

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Before getting priested, there was only one year that I didn't spend Christmas in Arkansas. I remember it vividly. For my Arkansas people, it was Christmas Day 2004, but for me it was the morning of the next day. I was living in Northern Thailand, studying local, sustainable community development and teaching English on the side. I spent a lot of time with Buddhist monks, even lived in the monastery for a few months before a family took me in. I was still new to that family's house, so all the creaks and groans a house makes hadn't faded into background noise just yet. I called my Arkansas family and they were, of course, delighted to hear from me on the other side of the world. The night before, Christmas Night, I'd thrown a big party for all my Thai buddies, monks included, gave out little gifts to everyone, and tried my best (and failed miserably) to draw a reindeer to help them understand our carols. When I got mom on her phone, she and everyone else was gathered at Grandma's, Grandma was dressed as an elf that year, and Uncle James laughed hysterically at the unintentionally Charlie Brown-style tree in the corner. Mom passed the phone around, and I got to check in with everyone. I wasn't there, but it felt almost right. Now, while I was on the phone, I felt the house shake a little, a noticeable shake and a little worrying, but only a little more movement than a delivery truck going by on the busy road out front would typically cause. Only there was no delivery truck. After I got off the phone, my Thai family and I hopped in the pickup off to run some errands and go about another normal day. We stopped by a temple, and after a few minutes of pattering around while they did temple stuff, a man walked up to me and said, "did you hear the news?" I had not. And the man's face sank as he realized it would fall to him to tell me. "There's been a tsunami."

Now, Northern Thailand's nowhere near the coast. We're talking a twelve-hour bus ride from the rural mountains I called home to the bustling tourist beaches of the Indian Ocean. I was not in danger, but even I felt the shake of the earthquake that caused the tsunami in that mysteriously absent delivery truck that shook the house earlier in the day. After a few days of fretting from afar, I finally tried to make my way south to Bangkok and then the beaches, thinking maybe my knowledge of languages could help with translation for all those foreigners trying to get help from all those Thais. Turned out, they had what they needed, and I probably would've just gotten in the way, so I wasn't given permission to get all the way to the coast. But I did see Khao San Road and other tourist hotspots as I'd never imagined them. Mostly empty, which was odd enough, with a deflated air in place of the usual revelry. And at either end of the stretch of bars and hostels and tchotchke shops, bookending the epicenter of tourism in Bangkok were these two police stations, only now the walls around the stations were plastered with missing posters printed out by desperate tourists in internet cafes, holding onto the stubborn hope that their loved ones weren't among the numberless masses of people dragged away by the sea. There were thousands of them, tens of thousands even, each a stubborn claim that in the face of chaos, in the face of fear, in the face of desperation, hope was not lost.

I'm no stranger to the power of water. I knew the dangers of flood waters from an early age. I've seen the Mississippi stake claim to land farmers only thought they owned. I've heard countless family stories that start with "it was a dark and stormy night" and end with tragedy or near misses. I've heard the adage, whether at the lake or the river or the beach, it's the same everywhere: "never turn your back on the water." I know water gives life, but it can just as easily take it. I know this. I knew this. But I had never seen what water could really do. And it is a fearsome thing. It's no wonder that, back in the days of the prophets, water was a symbol for chaos, THE symbol for chaos. Just like chaos, water is a thing that is, neither good nor bad, neither sentient nor still, life-giving but no respecter of life. And our scriptures are chock-full of water occupying this role, but more importantly for the establishment of our God over all the challengers of the day, our scriptures are chock-full of God showing mastery over water, mastery over chaos.

Right at the very beginning, in Genesis, before any creating happens at all, God's Spirit blows over the waters of chaos, and it's out of that chaos that all Creation comes. God's mastery over chaos made evident on Day 1. But it doesn't stop there, of course. The Second Creation narrative has God carving and directing the great rivers of the ancient world. God resets the brokenness of the world with Noah and a great flood. Moses, with God's help, overcomes the Nile and divides the Red Sea and then taps a desert stone for water to drink. Joshua stakes claim to the Promised Land dividing the River Jordan. Jacob digs wells. Jonah can't escape a raging sea's storm. Jesus comes along and is the Living Water, and on and on and on. There's almost no end to the examples of water as life-bringer and life-taker in Scripture. The Gospel is no different, right? Jesus falls asleep in a boat on the oft-stormy Sea of Galilee, and when the waters rage enough to swamp the boat, the disciples - desperate and afraid but still hopeful that God can help them - the disciples call for Jesus to wake up and do something! And boy, does he. With just three words, he makes them safe. "Peace. Be still." Way to go, Jesus! Right in line with the God of all that is, the God of all the waters, the God of Job that lays the foundations of the earth and shuts in the seas!

But y'all, this raises a massive question for me. If God has this power, if God can control the waters, if Jesus can make the storm stop raging, if Moses can push the tides back and walk on dry land, if Yahweh can chase Jonah with storms and waves and even great fish until he gives in to save a city, then what do we do with the times God doesn't? In other words, where was God when I was talking with my family that Christmas in Thailand? Where was God while the waters rose and a quarter of a million people died? If God can control water, then God can control chaos. But we all know more examples than we'd like of when God doesn't. So what do we do with that? There are some who would shrug their shoulders and dismiss this kind of question with a simple out like "God has a plan" or "The Lord works in mysterious ways." And sure, I do believe both of those things to be true, but I can't believe them to be true if they serve only as theological cop outs for difficult questions. No, for me, we have every right to ask these questions, maybe even to yell them at God. Before you start to worry that that isn't the faithful thing to do or that somehow getting angry with God is un-Christian, maybe take a closer look at the scriptures.

The entire book of Lamentations is just that: a beautiful, heart-wrenching collection of poems from people broken by chaos and yelling at God. They even end with the accusatory phrase best translated as "if you're even out there at all, God." And that's a faithful enough response to make it into the Bible. Ecclesiastes is probably best known for the lovely "To everything a season (turn turn turn)." But the rest of the book is such a gift to the askers of hard questions. There are so many sections that begin with the phrase, "You know what I've noticed that doesn't make sense?" And then they point out the injustices of the world, some brought on by people, and some just the lived reality of chaos interrupting life. And doing that, naming the injustices as people of faith and asking, "why is it like this, God?" -- that's a faithful enough response to make it into the Bible, too. And then there's Job. Good Lord, do I love this book. Basically, for over 30 chapters, Job is saying "I don't understand why all this bad stuff keeps happening to me, I haven't done anything wrong!" And his less-than-helpful friends argue, saying, "Well, you must've done something wrong because look at all these bad things that are happening to you!" And then God shows up and, out of the whirlwind, says, "You've all got it wrong." And like Forrest Gump's infamous bumper sticker, says, "Stuff happens" (only he doesn't say stuff). Chaos is a thing that just is, like water.

Now, that may seem like a stretch, but let's go a little deeper. A little later in Job, God is going to make reference to the Leviathan, and for my hard-question asking brain, this is where it all starts to come together. The Leviathan, like water itself, was also a symbol in the ancient world. The Leviathan was a great sea monster, and this sea monster was chaos personified. If the sea was chaos, then the Leviathan was the bringer of the sea and all the chaos it rendered. In one Creation story of the time, the Leviathan was defeated by the real God of

Heaven, and it was out of the blood and waters of the Leviathan that Creation came. Not only was chaos a part of Creation, it was baked into every aspect of Creation from the word go. So, when the God of Job speaks of chaos and the Leviathan, there's a truth that gets made clear: God creates out of chaos - just like Genesis - but chaos continues to exist. It's not that God can't or won't intervene, it's that sometimes, chaos simply is; and sometimes, echoes of the Leviathan still wriggle enough to upset the whole world.

I know there are some that will find this solution deeply unsatisfying. Wouldn't it be nicer to follow a structure where only good things happen to good people and only bad things happen to bad people? Yeah, of course it would, but experience doesn't bear that out. That is not the world we live in, because chaos is baked in from the beginning. It's almost like the ancients knew of entropy and made space for it in our story. I gotta say, I actually take great comfort in knowing that this stuff is in our scriptures. Because I grew up around so many people that did buy the shallow answers, and when faced with hard questions, they'd either brush it off or lose their faith. No in-between. But this idea of the waters of chaos continuing gives me a framework I can make sense of. And it doesn't leave me wondering why God doesn't intervene or worse, why God causes all this suffering. Sometimes, chaos just is. And while chaos rages, I can start looking for God elsewhere.

I don't believe for a second that God caused that tsunami (and I've met people who do). I don't believe that. But I do believe that I saw God all over the streets of Bangkok in its aftermath. I saw strangers seeking to calm the distraught. I saw saffron-robed monks praying for the thousands they'd never met. I saw fundraising and free meals and shattered souls weeping into foreign shoulders. And I saw more than a few miraculous reunions. I also saw something else miraculous, and I hope this comes off the way I intend for it to. I saw mourning across all the things that make us different. I saw the grumpiest anti-tourism Thais shed tears for the thing they hated. I saw political divisions dissolve while respectful silence held space for the pain and the loss. And I saw people from all over Creation setting aside division to just make time to listen. That was the most beautiful part of the entire experience. It wasn't just the generosity to make things right. It was the generosity to hold each other in what felt so wrong. It wasn't a solution. It wasn't prevention. It wasn't searching for answers or looking for blame, or even if it was, it was still faithful. More than anything, it was stilling not the storm, but the heart. More than anywhere, more than any time, in the midst of unimaginable chaos, God reminds us, "Peace. Be still."