

Creating, Relating, Instilling
Reading from the Old Testament: Genesis 1:1-5, 31
Reading from the New Testament: John 1:3b-5

When I first attempted to peddle my novel to agents and publishing houses, I managed to garner the attention of ... well, basically no one; and a tour of their websites quickly revealed at least one reason why, at least one reason apart from the possibility that the book might not be any good. It seems that agents and publishers were most interested in queries that contained words like dystopian, apocalyptic, post-apocalyptic, graphic, or horror. My first thought? Hmmm, just another day at the White House.

However, it seems the more dystopian, graphic, or post-apocalyptic the book, movie, or video game is, the more publishers and producers are interested. I cannot write like that because my brain is missing the wiring for those interests. I'll see the movie trailers and I'm thinking, "Nope!"

One popular contemporary movie franchise that will have its fourth movie released next year, which will also be the fourth for which I won't be buying a ticket, is a dystopian horror movie series known as

The Purge. Just the title would bounce me over to some rom-com in the next theater. *The Purge*. Advertisements label it as an American dystopian horror movie. The government passes the 28th amendment which authorizes a new annual civic tradition. Each year, for one night in March, all crime is legal and all emergency services are unavailable. Well, guess what? Chaos ensues. Mayhem, murder, rioting, pillaging. Neighbor killing neighbor. Justice, morality, conscience all disappear. The word dystopia is defined as “an imagined place or state in which everything is unpleasant or bad, typically a totalitarian or environmentally degraded one.” And no, listening to a sermon doesn’t qualify.

Rather, think of dystopian as a scene from *War of the Worlds*, *Mad Max* and its pitiful cousin-in-law *Waterworld*, Huxley’s *Brave New World*, *The Hunger Games*, Will Smith in *I am Legend*. While I cannot comprehend the allure of the genre, there is a huge market of people who do, and the literary agents are always in the market for the next potential blockbuster of dystopian misery.

I’d love to see you at Bible study this week. You know what the Good Book says, the word of the Lord is sweeter than honey and

drippings of the honeycomb! “Well, Matt, that would be nice, but right now I’m consumed by this post-apocalyptic novel about a farm family trying to stay alive during the misery of a post-war nuclear winter.” Oh sure, I get that. Enjoy!?!

Nothing like the restful and restorative luxury of curling up with a dystopian novel or movie about the horror of someone’s misery. I guess I actually don’t get it, particularly when there are so many stories of actual horror and misery that make up each day’s world news.

Dystopia? Chaos? For millions across the globe, that’s not fantasy or fiction; it’s reality. A doctor has established a new diagnosis to describe the trauma experienced by the children trapped in the all-too-real apocalyptic landscape of Syria. Nicole Morley, a British journalist, reports, “Many youngsters caught up in the five-year Syrian civil war have been orphaned, or have witnessed relatives or friends blown apart by bombs or Islamic State jihadis. Those who managed to survive the humanitarian crisis are often starved of food and water, education, medical treatment – deprived of their most basic human rights. Children caught up in conflict are being exploited, abused, forced into armed groups or early marriage, according to Unicef.” She reports that

approximately 6 million children in Syria need humanitarian assistance. One medic who has treated the child survivors observes, ‘We have talked to so many children, and their devastation is above and beyond what even soldiers are able to see in the war.’ And so it is that “Dr. M.K. Hamza, a neuropsychologist with the Syrian-American Medical Society (SAMS), created the term ‘human devastation syndrome’ because he thought anything else was simply not sufficient to accurately describe the levels of horror experienced by the child survivors.” (Nicole Morley, *metro.co.uk*)

Dystopian? Post-apocalyptic? Horror? You don’t have to go to the movies or read a graphic novel; you just have to pay attention to an unvarnished review of global news, or listen to someone describe the experience of being trapped in a home haunted with domestic violence, or talk with one of Charlotte’s homeless facing a night out in the winter cold, or sit with a friend in the throes of chemo. You don’t have to manufacture the apocalypse, just talk with someone living through it.

It is to this context that the first creation story of Genesis is written. Early in the 6th Century BCE, the Chaldeans conquered Jerusalem, and following the standard Mesopotamian practice, the

professional class, the priests, the craftsmen, and the wealthy were forced into exile. Herded into Babylon, they lived together, similar in a way to the Jewish ghettos of Warsaw in the dark early days of the Nazi regime, and there they labored to retain their religion, traditions, and identity.

According to Richard Hooker, “They called themselves the "gola," ("exiles"), or the "bene gola" ("the children of the exiles"), and within the crucible of despair and hopelessness, they forged a new national identity and a new religion. The exile was unexplainable; Hebrew history was built on the promise of Yahweh to protect the Hebrews and use them for his purposes in human history. Their defeat and the loss of the land promised to them by Yahweh seemed to imply that their faith in this promise was misplaced. This crisis, a form of cognitive dissonance (when your view of reality and reality itself do not match one another), can precipitate the most profound despair or the most profound reworking of a world view. For the Jews in Babylon, it did both.” (Richard Hooker, *Jewish Virtual Library*)

For the Jews who remained in Judah, living among the ruins of Jerusalem, there was not only a crisis of identity and despair, but also a

crisis of starvation as a famine came upon the land. The books of Lamentations and Job, written in Jerusalem during the exile, speak to both the famine and the crisis of religious identity. It was a time of reorientation for both the survivors and exiles. Who were they? And, how was their God to be understood?

The revered Genesis scholar, Walter Brueggemann, tells us that the authors of Genesis 1, utilizing older materials including Egyptian and Mesopotamian cosmologies and creation stories, transform these older sources for a purpose intimately related to Israel's covenantal experience. "It served as a refutation of Babylonian theological claims. ...To despairing exiles, it is declared that the God of Israel is the Lord of all life." (Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*)

Thus, Brueggemann says that Genesis 1 is not "an abstract statement about the origin of the universe. Rather, it is a theological and pastoral statement addressed to a real historical problem. The problem is to find a ground for faith in this God when the experience of sixth century Babylon seems to deny the rule of God." Brueggemann says that Genesis 1 affirms that God can be trusted even in devastating circumstances such as exile, sickness, poverty, injustice, violence, or any

other human experience of abandonment. Thus, the power of Genesis transcends time as a powerful rebuke to this world's darkness.

Tohu wa bohu – the Hebrew word to describe a formless void, a watery, desolate chaos. It is out of such chaos that the Creator accomplishes his greatest work.

1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, **2** the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. **3** Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. **4** And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.

Tohu wa bohu – endless nothingness, as with a black hole, bereft of any hope of change. And yet, a wind, a spirit, a sacred breath from God sweeps or hovers or broods over this chaos, as if to ponder what may be formed from the formless.

My friend Richard Boyce says such words hint at relationship. One way to picture it would be someone brooding over the words to say that may lead to a date/a relationship/a life together with the one on

whom he or she has a crush. Brooding, hovering near the phone,
searching for what to say, text, or tweet.

Some enchanted evening,
you may see a stranger
Across a crowded room
And somehow you know,
You know even then
That somewhere you'll see her
Again and again.

Brooding, thinking, envisioning, crafting a way for something to
come out of nothing.

Carole Crumley says that Genesis 1 “looks into the heart of
darkness and sees something beautiful and hopeful: a creative force; a
hovering spirit; and a penetrating light that cannot be overcome.” You
see, here in these first verses of Genesis 1, we discover hints of what we
call the Trinity: creative force, hovering spirit, light that shall not be
overcome — Father, Spirit, Son. The Trinity – our effort to describe the
indescribable. Transcendent and at the same time intimate, active, and
near.

Crumley points to a treasured 15th Century icon painted by the
Russian artist, Andrew Rublev. Rublev depicts the Trinity with the

three strangers/*angels unawares* that visited a childless Abraham and Sarah. “In the icon depicting that scene, he draws three figures seated around three sides of a square table. There is an opening on the fourth side immediately in front of the viewer. As one gazes on this image ... the three figures seem to be looking into each other with an unqualified dignity, respect, and loving gaze, three distinct persons, three yet one. The fourth side to the table is left open intentionally by Rublev, signaling an invitation [for you the viewer] to draw near, even to sit at the table and join in the [holy] conversation.” (Carole Crumley, *Feasting on the Word*)

Now, here is the interesting thing, a revered dean of Christian spirituality named Henri Nouwen spent many hours meditating upon a reproduction of Rublev’s Holy Trinity icon during a time of deep depression. Gradually, after contemplating the icon for months, he came to understand the Trinity as a community, a house of love. “In that household there was no fear, no greed, no anger, no violence, no pain, no suffering, even no words ... only enduring love and deepening trust. It was a house, he said, in which he could live forever.” (Carole Crumley, *Feasting on the Word*)

Tohu wa bohu, a dark, formless void, the bottomless, black hole that swallows the spirits, hopes, joys, and lives of far too many, far too many people we know – colleagues, family members; devastated children who we only know through the images captured by photojournalists roaming war-torn lands; families grieving love lost too early in a violent society; friends succumbing to the medicines that nearly kill them in order to let them live again, or at least a while longer. Tohu wa bohu. The dark formless void. And yet Rublev's table sits before us with the creative power of hospitality. A wind, a spirit, a sacred breath from God sweeps or hovers or broods over this chaos, as if to ponder what may be formed from the formless.

For all exiles from hope, there is no dark abyss into which we may fall, that our Creator God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, won't catch us, embrace us, shape us, create us, breathe life into us, and lead us from darkness to light. Amen.