



Sermon: Blessed Chaos September 11 2022 Genesis 1: 1-13 & Genesis 7:1-12;8:6-12
Rev Steve Clifton Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON

At 4:50 a.m. on September 3, 1967, H Day began. H stood for the Swedish word for “right hand traffic diversion.” Sweden, a country that, like the UK now, had cars driving on the left-hand side of the road, began the switch to having vehicles drive on the right hand side of the road. Crowds gathered on the morning of H Day to watch the change in motion.

Sweden’s geographic neighbors drove on the right. It was hoped that the switch would reduce accidents and integrate international travel.

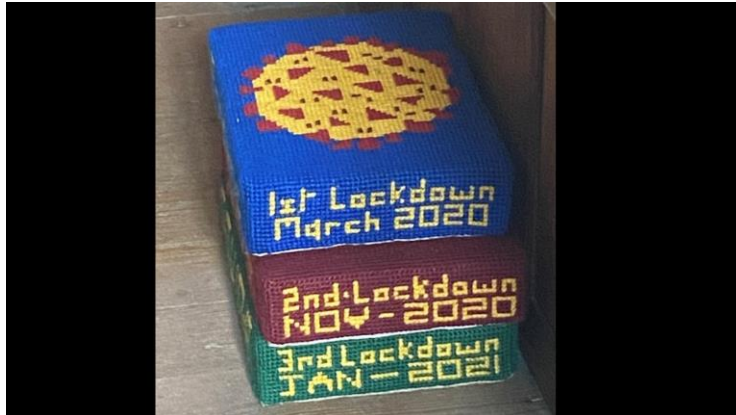
At the stroke of 5:00am, following a radio countdown, an announcement was made — “Sweden now has right-hand driving” — and traffic shifted from one side of the road to the other. This photograph captures the chaos that came with the change in the city of Stockholm.

I saw this photo of chaos in Sweden on the web this month and it reminded me a little of where we are now. Our world, our lives are chaotic. Something old is waning and something new is here. But we are in the middle, and old and new are colliding, and it’s messy.

We have been living with Covid for more than two and a half years. About 31 months ago we shifted from the world we knew into lockdowns, started working from home, schooling on zoom, worshipping on the web. We wore masks, we kept distanced, we were prudently cautious.

Now as mandates are lifted and almost everyone is vaccinated, as we return to school or to offices or to church, there is going to be some chaos and confusion. Old ways and new ways will collide. Covid is still with us. There is uncertainty about many things. We are not sure what will work in this new reality.

We are starting to move into something new. But what?



In the church we stopped gathering, stopped singing, stopped seeing each other in three dimensions. We lived with shifting rules and protocols, moved in and out of lockdowns. A church we visited in the UK remembered its lockdown with kneeling cushions. It's all a blur in hindsight.

Now where are we? Now where do we find ourselves? Churches generally in Ontario, across denominations have about 30% of their pre covid attendance in the pews, but as is true for us, churches generally have a large online congregation, and the total combined attendance of in person and online is higher than it was pre covid.

How much will in-person attendance return in the coming months? Unknown. But for sure online participation is here to stay.

How do we feel about things being online? I remember the days of lockdowns when we spoke into an empty void week by week, or even worse, when we recorded everything at home and I was just speaking to a screen in my basement...and I don't miss any of that at all! Lockdowns while unnecessary, were hard. It is wonderful to see people, to reconnect.

But we know too that while some are eager to return to shared spaces, others are rightly anxious about gathering. Health concerns, regular contact with people who are vulnerable to covid, may of course keep some at home.

We are not used to being in crowds and truly some people feel anxious about being in big groups after years of relative isolation.

Or maybe school or work is all we can take of the covid world and being online on Sundays is a welcome respite.



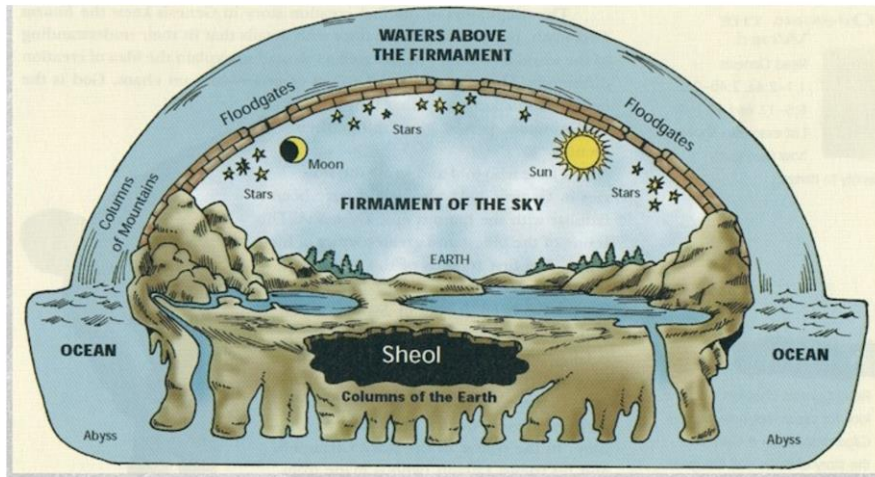
Some do not want to be online any\more and have zoom fatigue. My son Owen is teaching at Queens this fall. He asked his students how they would like to connect with him. Did they want to meet online over zoom? Or should he establish in person office hours? Of 130 students, 130 wanted to meet with him in person. No one wanted to meet online. Perhaps that generation is longing for interpersonal contact after years of virtual living and online learning.

On the other hand, some have discovered that online connection works well. Our online meditation group started meeting on zoom two years ago this September and we are just going to keep meeting online. We have a far larger group now than we had when we met in person precovid. Being online sometimes works better.

Some will find the mix of in-person and online challenging. If you return to your office, as one family member did this week, and most of your colleagues are still at home, you may still be meeting online only now it's more complex.

So here we are with the old patterns mixing chaotically with the new emerging patterns of life. Like Sweden in September 1967, our world right now is chaotic.

The good news? Chaos is where the sacred story begins.

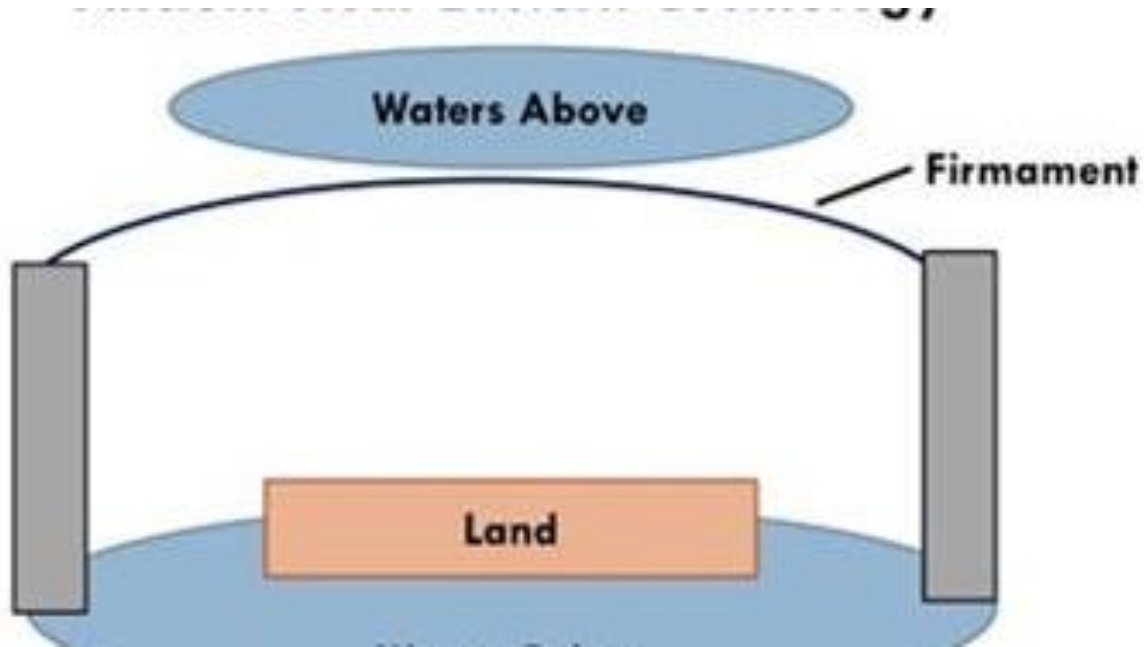


Genesis 1, the second verse reads: “2 the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” In the beginning there was chaos, but the Spirit of God was there, moving over it all - like a wind, like the breath of life.

In the thinking of the time of Genesis, before God created life there was chaos. Disorder. In Hebrew, the word for chaos is also the word for water. And the ancients saw God pushing back the waters of chaos to make the living world and a space for all its creatures.

They thought of the world in three parts: the heavens, which was like a dome in the sky, then the earth, and then the waters of chaos below. They believed that waters were also behind the dome of the sky. So, all around are the waters of chaos.

When God “separated the waters under the dome from the waters above the dome” (Gen. 1:7) the ancient near easterners understood that God was keeping the waters of chaos behind the dome of the sky to establish the order and protection of creation.



When it rained, water was allowed to break through the protective dome of the heavens. However, remove *all* the protection of the dome of the sky, and you've got yourself a worldwide flood.

Just a few chapters on in the Genesis story, God lets the water surge back in. There is the great flood and Noah and his ark.



But then God makes the waters of chaos recede and a new world is made again. A dove brings an olive branch to show that there is life and hope again...

In the beginning there is chaos, disorder... and the Biblical narrative makes clear that God is above the chaos. It rolls in and rolls out, but God is faithful through it all.

In the myths of ancient Babylon – and the Babylonians had the same cosmology as the writer of Genesis - the gods of Babylon had to fight against chaos all the time, to keep the world going, to keep the water of chaos at bay.

But the Hebrew tradition sees God as above the fray. Chaos doesn't trouble the God of Israel. After creating our world, God is so confident that God even takes a full day off to enjoy Creation and to see that it is good.



So here we are in the chaos. We do not know what Covid will do next. What will be required of us? We will see. There will be some continued challenges and uncertainties.

We can try and plan for the months ahead but planning only helps so much

When Sweden switched driving sides on their roads there was a time of chaos. Could better planning have improved things, lessened the chaos? Probably not. The Canadian Rhinoceros Party- a satirical political movement- a few decades ago suggested that Canada switch from right-handed driving to driving on the left. But they would have a careful plan and phase it in over three years. First year buses. Second year trucks. Cars on year three. A plan for even greater chaos.

But... we can remember that in our sacred story, chaos is where it all begins. And God is with us above it all bringing new life as we move into a new world together. Amen