

**Wrestling with: Chaos**  
**Sermon by Fred Joblin, St. Paul's United Church, Orillia**  
**March 9, 2008**

Ezekiel 37:1–14 and John 11:1–45

While preparing this sermon, I thought back to the many times when my life was in chaos—when I didn't know whether I was coming or going, didn't know what to do or say, was caught in the throes of events I couldn't control, or felt there seemed no way I'd get through or over this.

I remember the physical chaos as a child when I had bad asthma and eczema: when I didn't know if I'd catch my next breath or if my skin would ever stop itching. I remember the emotional chaos of being devastated to realize how much time and energy I was spending comparing myself to others—and coming up short. I remember the spiritual chaos of realizing after 6 years of university that I wasn't ready to be a minister.

Here at St. Paul's I sometimes experience the chaos of coming to work with a list of 20 things to do and going home with that same list of 20 things to do because of other matters arriving at my door. I remember the chaos of yesterday's weather and working on this sermon, wondering if it would ever come together!

There are many ways we can be thrown into chaos, uncertainty, and hopelessness, and I invite you to think of times when it's happened to you:

Perhaps times when your daily routines or plans were upset by weather or illness or someone suddenly showing up on your doorstep. Perhaps times when you had an idea you thought was wonderful, but nobody else thought it was. Perhaps times when you discovered you or someone you love had a serious illness. Perhaps times when friends or loved ones died unexpectedly. Perhaps times when a friendship or a marriage broke down. Perhaps times when you were taking care of children, who are the most wonderfully unpredictable beings on the planet!

On a larger scale we can no doubt think of seemingly hopeless situations like hunger, poverty, disease, conflict, war, and degradation of the environment, leading to monumental chaos in the lives of countless people.

In the Ezekiel story, the Hebrew people experience the chaos of being uprooted and forced to live as captives in a foreign land. And in the gospel story, we have the hopelessness of a brother dying and the expected help from Jesus not coming in time.

These are all times of transition, when unexpected things happen, which we usually don't like, and which put us in an awkward, uncomfortable, or confusing situation—into a state of emotional and spiritual chaos.

The question is: how do we deal with these times of chaos?

We'll wrestle with that question today on a personal level, as the season of Lent is a time especially intended for looking inward, examining ourselves, and seeking God's help in transforming our lives.

The first and obvious thing to say is that if we don't learn to deal with chaos, we're in big trouble, as we are likely to become either immobilized by fear or to project our feelings and frustrations on others. We need to realize that we can't predict what's going to happen in the future, or what obstacles will appear in our best-laid plans, or even what will happen in the next moment.

As we all know, things can change in an instant, with a cancer diagnosis, a car accident, or any of a multitude of losses including a job, financial security, or a relationship, or any change, for that matter, including success: a new job, a new relationship, a new place to live.

These events lead to a time of chaos, leaving us to wonder how things will turn out, and whether or not we'll make it.

And if we get stuck thinking things should be a certain way, if we want things to be the way they have always been, or if we get stuck on thinking things will work out as we expect, we're mixing up a recipe for disappointment and suffering, not only for ourselves, but also for others.

As an example, let's look at today's gospel story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Mainline scholars see the book of John as metaphor rather than literal truth, so the stories, whatever actual events they may be based on, are meant to illustrate deeper meaning. In this case, the focus here is on Jesus preparing the disciples for what is to come: Jesus' own death and resurrection. Woven into the story is also all the interpretation of the writer about Jesus being the Messiah.

Today, though, I want to focus on those agonizing parts of the story, rather than the happy ending, for how easily we can skip over the pain, suffering, and chaos to get to the good part.

Imagine the scene, with the sisters Mary and Martha about to lose their brother, and Jesus isn't in any hurry to do anything about it! Imagine their despair at loss of brother and the chaotic time of grief: of shock, emptiness, and bewilderment. (Realize, too, that the Hebrew belief of the time was that the soul of person lingered for three days, so on 4<sup>th</sup> day, the person was truly dead, with no hope left. They would have hope during those three days that Jesus could still do something, but when the 4<sup>th</sup> day arrived, any hope would have been gone.) Imagine how it must have felt for their most special, trusted friend not showing up before, during, or even soon after the death. Imagine the natural anger they would feel for Jesus. He could have done something! And he didn't! He should have been here! And he wasn't!

This time of confusion, uncertainty, and chaos is what William Bridges in his book *Transitions* describes as part of the transitions process, from an ending to a new beginning, whatever that new beginning might be. He uses the term "neutral zone" to describe that in-between time which we must allow for when chaos reigns. He has some suggestions for how to move through this time, for besides being a time of great angst, it's also a time of great possibility, of creativity, of

God's spirit to guide and surprise us. He suggests this is a time to step back, and to surrender to what's happening: to enter the mystery. To be still. To be with what's happening and what you're feeling rather than deny or run from it.

It's a time to let go of any illusion that we're in control. It's a time to seek connection to our inner self, our Higher Self, the wisdom of God deep within us.

The story of Joseph, as we experienced it not long ago here at St. Paul's in the musical, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat*, illustrates the many moments of chaos in Joseph's life, including perhaps the most challenging of all, when he is thrust in jail, not knowing if he will live or die.

The song *Close Every Door* expresses how Joseph surrenders to the moment and to the awareness that any answers to his predicament are beyond his current understanding:

Close every door to me  
Hide all the world from me  
Bar all the windows  
And shut out the light  
Do what you want with me  
Hate me and laugh at me  
Darken my daytime  
And torture my night  
If my life were important I  
Would ask will I live or die  
But I know the answers lie  
Far from this world  
Close every door to me  
Keep those I love from me  
Children of Israel  
Are never alone  
For I know I shall find  
My own peace of mind  
For I have been promised  
A land of my own

Notice Joseph's awareness that "children of Israel are never alone"; that is, he is part of a community that will find a home (even if he himself isn't there to see it).

Joseph was in a literal jail. And in jail, there's plenty of time to be still, to contemplate life. We tend to be in other kinds of jail: our intellect, our desire for security, our avoidance of looking within, our denial of inner chaos.

So a soul journey is needed. Debbie Ford's book, *The Dark side of the Light Chasers*, helps illuminate what this deeper journey is about. She speaks of the things we don't want to look at—the things about ourselves that we don't like, our inner demons, or what Jung called our shadow

side, or the person we would rather not be. Another way to put it would be: what am I most afraid of that someone will find out about me?

So I invite us now to think of those things we don't like about ourselves that seem hopeless to do anything about: ways we are fearful, angry, greedy, judgemental, manipulative, critical, or controlling; ways we project things we don't like about ourselves onto others.

This idea of projection is illustrated in a Sufi story (Sufism is mystical tradition in Islam) of man who made an appointment to meet a Sufi wisdom teacher, but the teacher wasn't at home. The man angrily wrote "Stupid oaf" on the teacher's gate. The teacher arrived home and rushed over to the man's house. "I had forgotten," he said, "that you were to call. And I'm sorry I missed our appointment. But, I remembered our appointment the minute I saw that you had written your name on my gate."

A way to test ourselves comes from Ken Wilbur, in his book *Meeting the Shadow*. If someone says or does something that *informs* us (teaches us, helps us understand, and guides our compassionate response), then we're probably not projecting. But if someone says or does something that *affects* us (we become upset, hurt, angry, judgemental, critical) we're probably projecting.

Notice that Jesus is *informed* by what Mary and Martha tell him when they are angry about his not arriving in time to help Lazarus. This enables him to remain centred, ready to respond from his own strength, from his own compassion. He is able to cry with them in their grief.

When we are *affected*, something is triggered in us that we don't like. As Debbie Ford describes in her own case: she came to the painful recognition that deep down, she didn't like herself. Despite outward appearances of confidence and understanding, deep within her were the feelings that "there is something wrong with me. I'm not okay. I'm not lovable. I'm not deserving. I'm not worthy." I also know that many highly successful and talented people often have underlying feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt.

When we have these underlying feelings, we get inevitably caught up in thoughts and behaviours that cause us and others to suffer. Maybe we hopelessly judge others. Maybe we hopelessly dominate conversations or conversely, don't speak up in conversations. Maybe we hopelessly react with anger, or conversely, suppress our feelings. Maybe we hopelessly only realize later what we should have done or said, or what we wanted to say. Maybe we hopelessly have thoughts buzz around our heads that won't stop. Maybe we hopelessly get caught up in addictive behaviour: watching TV, reading about celebrities, eating, or drinking. Maybe we hopelessly caught up in wanting things to be a certain way, thinking we are right.

If you're not sure what your shadows are, ask someone you trust to tell you!

Typically, we avoid those thoughts and feelings; we suppress our shadows. We put on the brave face and deny our fear.

Lent is a good time to acknowledge and embrace our shadows, for the point is, they are part of who we are. It's helpful to realize we're all the same in this regard: we all have a shadow side. Recognizing and sharing this part of ourselves requires trust, not knowing where it will lead, not knowing if people will understand and be supportive.

As Debbie Ford points out, these hidden aspects of ourselves are the things that need the *most* attention, and that without attention will most prevent us from being all that God wants us to be.

Only by going into the shadows can we emerge into the light. Only by embracing them can we make peace with them and stop pretending to be someone we're not.

Embracing our shadow side leads to loving ourselves for who we are, warts, beauty spots, and all. It leads us to realizing God loves us unconditionally, so can begin to love ourselves unconditionally. It leads to a new freedom to be ourselves. It leads to being okay with uncertainty and chaos as we process the feelings, tell other people about them, and start thinking and acting in new ways. It also leads us to allowing others the same breathing space to be themselves and to accept them unconditionally.

Furthermore, it leads us to the even deeper part of ourselves which is how God created us: as blessed, loved, and capable of true greatness. This inner beauty, which we now begin to see, is illustrated in the story of the Golden Buddha told by Debbie Ford.

There was a group of Thailand monks who were moving a large clay Buddha. One monk saw a crack in the clay, and when he examined it, he also saw a reflection from inside the statue. So he chiselled away at the clay, and when he did, there, revealed, was a solid gold Buddha. They figured that many years ago, monks covered up the golden Buddha to prevent it from being stolen during a time of war. The story illustrates how we, like the Buddha, have protective shells around us to protect us. These shells may be necessary for a while, but to discover our true selves, we need to chip away at our protective shells to reveal our inner beauty, our true selves.

I'd like to get a little more specific with shadow examples from my life. As I do, perhaps you can look further into examples of your own. My shadow has always been the feeling I didn't belong. I grew up thinking I wasn't good enough or capable enough. I felt I could never measure up to my dad and to his expectations for me. I went into protection mode: bubbly on the outside but scared and insecure on the inside. I had moments of angry outbursts but these were quickly suppressed.

All this led to a fear of confrontation. This still happens sometimes: I get the body shakes even in a confrontation situation that doesn't involve me. I recall a social services conversation about three weeks ago when someone became angry on the phone and was swearing at me because I wouldn't give him what he wanted. My body shook; I was hooked! I told Karen, and later I told Kathie. We talked it through, and I recognized where it came from: my old fears from long ago. This was freeing. I was then able to let the feelings be and so let them go, and I was able to speak to the person later and give an appropriate response.

Where does new life come from the dry bones of our egos, our shadow side, our times of chaos and uncertainty, our moments of deepest frustration and hopelessness?

We make it through, life goes on, we adapt, and we learn our life lessons. We become transformed: a new, healed, whole self emerges. We find our way home as the Hebrew people eventually did in the Ezekiel story. We see that new life is possible, even when it seems impossible, as the Lazarus story illustrates.

We celebrate miracles that occur, such as Rwanda, where 10 years after the horrendous massacres, new life is emerging and the country is now one of the bright spots in Africa. We celebrate and join with people who are mobilizing to take responsibility for the environment.

We ask what the greater purpose of our lives might be. As Eckhart Tolle says in *A New Earth*, we stop asking, “What do I want from life?” and start asking instead, “What does life want from me?” Or as Jesus put it, “Not my will, but yours be done.”

We see that people are all the same in spirit, all connected, all together in this thing called life. We see our inner beauty, and our blessings. We become able to understand what the Navaho artist David Palladin came to understand. He was captured by the Nazis, put in a concentration camp, and tortured to the point that he came out a 64-pound comatose paraplegic. He later was healed by the medicine of his Navaho elders and became a shaman—a spiritual leader—who came to recognize that his wounds were the world’s wounds, and his pains were Mother Earth’s pains. He was thus able to rise above his own sufferings to say, “I have died, too. Now let’s dance. We’re free. The spirit is ours because we have died. Now we are resurrected from the ashes.”

As Christians, we draw our hope in the resurrection we know will come: for Jesus’ spirit could not be killed. He changed the world, bringing new hope that justice will prevail, that basic needs will be met, that hurts will be healed, that community will be restored, that our environment will become whole, that joy will come with the dawn.

The Easter promise is that out of chaos comes creativity and new life. May it be so for each and every one of us as we journey together through the time of Lent and Holy Week. Amen.