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5/15/22—University Presbyterian Church  
Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

## THE CHAOS MONSTER

Today's sermon is about chaos. And we have no better example of chaos than what took place yesterday at a neighborhood grocery store in Buffalo. Chaos and evil and suffering.

The reading today from Revelation addresses the issue of chaos that has plagued humanity through all ages. In the passage we read today, the writer offers us a vision of a future when chaos and turmoil and evil will be no more. The writer tells us "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more."

Those among us who may love the ocean will find it disturbing to imagine an earth without seas. But in ancient times, the sea was a metaphor for all that is chaotic and evil. While we may find the ocean a peaceful, relaxing, and calming place to visit, those in the ancient world regarded the sea as a chaotic and dangerous force. People believed that great Leviathans and other sea monsters lived in the depths of the sea. Pictures of sea monsters can be found on ancient sea-faring maps with the inscriptions, "Here be dragons," as a way of marking uncharted and dangerous waters. In the creation story in Genesis, one of the first things God does is to gather up the chaotic waters, separating them from the dry land, and thus confining the scope of their chaotic forces.

But the writer of Revelation offers us a hopeful vision. The writer gives us a vision of a new heaven and a new earth which God is bringing forth—a vision of a time when the chaos monster will no longer menace humanity with its destructive and deathly forces.

What a relief this vision offers to all of us who feel overwhelmed by the forces of chaos and adversity! Chaos in all forms and sizes enters each of our lives: death and despair, alienation, fear, loss, illness, addictions. We no longer believe in sea monsters, but chaos still washes up on the shores of our lives today. Lately, it feels like chaos is the rule rather than the exception. The pandemic has upended our lives and made us all live with huge doses of uncertainty. There are the horrors of the war in the Ukraine. We are a divided nation, filled with hostility and distrust of one another. The internet fuels hatred and unkindness. Uncontrolled wild fires, droughts, hurricanes, tornadoes attest to the chaos brought upon by climate change. And gunmen open fire upon people doing their Saturday grocery shopping.

Of course, we each must deal with the chaos in our personal lives—the chaos of medical problems, relationship issues, financial stresses, personal anxiety. We are surrounded by chaos and evil and adversity on a daily basis. And it can make it hard to breathe, hard to get out of bed, hard to have hope for the future. We and our world can seem irreparably broken.

In the face of our world's realities, our society's realities, right now feels like a good time for God to conquer the chaos monster and to usher in a new heaven and new earth! And yet, people in every age of human history must have felt this same thing. The villagers who watched their homes burned in the Russian pogroms, those burned at the stake for their religious beliefs, those marched off to fight in wars they didn't believe in, those languishing in concentration camps or internment camps or POW camps, those who watched their loved ones shot before their eyes or their wives and daughters assaulted by enemy forces, all these people in human history lived through adversity which likely made them long for God's new heaven and new earth. So our age is really no different. We've all had our chaos monsters.

So, God, just when exactly can we expect to see you conquer the chaos monster and bring about this new heaven and new earth? Because we are exhausted and overwhelmed and discouraged by all our efforts to manage the adversities of life. So much of our energy and efforts in our daily lives are aimed at managing the chaos, trying to keep things from going out of control, trying to manage things when they do go out of control. We all try to manage the chaos in our own way. Some of us will follow the advice of self-help gurus like Mari Condi, who will teach us how to organize our sock drawer and declutter our homes, who will tell us the right ways to eat and what vitamins to take, or how to manage our finances to ensure security. Some of us seek to escape the chaos altogether by turning to drinking or drugs or shopping or traveling. Religion itself is a way of managing life's chaos. Religions establish boundaries for behavior and conduct as a way to manage the chaos of human tendencies. Religions offer lessons for how to understand and deal with life's sufferings.

And Jesus was no exception. Jesus came to help us manage the many chaos monsters that overtake our lives. In the passage we read today from John's gospel, Jesus is about to face his greatest adversity—his arrest and crucifixion. And he knows that in these events, his disciples will also face their own greatest adversity. And so Jesus offers his followers some final words before these chaotic and distressing events take place. And the message he teaches them is that in the face of the chaos they are to “love another as I have loved you.” Love is Jesus' answer to chaos.

That's it? Love? Maybe that seems too sentimental for you. Maybe that seems too weak in the face of the mighty Leviathans of evil that abound in our world. Maybe love seems too insufficient. But Jesus' love is in fact too hard for most of us to carry out. Jesus' love is not that warm sentimental feeling we have for a beloved family member or pet—although those feelings

are indeed wonderful dimensions of love. Jesus' love is a kind of strong, enduring, steadfast love that has the power to transform. What Jesus teaches his followers both with his words and in his actions is that the only way to manage and survive the chaos monster of evil and adversity and turmoil is with love. The only way through the chaos is love.

Don't you find it interesting that despite our hating the chaos of life, despite our wanting a world where the monsters of evil and suffering are defeated, that we will nevertheless borrow the chaos monster to further our goals or purposes when we feel it's necessary? We tell ourselves it's only for a brief period of time and for justified reasons. And so in pursuit of peace, we build and stockpile weapons. Or we engage in torture. Or we will displace entire peoples and communities. Or we separate migrant children from their parents. Or we withhold forgiveness or seek revenge. Or we hate. We hate. But none of these practices will ever defeat the chaos monster. Chaos cannot defeat chaos. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. understood this principle when he steadfastly advocated non-violent resistance in the Civil Rights Movement. "An eye for an eye" he said, "leaves everyone blind." The only way through chaos is love, strong, strong love.

No one likes adversity. No one. I would not wish adversity upon you or my children or my family. But adversity will find us all. And so the question becomes, "how will we deal with the chaos and adversity of life?" How will you deal with the chaos monsters that will wash up on the shores of your life?

As much as we all hate adversity, it does give us an opportunity. Adversity gives you the opportunity to practice being the kind of person you want to be. Adversity—whether that be a broken tooth or a failed marriage--adversity gives you the opportunity to practice being the kind of person you want to be. Do you want to be someone who is bitter, angry, vengeful, resentful?

Do you want to be someone who is hopeful, kind, or compassionate? Adversity allows us to practice being the kind of person we want to be. I say “practice,” because none of us always gets it right. And so we must practice this skill.

That is what the Christian community here at church enables us to do. The community of believers offers us a place where, in the face of life’s chaos, we practice being the kind of people Jesus calls us to be. To practice love. To practice compassion. To practice forgiveness. To practice justice.

So often the Book of Revelation is used by people to depict the end of the world in some kind of violent apocalyptic event. The apocalypse is the very definition of chaos! But that is not what we find in the passage we read today. Instead, in our passage today we hear about God coming to wipe away every tear from our eyes, about a time when death and suffering will be no more. God is not coming to *destroy* the world. That is something we humans seem more than capable of doing ourselves! Rather, this passage reveals that God comes to heal the world. And that healing comes in God’s very loving presence. Instead of lifting the righteous off the earth in some kind of giant rapture, the writer of Revelation describes how God actually comes *to* the earth. “See, the home of God is among mortals.” God makes a home among us in order to heal and to transform us.

I don’t know when God’s new heaven and new earth will occur. Right now seems like a good time to me. But in the meantime, we know that God’s love is among us. God’s love makes a home among us mortals. God came to us in Christ. And Jesus teaches us to live this love toward one another. Only love, this powerful love, can defeat the chaos monster. And this love is our Alpha and our Omega, our beginning and our end.