

Original Blessing
Genesis 1:1 – 31
February 14, 2010
Celtic Worship
René Rodgers Jensen
First Christian Church
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Genesis 1:1 – 31

Paraphrase by J. Philip Newell Celtic Treasure: Daily Scriptures and Prayer

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
Before that there was only empty darkness and the deep eternal waters.
But in the dark a wind begin to stir.
It was the breath of life.
It was God saying, "Let there be light."
And there was light.
God saw that it was good.
There was a time for light and a time for darkness.
The light was called day and the darkness night.
And there was evening and morning, creation's first day.

On the second day the storm kept stirring.
It was the wind of new beginnings.
God was saying, "Let there be a space for creation."
And the wind carved out a hollow in the deep waters.
It was a cradle for life.
Above, beneath and on every side of it were the everlasting waters.
God saw that it was good.
It was a place for birth and abundance.
And there was evening and morning, creation's second day.

On the third day God said, "Let the firm earth appear."
So the wind gathered together the waters of life.
The waters were oceans and the dry land was earth.
The wind blew over its dark soil.
Earth grew green.
Flowers in their freshness opened.
Colour and goodness burst forth from the earth.
Young bushes budded.
Trees were heavy with fruit and earth's seed was strong.
God saw that it was good.
And there was evening and there was morning, creation's third day.

On the fourth day God said, "Let there be lights in the heavens."
So the wind carried fire on its wings and scattered light through the skies.

There was a great light to rule the day and a gentler light to rule the night.
 And there were glittering galaxies beyond number.
 The sun, moon, and the stars moved in harmony.
 They guided the seasons.
 They marked the days and the years.
 They shone on the earth as signs of heaven.
 God saw that it was good.
 And there was evening and morning, creations fourth day.

On the fifth day God said, "Let the waters bring forth living creatures."
 So the wind awakened the waters into life.
 Great sea-monsters were born.
 Gleaming fish swarmed the seas.
 Winged birds of every kind rose out of the waters.
 Creeping things crawled from the sea.
 Wild animals ran free.
 And cattle roamed the grasslands.
 Earth was alive with its creatures.
 God saw that it was good.
 And there was evening and morning, creation's fifth day.

On the sixth day God said, "Let us make humankind in our own image."
 So the wind grew strong over the swelling sea
 And from the moist earth humanity was born.
 Spirit and flesh were formed in the likeness of God.
 Male and female came forth together.
 And the words of heaven were spoken on earth.
 "Be fruitful and multiply:
 The earth is yours and you are the earth's...
 Be strong in my likeness and guard the unity of life."
 God saw all that had been created and it was very good.
 And there was evening and morning, creation's sixth day.

There was the weird thing that happened along about the time I turned 50.
 I'm not talking about the aches and pains and wrinkles and sagging flesh and bi-
 focals that are the normal accompaniment of middle age. I'm talking about how I
 suddenly started to say, "Bless your heart."

I grew up in the south, where southern women would routinely offer this
 little blessing—sometimes sincerely, sometimes ironically. But I left home when I

was 18 and have lived almost all my adult life in the Midwest. But suddenly, after I turned 50, I found myself saying “well, bless your heart...” in response to all sorts of things. An unexpected compliment. “Bless your heart.” A gift of tomatoes from the garden. “Bless your heart.” A story of hard times. “Bless your heart.” It was as if, having become firmly middle-aged, some long forgotten example of blessing had been resurrected in me. Bless its pea-pickin’ little heart.

We have few remnants of the ancient tradition-offering blessing left in our modern world. “Bless you” when someone sneezes is the most common, I suppose. Blessing of the food before we eat. And here at church, we bless new babies and newly-weds, and offer a blessing at the end of the service as we leave.

But Celtic Christianity had blessings for everything, rooted in a sense of God’s original blessing in the act of creation. In Celtic Christianity, there was no dividing line between sacred and secular—everything in creation was sacred, everything was a reflection of God’s presence. So it was only natural to begin the day with the prayer,

*Bless to me, O God,
Each thing mine eye sees;
Bless to me, O God,
Each sound mine ear hears;
Bless to me, O God,
Each odor that goes to my nostrils...*

One of the many things that Celtic Christianity has to teach us is this sense of blessing, this profound belief in the goodness of creation as a reflection of God.

But before we go any further, a little history lesson to help us understand the distinctive nature of Celtic Christianity. After the Romans withdrew from

Britain around AD 400, there were nearly 200 years of significant separation between the Celtic church, and Roman Christianity, which was centered faraway in the city of Rome. During this time Celtic spirituality developed free of Roman domination and control.

Roman Christianity (the precursor of today's Roman Catholic Church and the parent of traditional western theology) tended to be authoritarian, hierarchical, male dominated, highly rational, and strongly legalistic, with a powerful need for control and uniformity.

Where the Roman church emphasized original sin and the essential fallenness of the world, the Celtic church celebrated original blessing, teaching that the natural world is a gift from God and that all creation is sacred. For the Celts, there was no rigid separation between the secular and the sacred.

But Rome eventually got around to bringing the Celtic church centered in Britain and Ireland under control. In AD 664, Rome flexed its authority over the Celtic church at the Synod of Whitby, and after that the rich distinctiveness of the Celtic tradition was gradually overwhelmed by the religious practices, governance, and theology associated with the Roman church. Roman Catholic Christianity with its hierarchy, its doctrine of original sin, and its insistence on orthodoxy became the dominant form of Christianity in Ireland and Britain as it was in the rest of Europe. But Celtic spirituality did not die out altogether; it stayed alive in pockets, particularly in the oral traditions of the common folk.

The church of today, led by communities like Iona and Lindisfarne, which have deep roots in the Celtic tradition, is rediscovering the wisdom of this ancient way.

We are realizing that traditional Western theology forgot the very first lesson that the Bible teaches us—the lesson repeated again and again in Genesis 1. God has created everything and it is good! Indeed, it is very good. Instead western theology has taught us that the world is sinful and corrupt and should be disdained; it has taught us that God is an angry judge, rather than a loving Creator; it has taught us that to be “spiritual” is to reject the delights of the material world. Matthew Fox, in his book *Original Blessing*, notes that a theology that emphasizes the fallenness and sinfulness of all creation fails to teach believers about “New Creation or creativity, about justice-making and social transformation, about play, pleasure, and the God of delight.” (*Original Blessing*, p. 11)

Now we can understand in part why the theology of the Roman church was so hostile to the natural world. They were contending with pagan religions that worshipped the gods of water and trees and sea. To wipe out these pagan religions, the church cut down the sacred groves and poisoned the sacred wells that were associated with pagan gods. The church insisted that God was not in nature but in Heaven. The war against paganism became a war against the rhythms of nature; the victory over paganism became a victory over the holiness of the earth.

Celtic Christianity, separated from these battles, was able to seamlessly merge a reverence for the created world with a reverence for God. St. Patrick, the famous Irish saint and the one Celtic figure we can probably all identify, wrote the creation-centered credo we used as a Call to Worship this morning—

*Our God is the God of all things
The God of heaven and earth
The God of sea and the streams
The God of the sun, moon, and stars
The God of the great high mountains and the deep glens.*

Celtic Christianity believes that creation reveals the divine Creator; that creation is a teacher that helps us understand who God is. “If you want to understand the Creator understand created things” said the Celtic saint Columbanus. Yet, unlike pagan religions or some contemporary New Age spirituality, which teaches the worship of nature itself, Celtic Christianity never worships the natural world. It reveres the natural because it points us to the One who created it all. The God who is in everything, yet at the same time beyond everything.

Celtic Christianity’s reverence for the created world as a reflection of the Creator has much to teach us in the 21st century. As we wrestle with enormous questions about global climate change, environmental crises, and ecological disaster, it teaches us that this world is not only God’s creation, but also a guide and teacher that helps us understand something of who God is. Celtic Christianity reminds us that God is suffused into the world—and that to abuse God’s creation is to abuse God himself.

John Scotus Eriugena, a ninth century Irish teacher, often wrote about *theophany*, which means a manifestation of God. He believed that God is the

Life Force within all things, and that therefore that “every visible and invisible creature can be called a theophany.” In other words, the whole world is a manifestation or sign of God’s presence and God’s goodness.

When we begin to see that—to see God everywhere and in everything—we develop a vivid sense of the original blessing of creation. And we can live with some of the joy and delight found in this ancient hymn of praise:

There is no plant in the ground but is full of His virtue,
There is no form in the strand but is full of His blessing...
There is no life in the sea, there is no creature in the river,
There is naught in the firmament,
But proclaims His goodness....
There is no bird on the wing, there is no star in the sky,
There is nothing beneath the sun,
But proclaims His goodness.
Jesu! Jesu! Jesu!
Jesu! Meet it were to praise Him.

Indeed, it is meet and right to praise him, the Creator of all that is, the One who is the source of life, the giver of that original blessing.