

Chapel: 10 February 2011
Augsburg College
“Breaking and Remaking: God’s Construction Zone”

Several years ago I climbed Africa’s “Shining Mountain,” Kilimanjaro. It hadn’t been on my bucket list. It was a time in my life when the mere thought of bucket lists turned my stomach. I had lost my husband and partner to brain cancer the year before, and the whole concept of a bucket list – things you had to do before you died -- seemed a luxury that had cruelly passed me by. I was broken, in pieces, and quite literally, listless.

So when a friend invited me to join his climbing party, I shrugged -- listlessly – and said: “Why not?” One morning a few months later, I found myself at the base of the mountain.

We climbed through the rainforest, steamy and close with the calls of strange birds. There was evening and there was morning, a second day.

We climbed through the alpine meadow, filled scrub trees green against red volcanic rock. There was evening and there was morning, a third day.

We climbed above the tree line, into a zone where plants hugged the ground, bursting with color from every crevass and cranny, and we learned the hearty species that survive altitude and intense swings in temperature.

There was evening and there was morning, a fourth day.

We climbed out of realm of vegetation entirely, entering the fierce landscape of the summit itself. Here there was nothing but scree, searing sun, and shards of sharp fragments of lava. It looked for all in the world like we'd stumbled into a giants' kitchen. Maybe there had been an earthquake or a violent domestic argument, but something traumatic had happened. The ground looked littered with shards of red-clay pottery – and little else. Here, a once perfect bowl, angrily smashed into pieces; there, a pitcher, broken beyond repair; up ahead, a plate, dashed into fragments.

There was evening –

— and at midnight we made the final ascent. And by that time, like the landscape we ourselves were in pieces, shattered by exhaustion, thin air, and the cold. The only thing that kept me going was the pull of the hundreds of hikers in front of us, the push of the hundreds from behind. Broken as we were, together we snaked up the mountain like something alive, our headlamps steady shards of light in an inky darkness.

There was the rest of that evening and there was morning, a fifth day

And as that day dawned, we stood at the summit and surveyed the wreckage we'd spent the night climbing through. As I looked at the earth's curvature gently falling around us, I remember thinking: this whole mountain is one huge mound of broken pieces, shards from something else. And yet, there it was, Africa's "Shining Mountain," the highest peak on the continent. Out of these pieces, a new creation.

And that wasn't the only high point of the trip, though it certainly scored in terms of elevation. The following week we visited the school a member of our climbing party had started in his native village outside of Iringa in central Tanzania. We lost a tire to a pot-hole on the way there, but when we finally arrived, students stood at attention in their classrooms in faded green uniforms to greet us.

Their green jackets and pleated skirts looked worn, but clean, relics from another century. Their desks and chairs looked vaguely familiar, kind of like the ones I'd used when I'd been in grade school. Broken and badly in need of repair, they done hard service for at least that long. The names on the back of the chairs told a story: Anderson, Jenson, Carlson. Those weren't Tanzanian names. Later the principal proudly explained that the furniture, the uniforms, even the schoolbooks had all been donated by a MN non-profit – hence the names. Like the mountain, the school had been built on shards, cast-off pieces from somewhere else.

And yet, there it was, in so many ways more magnificent than Kilimanjaro, a school at the end of a red dirt road, the only opportunity for education beyond third grade for miles around. Out of these pieces, a new creation.

These images stuck with me, broken as I was, like scraps of an insistent rhyme that at first I could neither shake nor completely make out. But then I started to hear it everywhere: breaking and remaking, breaking and remaking. Out of the pieces, a new

creation.

You catch the rhyme in the story of the first creation. Let's be frank: there's a lot of breakage involved. For anything to happen, the smooth stone of matter, which was "without form and void," had to be shattered, rather like the aftermath of the domestic argument we imagined on Mt. Kilimanjaro. Light is broken apart from darkness, day from night, the heavens from the land and the seas, sun from moon and all stars – the stars themselves, like headlamps, shards of light in an inky darkness. And at the end of each day, God looks at all these broken and repurposed pieces of creation – and blesses them: "God saw that it was good....God saw that it was very good."

There is evening and there is morning, another day. And then we come upon the story we read this morning (Genesis 2:21-23), the story of the creation of Eve, itself a story of breaking and remaking, because the only way to get Eve is to break Adam apart, break Adam open, break into Adam. From his bone and from his flesh, literally, from pieces of his body, Eve comes forth, the second human. Out of the pieces, a new creation.

Backgrounded by the soundtrack of breaking and remaking, another story of creation makes a different kind of sense. This is the story of the creation of the disciples, which now seems a lot like the story of the first creation, at least when Matthew rolls the camera, because if you listen to Jesus' first public sermon, he's surrounded by wreckage. He makes his recruitment speech to a broken bunch of people:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit...

“Blessed are those who mourn...

“Blessed are the meek....

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness....”

These are people who've been broken into pieces by the world's ways – and yet these are precisely the people whom Jesus blesses and refashions into his disciples. Jesus calls – not by command – but by blessing. Out of the pieces, a new creation.

Jesus seems to have done a pretty good job of this new creation, because by the close of Matthew's Gospel (25:31-46), these disciples, broken, blessed, and repurposed, have become a new creation: giving food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothes to the naked, comfort to the sick and imprisoned. What I love about this is that these once-shattered disciples are shocked by their own makeovers! They barely recognize themselves – or Jesus: “When was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?” But these blessed pieces have become a blessing to others, without even knowing it. Out of these pieces, a new creation.

And should this surprise us? Because the central practices of this broken band of disciples today, bound together by duct tape, piano wire, and a fair helping of grace, they are all practices of breaking and making. Look at the Lord's Supper: you take a nice loaf of bread perfectly round – and tear it into pieces. These pieces nourish a new

creation. Look at the rite of baptism, where you take an infant, break it away from the arms of its family of origin, adopt it into a new family, the family of the faithful, and give it a new name “Child of God.” It’s shocking, and I keep waiting for some parent to suddenly see what’s going on, take the child, and run screaming from the sanctuary. Out of these pieces, a new creation.

And should this surprise us? Because this pattern of breaking and remaking calls to mind the story of Jesus himself, broken, blessed, and repurposed as the risen Christ, a creation so new even his disciples wouldn’t have recognized him – were it not for the marks on his body, witness to his own brokenness. Out of these pieces, a new creation.

The pattern of breaking and remaking is only another way of thinking about cross and resurrection, this time using the body of Christ as the mountain, the school, the broken pieces of our own losses.

Ah! The most terrifying words in scripture may be the words God springs on us at the end: “Behold, I make all things new!” Because the new creation always comes out of the shards of the old creation. Call it divine recycling, if you will, but this is God’s way of working in the world.

Here are some ground rules for moving through this divine construction zone:

First, make no mistake, navigating the new creation takes time – sometimes more than

seven days. And you may be in Day One or Day Six, but there is evening and there is morning. Another day.

Second, remember that, just as God blessed each day of creation, God blesses broken pieces, so that they can come together into something new. Expect that blessing – look for it, if you like, but it will find you. Let your loss bless you.

Third, the new creation is just that: new. It's not the old creation warmed over. I used to tell my friends that if anyone saw my Old Life wandering around, they should remind it where I lived. But I knew the Old Life wasn't coming back again. Resurrection is never resuscitation; it's something new entirely.

Finally, just for the journey ahead, take a mental snapshot of this image of the creation of Adam that Michelangelo painted in the Sistine Chapel in Rome. This time notice two things: that God's finger is not quite touching Adam's – but it's close. And notice, of course, the crack. There's always breakage.

Let us go forth with good courage.

Amen.

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