

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
8th Sunday after Pentecost, July 26, 2020
Luke 6:43-45
“When God Gave Us Words” by Rev. Sue Trigger

Luke 6:43-45

(CEB*)

⁴³“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. ⁴⁴Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. ⁴⁵A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.

Video of the story “When God Gave Us Words” shown. ([See video of worship on website page](#))

The first time I read “When God Gave Us Words”, I realized that I had never thought about the creation story including God giving us words. Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso paints a creative and entertaining picture of God and the angels wrestling with the idea of giving people words. The angels are very insightful and often challenge God. “People will just mess them up.” But God insists and the angels take sacks of words to humans.

It is a wonderful story, but under the surface is much more. Rabbi Sasso takes us into an ancient conversation with rabbis from across generations. All we have to do is turn on the news or pick up a newspaper to see the worst of human nature. Violence, abuse and lies make the headlines every day. This is not new, the biblical story of humanity begins with deception and a lie. Throughout history, Jewish rabbis have wrestled with their own disappointment with people. They wrote many reflections on the question, “Should humans have been created?”

In Genesis 1:26, God said, “Let us make the human in our image.” The rabbis wondered what was meant by saying, “let us create.” Shouldn’t the verse have said, “Let me create? Or I will create?” In the Bible, God often speaks in the royal “we”, but the rabbis imagined God, at the beginning of creation, consulting with the angels about the creation of humanity. Rabbi Simon imagined the angels arguing with one another. The angel of Love favors the creation of humans. The angel of Truth does not. The angel of Righteousness agrees with the angel of love. The angel of Peace complains that humans will be full of strife. It was a tie. God has to break

the tie, and does so by casting Truth to the ground. There is more to the story, but in the end, the rabbi concludes that God wanted to create humans despite knowing that they will lie and struggle against each other. The angels represented the rabbi's voice of despair about human behavior.ⁱ

You can hear the seeds of "When God Gave us Words" in Rabbi Simon's midrash. Drawing on ancient teachings, Sasso, draws us into a gap in the biblical story of creation and enters into a debate that people of faith has wrestled with from the beginning. In the children's book, it is what people do with the words that leads us to into the question, "Should God have Created humans?". The people twisted and turned the words and made lies, they created curses, they mixed words with sharp thorns and gossip was born. It is this next sentence that hits me right here every time. "And God regretted giving words to man and woman." It would be easy to think, "this is just a children's book, the Bible doesn't say that God regretted giving words to humans." But I couldn't stop wondering, "Did God ever regret creating humanity?" I don't like to think about God regretting us. So I did a word search to see if the Bible actually says God regretted. There are as many as 15 references of God showing regret.

I am going to share three translations of Genesis 6:6 which introduces the story of Noah. The Jewish Publication Society translation of the TANAKH says, "6And the Lord regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened." The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible says, "6 And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart." The Common English Bible, which is closer to the Tanakh than the NRSV, says, "6 The Lord regretted making human beings on the earth, and he was heartbroken." God regretted making human beings for just the kinds of things Sasso described in her book; evil actions like lies, curses, and gossip. If God was heartbroken at the time of Noah, imagine how God must feel about the world today. What a heavy burden. If we do nothing but think of the words people use daily, we will find plenty of reasons for God to have regrets. I wonder how many lies are told around the world in one day? How many times a day do people ask God to punish their enemies? How many times a day do people talk about other people, including details that are not confirmed to be true?ⁱⁱ The numbers must be staggering.

In the writings of the rabbis, called midrashim, the strife of the people and the reality of human failure are wrestled with. For Rabbi Simon, the debate of the angels was the debate of the

rabbis. The good news is that all is not lost. Two of the angels spoke in favor of the people. They saw that people could be loving and honorable. In “When God Gave Us Words”, Sasso painted the picture saying, “People stirred soft music into words and sang lullabies. Words were mixed with dance, and poetry was born. People joined laughter to words and told jokes. People mixed words with midnight and wrote mysteries. People wove longing, thanksgiving and hope into words and offered prayer.” The book takes us to the place where the rabbis landed, a place that teaches us something very important about God. That despite human wickedness, God still cherishes human us. God is compassionate.

It may look like a children’s book, but Sasso invites all of us to pause and consider the human condition. Our words and actions matter to God. Our wrongdoings are a heavy burden, a weight that we bear, that others bear, and most of all, God bears. Yet God is compassionate, God desires to continue to listen to our words and rejoice when we are loving, laugh when we are funny, cry when we pray from the depth of our soul. God reaches out to us with love and forgiveness.

At home, you may have printed out the positive word tree to add words that can grow a beautiful, strong tree. For those who are not making the tree, I invite you to consider the questions that Rabbi Sasso wrote to encourage reflection on her midrash.

- 1. When have you felt like the angels who argued against giving people words? (*People will just mess them up.*)**
- 2. When have you felt like the angels when they argued in favor of the people? (*We must hear the end of the stories the people are telling?*)**
- 3. What argument do you have with God about human behavior?**
- 4. What grace and compassion have you experienced in your life?**

When I began thinking about this sermon several weeks ago, I couldn’t stop thinking about my personal frustration with those who claim their first amendment rights as a permission slip to say anything they want. I thought of the hateful things people say about others on social media, or the lies from public officials, the demonizing of people who choose to wear masks, and the ridicule of those who don’t wear masks. “It’s my first amendment right”, people say. I really

thought about banging the drum of our responsibility for our words, to the first amendment, but to God. But the longer I wrestled with those feelings the more I had to see myself in the mirror. I had to be honest about the words in *my* head and the words that leave *my* lips or my fingertips. I imagined myself sitting at table with the rabbis, trying to make sense of the world and what kind of God would put up with such behavior. What I found was the God the rabbis found, a God who is compassionate and patient. God who feels regret because of our behavior, but continues to listen and patiently draws us to repent. God who continually forgives us.

I wanted to talk about the guilt we should feel because of our behavior, because of our words. I wanted to say that we need to watch what we say for God’s sake. But what I found in the ancient words of the rabbis, the words of Scripture, and the words of Sandy Sasso was the voice of God calling, saying, “Don’t do it for my sake, do it for your sake”. For the sake of stories, for your stories are my stories. Thanks be to the God of compassion, may we follow – for the sake of stories.

ⁱ Sasso, Sandy Eisenberg. *God’s Echo: Exploring Scripture with Midrash*. Paraclete Press. Brewster, MA. 2007. pp. 6-7.

ⁱⁱ Gossip, definition, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/gossip>