

ORIGINAL BLESSING
Babel to Pentecost
Randall Tremba
June 4, 2017
Pentecost Sunday
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

* * *

Once upon a time all humans spoke one language. They all assembled in one place to work on a project.

This, by the way, is a folktale from the Great Ancestors. It's not history.

Humans never spoke just one language. It's a story portraying the human longing to be together and work together, you know, the way 195 nations agreed to work on climate change.

But something happened. No more one for all and all for one. Rather, us first; forget about the others.

According to the tale, humans suddenly lost their common language. They withdrew into tribal factions—suspicious and fearful of each other. And there the tale ends with the saddest verse in the whole Bible—they left off building the city, or we might say, they stopped working together as one community.

That story in Genesis 11 is known as Babel, everybody babbling with no understanding. The story leaves us hanging, just as we are left hanging today. Can the peoples and nations of the world find a way to live in harmony?

Last Sunday I expressed my gratitude for the Presbyterian Church and the Reformed tradition of Christian faith it embodies. Today in my last sermon from this pulpit I want to express my gratitude for Judaism, an older and deeper tradition that gave birth to Miriam who gave birth to Jesus.

I once heard the worldview of Judaism summarized like this. *Something or someone was before time. Something or someone will be after time. No one knows. In the meantime, we know this: we are here now. So be here now.*

If you find something broken fix it. If you find something torn, mend it. If you find something lost return it.

It's not about religion. It's about practices that mend the world and our souls at the same time.

Judaism is not about getting out of this world; it's about getting into this world wholeheartedly. That's a lot like Buddhism. Which is why I love the so-called Jewish Buddha who says: *Be here now. Be someplace else later. Is that so complicated?*

Mary had reasons to say, *No, not me. I'm nobody.* But in the hour of darkness, Mother Mary said, *let it be.* She chose welcome. She chose to live in the light for she held the ancient promise of her people in her heart, a promise of a new world.

Her child was weaned on the promise from that tradition. Jesus would ignore and repudiate some of that tradition but embrace other parts just as we must do with our own if we are to be a church reformed and always being reformed.

The first resounding word in the Jewish tradition is GOOD. You can hear it in Genesis 1.

In the formless darkness a word resounds. *Let it be. Let there be light.* And there was light. And in that light the whole world came to be.

Behold it is good, it is good, it is good, proclaims the mythic poem of creation as all things are called forth into a vast, ever-expanding community of things. And on the seventh day, the vast interdependent community of things was blessed as one, whole and holy wondrous web of life.

Life arises out of an original blessing.

There's no proof. Only clues. So, yes, it's a claim of faith. You gotta believe it to see it. Life arises from an original blessing.

Unfortunately, to its everlasting shame, much of the church twisted and perverted that blessing into a curse. Why? Here it gets a little weird.

It's all because Adam and Eve took the forbidden fruit and thus contaminated every human child born thereafter. Original sin!

Much of Christianity was built on that premise. The first mother bore condemned children into the world. The rest is history.

Not so, says Eric Fromm, a social psychologist and humanistic philosopher. Fromm also happens to be Jewish and knew a folk tale when he saw one.

Forty some years ago I read Fromm's book, *You Shall Be As Gods*. It turned my world inside out.

The story of the forbidden fruit is not history. It's a tale portraying the human instinct to seek knowledge and power like no other animal. Not even the gods can stop us, says the tale. But that drive comes with risks, including guilt, shame and reckless behavior with god like powers to create and destroy.

Once I saw that story as a folktale depicting not original sin but the human condition, I soon came to see that the mythic poem of creation in Genesis and the series of folktales that followed, including the forbidden fruit, Cain's murder of his brother Abel and the story of Babel—I saw them as profound gifts of wisdom and insight from our ancestors.

The world is good. But we mess up, time and time again. And yet we are still blessed. And because we are blessed from the foundation of the earth, we can be a blessing. There is much good work to be done, to mend ourselves and all creation.

And now back to Babel. *They left off building the city*. So ends Genesis 11. Now what?

Next comes the story of Abraham and Sarah awakening to a nudging in their hearts, a calling to find a way to bless all tribes, nations and peoples of the earth. And so Abraham and Sarah left their tribe and kindred behind to look for that city, that beloved community where all may safely dwell.

And that brings us to the story of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-2). On that festive holiday, which happened in a certain time and a certain place but, as it turns out, it is also timeless. For it can happen any day, anywhere, whenever a dispirited people or world awaken to the latent power of the spirit within them, the breath that called all things into being.

On that particular Pentecost those frightened people—dispirited by the lost of their leader—suddenly stood up and boldly proclaimed the promise that all shall be one—one heart, one love, one body forever. Though the assembled crowd in the streets of Jerusalem spoke many different languages, everyone understood completely.

Why?

Because they heard the language of love whose voice can be heard everywhere—from Hebrew prophets like Micah, to Sufi Muslim poets like Rumi and Hafiz, to Buddhists

like Thich Nhat Hanh, to Jewish rabbis like Rami Shapiro, and even to Christians like St. Francis, Frederick Douglas, Sojourner Truth, Mother Teresa, and Martin Luther King.

Yes, we are Presbyterians in the Reformed tradition of Christian faith, but our roots go back through the one holy catholic and apostolic church, through Jesus, through Judaism and into a promise, a promise held in the heart of Abraham and Sarah that someday we shall find a way to bless all peoples of the earth.

That way has been found. It's the way of Jesus. Not a way out of this world but a certain way of being in this world, of being in love.

And so, dearly beloved, I urge you to be faithful to that way. Be kind. Do justice. And walk humbly with your God. It's not about success. It's about faithfulness.

Yes, there will always be darkness. God didn't eliminate darkness from the world. God named it. And sometimes that's all we can do. We name the darkness and let it be, knowing that darkness is pregnant with light.

Yes, there will be dark times ahead. But I'm quite certain that in your hour of darkness Mother Mary will come to you, speaking words of wisdom, let it be. Let it be. Let it be. Let there be light.

* * *

Hymn 749

"Come! Live in the Light"