

The Trouble with Beginnings

preached by the Rev. Colin Bossen at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Cleveland
September 16, 2007

And so we find ourselves at the beginning of things. This month marks the start of our ministry together. This is my first sermon as your settled minister. Together we have begun a new era in the life of this congregation.

The problem with beginnings is that it is often difficult to discern exactly when things start. In any relationship there is a lot that happens beforehand to make the actual relationship even a possibility. I arrive here after having gone through an extensive search process. I talked with and pre-candidated with many different congregations before deciding that this congregation was the best fit for me. Your search committee interviewed many different ministers before deciding that I was the best fit for this congregation. Before we got to our decision points, or even began our searches, there was a lot of discernment that took place. Based on my skills, my values, the needs of my family and my hopes for the future I had to figure out what type of congregation I wanted to serve. You had to do likewise as you prepared to look for your new minister.

I think a statement from my brother, Jorin, sums up all of this quite nicely: "There's a lot of stuff that happened before I was born." Whenever we start, whenever we are born or embark onto a new adventure, we are coming into the middle of things. What happened before we begin shapes who we are and what we understand is possible. The past can limit us or it can help us to understand that there are boundless possibilities before us. But the past itself is problematic. Ask two participants at the same event and they are bound to give two slightly different histories.

I picked our readings today from first two chapters of the book of Genesis because I believe that taken together they demonstrate the problems with beginnings. If you read the book of Genesis you will notice that it actually contains two different creation stories. In the first story, found in the first chapter, God creates humankind, man and woman, together. He does this after he has created the stars, the earth, the sea, the animals, the plants and pretty much everything that exists.

In the second story, found in the second chapter, the Lord God creates man first and then woman from the body of man. Woman is only created after man has already named all of the plants and animals. In this version of creation man, and not the animals and plants, is what comes first. Woman comes last.

There has been a lot of speculation as to why there are two separate stories of creation in the book of Genesis. The story of creation is not the only instance where the Bible contains two versions of the same story. Over the years Biblical scholars have evolved what is called the documentary hypothesis to explain why these duplications exist. This theory holds that the first five books of the Bible, usually called the Torah or the Pentateuch, were not written by one person or even one community. Instead, they believe that the Torah came together over many hundreds of years and that it had four primary sources. These sources, each representing a different community among the ancient Israelites, can be identified by the language they use and how they understand the divine, the priesthood and the Law.

Scholars of the documentary hypothesis argue that the reason why the book of Genesis has two different creation stories is because it is the amalgamation of at least two different texts. One is called the Elohim because of how it refers to the divine. In this version the divine is called, in English, God. The other version is called the Jahwist because it refers to the divine as the Lord God. The Elohim source is commonly attributed to a community in the Kingdom of Israel while the Jahwist source is usually believed to have originated in the Kingdom of Judah. The two sources offer different histories about the people of Israel and in some cases contradict each other. Whichever individual or group edited the version of the Torah that we have today could not, for whatever reason, decide which of their stories were correct or more important and as result there are many instances where we have the same story told from two different perspectives. At this late date in history it is impossible to know which one is closer to the oral tradition from which the Bible originated, or even if such a concept makes any sense when trying to interpret the Bible.

I think that this illustrates a simple truth about history. There are always multiple interpretations of the same event. Each community, and each person, will understand what happened in the past a little differently.

The other thing that the book of Genesis can teach us is that beginnings are never truly clear. The first sentence of Genesis reads “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...” The problem here is that it does not say where God comes from, why God decided to create the earth or what the pre-history of the world was. Even in this story of the creation there’s a missing story of the beginnings of the beginnings.

Again scholars have tried to figure out what is going on. Some have speculated that the Bible actually contains hints of the pre-history of the world within the text. Based on what is offered in those hints, some scholars believe it is actually possible to create a rough narrative of what happened before the book of Genesis. I had a professor in graduate school who thought that various Sumerian and Babylonian sources, when compared with the Biblical texts, could be used to help fill in the missing gaps. Whether this is actually true, or whether it is a flight of scholarly fancy, I do not feel qualified to say.

Today, in our own beginning, we find that we are not really at the beginning. There is a lot of pre-history that proceeds the start of our ministry together. In fact, for some of you our beginning is not a beginning at all but a continuation of the ongoing story of this congregation. For you I am a character introduced somewhere in the middle of the story. I come in neither at the beginning nor, I hope, at the end. The congregation will continue after I move on, an event that I hope will not occur for many years, and at some point my time with you will simply be referred to as the years during which Colin Bossen was your minister, just as you talk about the Farley Wheelwright, Jesse Cavileer, Chris Bailey or Peggy Clason years.

Since I am coming into your story in the middle things I have spent a little while trying to understand what happened before I arrived. Unitarian Universalism and this congregation have a long, interesting and complicated history in the Cleveland area. There is a lot to try and understand. As far as I can figure there have been Universalists in the Cleveland area since at least the 1830s. Our oldest congregation in the area, the North Olmsted Unitarian Universalist Church, dates from this era.

The first Unitarians arrived to Cleveland around the same time as Universalists. It was not until 1867 when the Unitarians were organized enough to form the First Unitarian Society of Cleveland. That congregation is one of the two ancestor congregations of our community. Our other ancestral congregation is All Souls Universalist Church. That congregation merged with First Unitarian in 1932.

The real story of this congregation seems to begin in 1951 when the majority of the members of First Unitarian decided to relocate the congregation to Shaker Heights. At the time the congregation was located at 82nd and Euclid. The neighborhood that the grand old Gothic church was in was changing. Cleveland was experiencing its first major round of white flight and middle class whites were leaving the city for the suburbs. The people who founded the Society were those who decided that they wanted to stay in the city.

About twenty years later came another defining moment in the history of the congregation. I have heard some people refer to it as “the time we gave the church away.” Earlier this year your interim minister, Rev. Kathleen Rolenz, preached an excellent sermon called “The Legacy of Empowerment” on this time in our congregation’s history. In that sermon she argued that this period of time has left a long standing imprint on the congregation. What happened between 1969 and 1971 determined the shape of the congregation for years to come.

I do not pretend to understand everything about that period in the congregation’s history. What I do know is this, the late sixties and early seventies were a very tumultuous time in our country, in our religious association and in our city. The years between 1967 and 1971 saw what has been commonly called the black empowerment controversy in the Unitarian Universalist Association. During this time Unitarian Universalists struggled with racial issues in a way that we had not done before and have not done since. At the heart of the crisis was the question of whether or not the UUA would give \$1,000,000 to the Black Affairs Council, or BAC, to spend as they saw fit.

At the 1968 General Assembly, held here in Cleveland, the member congregations of the UUA voted to give BAC \$1,000,000. Not long after, citing a looming financial crisis, the UUA Board of Trustees overturned the decision. Up until that point the General Assembly, to which each congregation sends delegates to represent its interests, was the body that set the budget of the UUA. The decision to overturn the financial commitments that the General Assembly had made was unprecedented and at the following year’s meeting, held in Boston, total chaos broke loose.

An attempt was made to reverse the Board’s decision and when it failed, our religious association almost split in two. Many African American members of BAC left our movement. First they left the meeting in disgust, and then they left our religious association. At the same time, Jack Mendelssohn led a walkout of the white delegates sympathetic to BAC. Almost half of the Unitarian Universalists present at the meeting followed him. It has taken more than a generation to begin to heal the self-inflicted wounds of that day.

In 1969, our congregation experienced its own version of the black empowerment controversy. As the neighborhood around 82nd and Euclid continued to change and the toll on the congregation began to show, it became necessary to hire a police guard during church functions, the administrative offices were broken into so frequently that it was no longer safe to keep stamps

there overnight and two women were mugged on the church's property. In the face of these circumstances the congregational leadership decided that something had to be done.

Under the leadership of then minister Farley Wheelwright, it was decided to consider giving the building and half of the endowment to the Cleveland Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus (BUUC) so that they could start an African American Unitarian Universalist congregation. After a very controversial vote that is exactly what happened. The Cleveland BUUC organized the Black Humanist Fellowship of Liberation and called John Fraizer to be their minister. For reasons that I do not know, that congregation collapsed within only a few years.

It became clear to the members of the Unitarian Society that they needed to find another place to worship. In 1971 the Society purchased this building. The congregation that came here was dramatically different from the congregation that had been at 82nd and Euclid just a few years earlier. To be blunt, it was much whiter and much smaller. In the course of a few years the membership of the Society shrank from slightly over three hundred to under one hundred. Over the next thirty five years the congregation's membership gradually shrank to around sixty members.

Through it all this congregation has remained here and struggled onward. No doubt at times some of you have been like the young frog in the story from earlier today. You have been ready to despair, drown in the cream and let the congregation fold. Others have probably played the role of the older frog and kept on croaking "Keep hope alive! Keep hope alive!"

This congregation has seen remarkable growth in the last few years and it seems likely that those of you who kept crying "Keep hope alive!" were onto something. The congregation may be at another turning point. It might be poised to shift from a small congregation to a larger one.

Some of you may be hearing this history for the first time. Many of you probably remember part of it from Rev. Rolenz's sermon. Still others of you may have lived it. The history of our congregation is undoubtedly like the creation myth at the start of the book of Genesis. There is more than one version. But however we remember it or understand it is important.

One of our challenges together will be to honor our past without letting it hold us hostage. Today is a different day than 1969. Our congregation today is very different from the congregation that existed then. We should look to our past as a guide, but we should only hold it as one guide of many. The transcendentalist Samuel Longfellow used to say that revelation is not sealed. Alongside our history we will find many other sources of inspiration as we labor together.

However you understand our history, whether this is your first time here or your thousandth, the truth is that today we find ourselves at a beginning. We are in the middle of the congregation's history but we are at the start of a new ministry together. We can see the road behind us but the path ahead is murky. What will we decide about our future? What will we choose? Which road will we take?

Here we are at the beginning of things, in the middle of things, with part of our story told and part of it yet to unfold.

Amen and Blessed Be.