

The First Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B
January 11, 2009
The Reverend Amy Hodges Morehous

“May Your Crayons Never Melt”

In the darkness, all you could hear was the lapping of water, and a gentle splashing. Then the splashing grew louder, and a mysterious light appeared. Chaos reigned, and order was yet to come.

Certainly sounds like the beginning of creation, doesn't it? Actually, I'm describing the depths of my parent's basement, when I was about 7 or 8 years old. On Saturdays, my sister and I would go downstairs to play when we woke up, to let my parents sleep late. We usually got up somewhere near the crack of dawn, and my mother was not a morning person. Now that I'm a parent, I know understand why this was such a fantastic arrangement. We got our breakfast, and went to play, as usual. However, instead of the usual basement with orange and brown shag carpeting, we found a basement full of water – that morning anywhere from 6 to 8 inches of standing water filled the basement, rising up the sides of the furniture, and lapping gently at the bottom of the stairs. My sister and I did what any sane children would do in the same situation. We played! We could not have been happier. We splashed. We ran, and slid like it was a giant Slip 'n' Slide, to land with a thump against the side of the couch. It was fantastic. We briefly discussed informing our parents, but decided against it. We were under strict instructions to not wake them up too early, we reasoned, and we knew that when they woke up, things were never quite as fun.

Eventually, I ventured into my parents bedroom. My mother rolled over, and said, “What are you two doing?” Ever honest, I said, “Oh, Mom! We're having a great time playing in all the water downstairs.” Mom said, “Oh, that's nice, honey,” and rolled back over. (I did mention that my mother was never a morning person.) Thinking I had done my eldest child duty, I went back downstairs to play. About five minutes went by, and we were as happy as clams. Then, from the top of the stairs, we heard, “WHAT water!!” The party was officially over.

For some reason, whenever chaos reigned in our house growing up, there was usually some form of water involved. It began a few months after we moved from Knoxville to Sevierville, into the house my father had grown up in. My father was out, and my sister and I were hiding under the kitchen sink and giggling. However, it's a bad idea to put a 5 year old and a 3 year old under the kitchen sink, because one of us sat on one of the pipes, breaking it, and sending scalding water shooting into the floor of the kitchen. We were fine – luckily we weren't injured. However, we were sure my mother was going to kill us. We had only lived there a few months, and she had no idea where the water shut-off valve was. My mother finally found it, but couldn't budge it. So she set up madly mopping the water,

wringing the mop into a bucket, and tossing it out the back door. My sister and I, helpfully, stood to the side, watched the water begin to cascade down the steps to the basement and grew more and more hysterical. Into this scene walked my great-aunt, who lived across the street. She was in the habit of stopping by unexpectedly, to my mother's great annoyance. She walked in to find my mother mopping, wringing and tossing, and muttering the whole while. She looked at my mother, and said, "I think you have a leak."

Between trips to toss water out the door, my mother briefly explained what had happened, and that my father should be home at some point. (Remember this was before cell phones, and we lived in the middle of nowhere.) My aunt, bless her heart, took in the frantic mopping and the hysterical, wailing children, who were still sure that death was imminent, and said, "Well, if there's nothing I can do, I'll just walk back home and be out of your way." With clenched teeth, my mother responded, "I believe I have another mop."

Lastly, there's Christmas of 1983. If you lived here then, you may remember that it was memorable for being -2° in Knoxville on Christmas Eve, 1983. I was 11 years old, and all the plumbing in one end of the house froze. Most of our plumbing didn't work, including all the bathrooms but one. My mother nearly had a conniption on the spot, because roughly 20 members of my father's family were coming the next day for Christmas dinner. Christmas Day, it was -6° . Still no plumbing, but all the relatives came over anyway. (I think it was for the sheer novelty factor.) For days, we washed dishes in the one remaining bathtub that worked, my sister and I camped out in my parents' bedroom on the floor near the wood stove – in general, we thought it was by far the coolest Christmas ever. It was just like living in the middle of Little House on the Prairie. I don't believe my parents shared the same enthusiasm.

However, the one certainty of frozen plumbing is that eventually it will thaw. Days later, I walked into my bedroom and opened my closet to find a waterfall cascading down the walls inside. Double bonus – camping inside, and your own waterfall in your closet! How many people could say they had that! However, reality soon sunk in. Every piece of clothing I owned, including all my shoes were soaked. And remember we had no water still, so until the plumbing was repaired, so we couldn't wash anything. I wore the same sweatsuit for 3 days. Not so very cool at all. That year, one of my prize Christmas gifts had been a Crayola caddy. It was a square lazy Susan, with all the crayons arranged in a spinner. There's nothing like a perfectly sharp set of new crayons, and I had these all meticulously arranged by color. They brought in large heaters to dry out the carpet, walls and floors, and every one of my perfectly arranged crayons melted and slumped down the sides into a large multicolored mass of goo. This year, for Christmas, my very dear sister gave me a silver bracelet. On it, it reads, "May your crayons never melt."

Given all those incidents, I can see why it was so important to create order from chaos at the beginning of creation, to shine light on the darkness. We as humans cannot exist for long periods of time in the middle of chaos – no matter how momentarily delightful it

might be to our children. Living in chaos is exhausting, it saps your resources, and it keeps you from moving forward into the future. We see the news reports daily, we read the articles, and see the pictures, and know that there are parts of the world which are plunged into a darkness and a chaos that we can't even imagine, much larger than broken pipes or flooded basements.

John the Baptizer appears from the wilderness, from what would have then been the chaos of the unexplored and unprotected wilderness, "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." People were drawn to the wildness that was John, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan. Jesus himself came and was baptized, and the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove. Out of the wilderness of Judea came prophesy, and peace. We are assured that God's wish for each of us is not for us to live in fear and chaos. "The Lord sits enthroned above the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as King for evermore. The Lord shall give strength to his people; the Lord shall give his people the blessing of peace." True, things will not be the same as before; they will be changed, and marked by events that have passed. But order can come from chaos. Floods can be mopped up. Homes and lives can be rebuilt. Peace can be restored.

Each time we baptize someone in the Episcopal church, child or adult, we repeat together our baptismal covenant. We renew the vows that we ourselves made, or were made on our behalf. As baptized Christians, we each have received the gift of grace and the Holy Spirit. That gift is freely given to each of us – it isn't a transaction, some cosmic quid pro quo. God's grace is not earned – ever. It is freely given to each of us. I believe God knows and loves every person on this earth, all those who have been, and all those who are to come – the baptized and the unbaptized. If you've held your own children in your arms, if you've had them baptized – did you love them any more after they were baptized than you did before? How much more infinitely does Almighty God love each of us?

We cannot earn our way into the grace of God. From the moment we come into being, God knows and loves each one of us. In baptism, we enter into a relationship with God; God knows us always, but in baptism, even when we are very small, we begin to learn what it means to be a child of a loving and living God. Robert Benson, in his wonderful book *Between the Dreaming and the Coming True*, writes, "The great risk is not that we will fail to qualify to be reunited with God. The risk is that we will somehow fail to understand why we are here. ... We are not here to show something to God. We are here because God - the One who wants to be completely known - has something to show to us."

In our baptismal covenant, in loving response to God's gift of grace, we make several promises about the relationships in our life. Some of these concern our relationship with God. Some of them talk about our relationship with each other. In the last two questions of the baptismal covenant, we are asked if we will "seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?" and if we will "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?" To those questions, we answer, "I

will, with God's help." Every morning we wake to a new day lived within the baptismal covenant – each day we wake up, we can choose to live out that covenant...or not. We can choose to let God show us what we should be about...or we can choose to look away.

As the waters of chaos recede, there will be mopping up to do. In our relationship with God, and with each other, there will be missteps. There will be evil, there will be sins, there will be mistakes. At some point in our lives, our crayons will melt, and we will be hurt and disappointed. When that time comes, we will need each other. Sometimes we need someone else to grab a mop, and push back the chaos with us. Sometimes we need someone to give us funny bracelets to help us to look back and laugh at the small tragedies. Sometimes we need someone to hold us, to help us survive the very real heartbreaks of our lives. Mother Teresa once said that "we can do no great things, only small things with great love."

When you wake up in the morning, ask the Giver of Grace to show you the way. Don't fear it is too small or insignificant to matter. Each morning, ask for the boldness and strength to live into the words of the baptismal covenant, into the promises that we each have made. Let God's Almighty love and grace shine through our lives, into the lives of others. And may we see the way before us, see what God wishes to show each of us...with our eyes, and with our hearts.

Amen.