

**LISTENING FOR THE WORD**  
Randall Tremba  
January 11, 2015  
Baptism of Our Lord Sunday  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

\* \* \*

**Genesis 1:1-5**

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 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. Then God said, "Let there be light;" and there was light.

**Mark 1:4-11**

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth and was baptized by John in the Jordan River. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

\* \* \*

Words are powerful. A certain word in a certain place can provoke mass murder. Think: Paris this past week. Think: *Charlie Hebdo*.

Words are powerful. It's not just the voice of God that creates and destroys. The human voice does too. Sticks and stones may break our bones but words can hurt even more.

A certain word in a certain place can provoke mass murder. But the right word at the right time can liberate and heal. Forty years ago this month, 12 ordinary words on a page saved my life.

Forty years ago I was working as a tree pruner with five other men in an apple orchard along Rt. 340 outside Charles Town. We worked against cold winds and through snowstorms. It paid \$1.25 an hour.

It wasn't fun. But it paid my room and board. And it kept my mind off my broken heart, a broken heart that I had carried for more than six months from southern California, through Canada, across Europe, into the Alps, along the Adriatic Sea and somehow serendipitously into West Virginia without a cure or fix in sight.

I was 27 years old. Alone. With no place to call home.

The orchard was a remedy during the day. But at the end of the day I returned to a single room in a large red brick farm house across from the Fort Drive-In Theater along Rt. 340 just a mile or so from the orchard.

My life was simple. I didn't go very far or do very much. I ate breakfast. Worked 8 hours and returned to my room. I didn't cry every night but I was stuck in grief and wondered if life was worth living.

All my friends and family lived far away. Books became my companions.

The Bible wasn't one of them. I'm afraid by then I had studied it to death. Its words were lifeless and cold.

So there I was reading a book that had ended up in my backpack somehow, somewhere in Europe. The book was *Adam Bede* by George Eliot, the pen name for Mary Ann Evans, the 19<sup>th</sup> century English novelist. She's best known for *Silas Marner* and *Middlemarch*. I hadn't been looking for *Adam Bede*; it just came my way somehow.

Adam, as it turns out, had lost the love of his life. Just like me. His heart was badly broken. He locked up his carpentry shop. Closed the shutters of his house. Sat down and quit life just as I had quit on life, quit on the church and quit my ordination as a Presbyterian minister.

A lamp was lit each evening in Adam's house but there was no sign of him. The village mourned for him. Weeks went by; then months.

And then one day, the sound of a hammer and chisel was heard coming from Adam's shop. A neighbor looked in and said: Adam, are you all better? "No," he said. "I'm not. I just figure a lot of good work can be done with a broken heart."

I set the book down and took a deep breath.

*A lot of good work can be done with a broken heart.*

And just like that, a light shone in my darkness. Let there be light. And there was light. The first day.

It was an epiphany for me. Something I'd never before grasped in my heart. And that's when I first learned that life is hard but grace abounds. Little did I know at the time I would soon find a life and a love far greater than what I had lost.

I don't know how the light came or why those particular words carried it. But it came nonetheless. The light came.

As it turns out, those mythic first humans, Adam and Eve, exiled from the garden, wandering east of Eden, outside of paradise, making their way with fearful and broken hearts are just like most of us, if not all of us—longing for a little light, a bit of grace as we make our way through life. It's one reason among many why we must be kind to one another.

Words are powerful.

Over the past 10 years I have found that our friend—whom we've yet to meet—our friend Steve Garnaas-Holmes is a generous channel of healing words. For me and many others, his words have provided one epiphany after another.

It pays to pay attention. It pays to listen for the Word.

Forty years ago this month I didn't even know I was listening. The word came anyway. It's still a mystery to me.

One day we're standing with our feet in a river or sitting in a chair mindlessly reading a book and a voice says in so many words or none: *You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased.*

It's not just Jesus. It's each of us. We are beloved. You are Beloved.

Please don't let it go to your head. Let it go to your heart. Let it go to your feet. Let it go to your hands. Let it go to your tongue. Speak kindly. Be kind. Be a servant of love. Love others with your whole being.

No, we are not the light of the whole world. But we can let it shine.

\* \* \*

### **How the Light Comes**

I cannot tell you  
how the light comes.

What I know

is that it is more ancient  
than imagining.

That it travels  
across an astounding expanse  
to reach us.

That it loves  
searching out  
what is hidden  
what is lost  
what is forgotten  
or in peril  
or in pain.

That it has a fondness  
for the body  
for finding its way  
toward flesh  
for tracing the edges  
of form  
for shining forth  
through the eye,  
the hand,  
the heart.

I cannot tell you  
how the light comes,  
but that it does.

That it will.  
That it works its way  
into the deepest dark  
that enfolds you,  
though it may seem  
long ages in coming  
or arrive in a shape  
you did not foresee.

And so  
may we this day  
turn ourselves toward it.  
May we lift our faces  
to let it find us.  
May we bend our bodies  
to follow the arc it makes.  
May we open  
and open more  
and open still to the blessed light  
that comes.

**Jan Richardson**