels. They have already endured ruined crops and threatened livelihoods, all because of global climate change. Nor do I think they have an answer to why the "golden age" involved slavery, Jim Crow, and now an out-of-control correctional system.

But I get one thing. Change is uncomfortable, especially when it seems like it is driven

by people you don't trust, or by forces you don't understand and can't predict. The rate of change in today's world matches great social upheavals on the scale of the Renaissance and Reformation, the Great Schism between eastern and western Christianity at the end of the first millennium, and the collapse of the Classical world about 500 years before that. We live on shifting sands.

The idea is not new to God, however. The lessons for today speak to us about change. Jonah goes to Nineveh, a huge city in its day, to preach repentance. We know Jonah's backstory, so to speak, 3 days in the belly of a big fish and all that. Now Jonah is actually there, and he preaches with vengeance! "Repent, for God will destroy this place in 40 days." But then, of all the stupid things, they do! And God changes the plan, and Jonah's long-awaited destruction of an enemy of Israel at the hand of God slips through his fingers like sand. The rest of the book is about his quarrel with God about the change.

Jesus strides onto the beach and approaches some fishermen in the Gospel lesson day. "Come, follow me," he says, and they do. The sand beneath their feet shifts, and they are never the same again. All of them spend their years after the Resurrection spreading the word about Jesus. They become fishers of people.

St. Paul describes the effects of change in graphic detail in the second lesson. Paul was undoubtedly convinced that Christ would return and establish a divine reign within his lifetime, which of course, did not happen: If you have a wife, live as if you were single. If you don't, don't marry. If you have possessions, live as if you don't. If you don't, don't seek to buy.

Paul reminds us of an essential spiritual truth, something that times of change bring to the surface. Ultimately, everything on the outside is negotiable. All those things we rely upon to tell us who we are and what we can and cannot do, all those things that draw an outline of who we are supposed to be in society, all those symbols in which we invest our ego, none of it is ultimately real. There is within us something deeper, something more permanent, something that lives beneath the waves of change. It is our identity in Christ, as beloved children, called into beloved community, where basic existence is the first measure of value, and nothing more, be it basic humanity in humans, or the fact of being of other things in our world, all, in the largest picture, has a place—never pride of center, but a place. This is our refuge in times of social upheaval.

What does it mean for us today? Years ago, I was at the beach in Ecuador. The wind was rather strong, and the surf was up. I've never been a board surfer, but I do like a good body-surf in a solid 3 ft. wave. I had just ridden such a swell when a 5-footer hit me from behind, sending me tumbling in the foam. Why didn't I anticipate it? Why couldn't I see it coming? It's because I know nothing about waves, really.

Polynesian navigators, on the other hand, understand waves. They know the larger

patterns, like how waves are affected by islands, miles and miles away from the shorelines, how currents and winds and water temperatures interact. For them waves, though constantly in motion, constantly changing, follow patterns. If we step back from the current chaos, we can see some important spiritual patterns. These are ways the faithful have grounded themselves in that something deeper that lives beneath the waves of change.

The late Dr. Phyllis Tickle describes three other times in the history of the church when great upheaval turned the world upside down. I mentioned them earlier, but I did not mention what happened in the church. Several interesting things took place. There was a rise in monastic vocations, there was a rethinking of the faith, and there was a renewal of church vitality.

A rise in monastic vocations means that people sought out spiritual resources in the midst of the storm: the life of prayer, the life that seeks those moments when we know ourselves to be caught up in God, filled with wonder and joy, where we know ourselves to be important, but not the center, which is God. This is a time when your life of prayer, my life of prayer, and even more importantly, OUR life of prayer is of utmost importance. Stick with the community of faith, participate in it, both individually and corporately. We must be a people of prayer, for prayer roots us in the unchanging ground of our being.

A rethinking of the faith implies unpacking the words we use to talk about our faith. As the world shifts, so do meanings of words. For example, new liturgies are looking for alternatives to the word, "Lord" in reference to God. Why? Well, it's actually a masculine word. The feminine counterpart is "Lady." Now, I'm not adverse to using the word, because it also carries with it connotations of authority, and I'm not interested in a wishy-washy, make-everybody-happy kind of God. I believe that God is powerful—in ways way beyond what we normally imagine. In fact, God is so powerful that God doesn't need to coerce anyone. *How do you capture that in a title for divinity?*

Rethinking the faith is not just revisionist. It asks the hard question, how can we reimagine the unchanging message of Jesus Christ for our emerging world? And don't leave it up to the "experts." All of us, if we walk with God, have experience on which to draw. Get involved in talking about your faith-walk, be willing to be challenged and to challenge in a faithful, caring and empathetic sort of way.

A revitalization of the life of the church gives us hope for the future. The chaos is not the new normal—ultimately. This is a particularly rough spot on the sea, but there is smoother sailing ahead. New ideals will galvanize humanity, new horizons will beckon. We will not create heaven on earth or bring in the Kingdom—at least history doesn't give us much hope for that, and there will be a different set of goodnesses about global society, as well as a different set of invisible injustices, but the newness will give us all a shot in the arm, a reminder that the Spirit is alive and well in the church, and always has

been. Just hang on and be patient. There is hope.

It has been said that at this juncture in the world, anything is allowed and nothing is forgiven. I can't think of a more poignant description of deep dysfunction and hopelessness. Let the church be a place of groundedness, grace-filled dialog and hope instead.