

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
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Genesis 1:1-5
“Let There Be Light”

The first book of the bible, the first words of the bible, speak about the first of all things. Creation. Let's be clear about this: Genesis is not about particularities or precision. Genesis is about poetry. In the beginning: back then, whatever “then” was, will not be clearly described. It will not be talked about in language that is scientific and measurable. It will only be described in negative terms. It was a time of potential unrealized; it was form unfashioned. It was empty, desolate and going nowhere fast. But something set it in motion. Now whether you want science or faith to take a stab at describing what happened next, both agree that something happened. The poetic language we use is this: At the beginning of God creating everything, the universe was formless and void and darkness reigned. And God said, Let there be light.

Light: something that lets you see instead of having to grope in the dark. But light is more than that. Light literally pushes back the dark boundaries of chaos so that something else can now exist, can come to be. A light that shines on an empty canvas so a work of art can be painted. A light that illuminated a potter's wheel so that clay can be molded and shaped into beautiful vessels. Light: as in a primordial power that is life-sustaining and nurturing, as opposed to darkness and chaos that is life-destroying and negating. Light: as in hope and possibility, not a place full of despair or captive to fear. The first thing that happened back then, at the beginning of all things, was when God said, Let there be light.

Side comment: The Jewish tradition holds that every day begins with the previous evening. Darkness starts each new day. Why? Because of Genesis and its poetry. What existed first? Darkness; a place, though, where God still ruled, a place out of which God called everything else into being. With God, darkness yields to light; there is evening and there is morning, one day. What is the darkness of your own life, remembering that God is active even there? What is your evening and what does your God-blessed morning look like? What is God calling you toward as God's light dawns within you and shines upon you? Think about these things.

Next comment: The darkness is never fully gone. God separated light from darkness. God made a space in which creation can occur, in which order can prevail over chaos. But darkness is only restrained, not destroyed. So it is important to name the darkness whenever its shadows creep into our world. That was true on the first day of all time; it remains true this day as well.

I'm enjoying teaching a class at the seminary on "Preaching & Ethics." The students and I have been reading some examples of sermons from great preachers like Harry Emerson Fosdick, Martin Luther King, and Jeremiah Wright. It is a humbling thing, as a preacher, to read the challenging words of these men of God. On Armistice Day 1933, while tombs to the Unknown Soldier were being dedicated, Rev. Fosdick stood in the pulpit and said, "I renounce war. I renounce war because of what it does to our own men. I watched them coming gassed from the front-line trenches. I saw the long hospital trains filled with their mutilated bodies. I remember the maimed and ruined men for whom the war is not yet over. I renounce war because of what it compels us to do to our enemies, bombing their mothers in villages, starving their children. I renounce war for its consequences, the hatreds it arouses, the lies it lives on and propagates. To the Unknown Soldier I make a pledge to never sanction or support another war."¹

On the Sunday before Easter, 1968, Dr. King stood in the pulpit and said, "Vanity asks the question – is it popular? Conscience asks the question – is it right? There comes a time when one must take the position that is neither safe nor politic nor popular, but one must do it because conscience tells us it is right. I believe today that there is a need for all people of good will to come with a massive act of conscience and say in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "We ain't goin' study war no more." This is the challenge facing modern man."²

And on the Sunday after 9-11, Rev. Wright stood in the pulpit and said, "We have got to change the way we have been doing things. We just can't keep messing over people and thinking that, 'Can't nobody do nothing about it.' They have shown us that they can and they will. Rather than figure out who we gonna declare war on, maybe we need to declare war on racism. Maybe we need to declare war on injustice. Maybe we need to declare war on greed. This is the time for self-examination. This is the time for social transformation."³

Light, pushing back darkness, is both a creative act and an assertive act. God said, "Let there be light" instead of chaos; life instead of death. Fosdick, King, and Wright remind us that preachers and congregations alike are still in the business of calling forth the light that can push back the shadowy realm of darkness. (Creation did not end on the seventh day; God only rested before inviting us to join in this holy work.)

Here we are early in the new year of 2012. It is Epiphany Sunday, a time to celebrate many things including God's creation long ago, and the new creation that became possible in the sending of God's Son as light in a dark world. We stand in Christ's light, but if we are standing still and passive, then all we are doing is casting shadows. Our darkness, our shadow risks diminishing the light of Christ. If the first act of all creation was a word, shouldn't our first acts each day involve words as well – using our voice to call forth light, to push back darkness, to create a space for God's spirit to move and act and heal and redeem?

To be silent is no longer an option, for silence only allows other voices to move over the face of the earthly waters and call forth their own versions of what creation should be. Voices too comfortable with the language of militarism, of blaming the poor for being poor, of whitewashed patriotism trying to cover a multitude of national sins. The first act of creation was God speaking forth light. Later when Christ was baptized, the heavens were torn apart and a voice spoke again and said, “This is my Son, the Beloved One. Listen to him.”⁴ And in the Acts passage acted out for us earlier, when believers were baptized, and fully understood what it meant to walk in the light of Christ, through God’s creative Holy Spirit, their first acts were to speak. They prophesied and testified to all who would listen.

Think about it: Creation does not arise from a place of moderation. It is not a middle of the road, “let’s play it safe” kind of thing. Speaking words from a safe middle place is no longer possible when the entire range of responses has shifted too far to the right. If the discussion is already skewed to the side of darkness, speaking words from the center will only mean we’re still standing in the shadows. My grandmother used to say “You can attract more bees with honey than vinegar.” Well, there are some bees I have no interest in attracting. Profit over principle, might makes right, believing racial, economic, or national hierarchies are somehow part of God’s plan: Those ideas can all buzz off.

This is our first day, Sun day, our “let there be light” day. There is a clarity to this new creation: light, as opposed to darkness. Baptism: either you’re in the water or you’re not. Communion: either you take the bread offered or not; either you see it as a shared loaf or not; either you stand humbly beside others or not. We commonly come forward to receive communion as a physical profession – not of self-worth or privilege, but as a way to publicly acknowledge we are willing to receive this gift God has so freely given to us in Christ. It is our “let there be light” moment.

So let us say what needs to be said. Let us remember our baptism. Let us share in the meal at which Christ is host and provider. And let us call forth light, for there is evening, and there is morning, a new day for all. Thanks be to God!

AMEN

¹ “The Unknown Soldier,” Harry Emerson Fosdick; preached at Riverside Church, November 12, 1933.

² “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution,” Martin Luther King, Jr.; preached at National Cathedral (Washington, D.C.), March 31, 1968.

³ “The Day of Jerusalem’s Fall,” Jeremiah Wright, Jr., preached at Trinity United Church of Christ, September 16, 2001.

⁴ Mark 1:11, 9:7.