

Really? Really.

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

November 13, 2016

During this morning's service, we celebrated the Dedication of Rhys Trumbull Mechem. You will see him referenced near the end of the sermon.

Meditation

Who says

we should be better than we are?

Don't big fish

eat little fish?

Wouldn't a crocodile

eat you?

(consider leeches

large dark rats)

Who says

we should transcend

our violence?

Aren't floods and

earthquakes killers?

Don't droughts

wipe thousands out?

(consider hail stones

cancer cells)

Who says

in the midst of

this universal

swish and swirl

we should

care for

each other?

(we do, we do, we do)

- Della Elizabeth Davis

Reading #1

Our first reading today comes from the Book of Numbers, the fourth book of the Hebrew Scriptures. Numbers is primarily a description of the time following liberation of the Israelites from Egypt, before reaching the Promised Land. It is a time of wandering and struggle. In this reading, Moses wonders how he, as the leader, is supposed to carry the burden of everyone's needs. We should remember that, in fact, Moses does not ever make it to the Promised Land, even though his people – eventually – do.

Numbers 11:10-15 New International Version (NIV)

10 Moses heard the people of every family wailing at the entrance to their tents. The Lord became exceedingly angry, and Moses was troubled. **11** He asked the Lord, "Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? **12** Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their ancestors? **13** Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me, 'Give us meat to eat!' **14** I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. **15** If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me—if I have found favor in your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin."

Reading #2

Our second reading is from Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, delivered on March 4, 1865 – five weeks before the surrender of the Confederacy and six weeks before his assassination.

"Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with or even before the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully."

Offertory

"I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight, I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice."

– the Rev. Theodore Parker

Sermon

Really? Really.

the Rev. Anne Bancroft

“If you say it right,” according to Mary Oliver, “it helps the heart to bear it.” Which is perhaps another way to hope that “the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart might be acceptable,” to a holy spirit of Love, and of use to all of you, this morning, because I know our hearts have been bearing heavy loads, in many ways and for many reasons. May these words offer both solace and challenge – because that is our life.

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When I picked the title for this week’s sermon several weeks back, I chose it because it felt the most flexible. “Really? Really.” The title left anything possible, right. “Really, we have the first woman president?” OR “Really? We elected Donald Trump?” OR, harkening back to a previous experience . . . “Really? We don’t know the results yet?” Any of those were possible, and whatever inflection you heard was accidental

But, we do know, now. Really. Our voting system is such that we now have a president-elect. Whether you were aware, weeks ago, that anything was possible, or were totally taken by surprise because you were pretty sure what would happen, the long, long season of waiting is over, and we have something in front of us. In many ways it doesn’t look like anything we’ve experienced before, though we have short memories, you know. Still, we will be wading, together, through this unknown, trusting – hopefully, trusting – that the systems we have created for our democracy will serve us as we move forward. At the very least, I imagine we will all be paying closer attention. This has been no ordinary season – of that we can all agree.

I want to share and engage two different perspectives this morning. I have some thoughts about how we might address our immediate future, but first I want to invite you to consider this time in our collective lives from a ways back, if you will.

Let’s talk about Moses for a minute or two, because scripture – after all – is one of our sources of wisdom, with stories that we believe are always alive to revelation, that is, they always have something new to teach us. Our first reading this morning was from Numbers, because it has to do with the census, counting who and how many. At this point in the story, the Israelites are not in bondage anymore, but they’re not in the Promised Land, either. They’re somewhere in the middle, wandering, trying to find their way. Sound familiar? They thought once they were free, once they were no longer slaves to someone else’s truth, they’d be on easy street, but it seems freedom is not the end-point of their story. Freedom, as it turns out, is just the beginning, and life in the free world is not so simple. The Promised Land for the people is far beyond their vision. As someone familiar to us might have said, “the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways” They’re tired, and hungry, and crabby,

confused and frustrated for lots of different reasons; so they complain about everything that is not the way they want it to be, not the way they imagined, and Moses, this Moses, is running out of good ideas. They put all their eggs in his leadership basket, and they're not happy. And Moses seems to be wondering what the heck he's supposed to do, anyway – with all their clamoring and varied requests. He thinks he's got a plan. He thinks it will get them where they want to go.

I wondered the other day: what if Moses had been elected? I know that's not the story line, but let's just imagine that instead of being chosen, he was elected – and, some people just didn't like him, or didn't like his priorities. I mean REALLY didn't like his priorities. Probably, like, half the people were not Moses fans. For the other half, of course, he's their guy.

We're all on a journey to somewhere, and we all want somebody at the top, or the front, to help us get there.

What if the Moses I want, and feel in my heart that I need for myself and my family and my community . . . what if that Moses is not the same as yours?

I'm asking you to stretch, here. I'm asking you to set aside what I believe to be some pretty major immediate concerns in order to see a bigger picture – a MUCH bigger picture, because I think it might help us understand the reasons we find ourselves in such a divided landscape. We'll come back to the concerns.

At this point in our human time, we are on a global journey. The Moses who was named Martin Luther King, Jr., knew that. Remember the “world house” speech, in which he reminded us of the novelist whose papers were discovered after his death? This novelist, King told us, wanted to write a story about a “wildly separated family [that] inherits a house in which they have to live together. This is the great new problem of mankind,” King said. Mankind, he said – humankind. Not Americans, or the French-kind; not Mexicans or Australian-kind. This is the great new problem for all of us, he said. More than half a century after King's death, we are still coming to terms with this challenge: with our larger and larger world population; with increasing interdependence, with the finiteness of this planet we inhabit together, and the limits of its resources to sustain us indefinitely. We are struggling all over the world to figure out how to occupy the same house socially, financially and religiously, and I am imagining, at least, that when we step back far enough, we might see the ways in which our national borders may one day be – to a large extent, may already be – disserving us and our planet. As attached to them as we are, they may be getting in the way of our global home. We might even see, in the far distant future or maybe not so far, how our borders might become irrelevant. Maybe that inkling, even as it is too far out to catch sight of, has us holding on tighter than ever. When we feel threatened, of course, we hold on tighter. As a human community, we are suffering the growing pains of our shared home, and that pain has been very much evident in this election.

Imagine yourself far enough back from our planet that you can see whole stretches of land with no borders dividing one region from another, or one people from another; you can see the fields that feed and the oceans that carry sustenance to all the world's people. There is life here, there are blues and greens, a sun that warms and a moon that circles, and there are no dividing lines.

We are not there yet, of course. If at all, we only divine it by conscience. We are nowhere near that "promised land"; but, I believe it must be where the arc is bending because, in the long run, it cannot do otherwise unless we destroy ourselves all together – and so, of course, many of us are afraid. We are being asked, perhaps forced – however remotely – by the circumstances of our numbers and proximity on this earth, to evolve into a new way of being. We are in that desert, that wandering land. It's happening in the ways we are overlapping each other more and more. The pushback is a sure sign of that. And the new reality is already requiring us to experience what all change requires: what sociologist Marty Linsky refers to as a "distribution of loss." We are all having to give up something, because becoming something new and sustaining means things will not stay the same.

We are story-making creatures. Our stories help us make sense of our struggles. In the story from the Hebrew scriptures, Moses was a person, one person who had a constant and binding relationship with his God, who said you must shepherd these people towards home – a land of milk and honey – even though you, yourself, will likely not get there. His vision was a function of his faith and people counted on him to lead them.

Fast forward lots of years, to a time and place of enormous civil unrest, in fact of civil war in a small and fledgling country. There were some who were struggling to hold onto what they had known, to a way of life and property that they were loath to change and others who saw that system as an abomination. And the Moses whose name was Lincoln said, "Both [sides of the struggle] read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other."

We have not healed as a country from that divide, even still. We are slow learners. We cling to the things we hold sacred, illusions of security or safety of sameness, even when we don't always recognize what those are, or how we acquired them to begin with.

And, here is one of our unlearned lessons: that we tag our leaders to fix things so that we CAN hold on, or reclaim, so that we will not suffer any more than necessary in the "distribution of loss" that is a part of change. We all choose leaders that come as close as possible to assuring us that OUR visions will be redeemed, but we forget to listen to the visions that might differ from our own, and so then we are caught short, asking, "Where is OUR Moses now?"

A congregant and I had coffee yesterday. I was explaining a little of my thinking and he said, "Are you suggesting that Donald Trump is Moses?"

The scriptures never said Moses was perfect. And I'm not sure vilifying anyone is really going to serve the greater good.

As people of faith who value love and compassion for all beings, who profess the worth and dignity of each and every one of us, we do not accept bigotry or misogyny; homophobia or sexism; xenophobia or ableism. And we do not expect it in our leaders. Our most recent president-elect is surely not the first to carry those particular attributes. He has most certainly been the most blatant, of late. Regardless – as hard as that may be to say – he is Moses for somebody, many somebodies.

In a podcast with Krista Tippett, author and interfaith leader Eboo Patel defined democracy as the political system in which “you can make personal convictions public.” This freedom – this right to the open expression of thought and belief – is not an easy system to live with. Still, it is increasingly the one the world aspires to, which should encourage us, I think, to want to do it well. I want to prove it can be done, even when we feel at low ebbs.

I remember telling you all about a visit with Gordon Kaufman, a theology professor who asked what tradition I represented, and when I told him Unitarian Universalism, he said, “Hmmm, an interesting experiment.” Yes – I told you all – it felt to me very much like our democracy.

Our system of governance is no more guaranteed to survive than is this open and free religious tradition that we love so much, but they are both worth working for. Really. Really.

You may feel, as I do, that you were taken off guard this past week. It was shocking to me, I will admit. I'm not sure I thought the alternative was the answer, either, but I wasn't wrapping my mind around the idea of the Republican candidate actually becoming our president-elect. I thought I knew who my Moses had to be, who OUR Moses should be. And the gift, if it can be seen that way, is a clarity of focus around the concerns that I know I must now be even more vigilant about. A note from Ann Friedman, in *New York* magazine, reminds us, “The hard work of making change in America is very different from electing a president. Elections have endpoints. Social progress does not. . . . The call to action is the same, but so much louder.”

Several weeks back, we spoke about saints, and I mentioned the newly named Saint Teresa of Calcutta. I was reminded recently that she said, “If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.” Not just some of us. Not just the ones we agree with, or whose priorities we share. Not just the ones who are kind to us, or concur with our way forward. All of us. Really. We belong to each other.

We need to start there. A bigger fear than what a conservative agenda will do to our country is that we might allow it to further tear us apart. We are ALL in the desert, struggling to build a home on this amazing planet. Before we take our complaints to Moses, we need to speak to each other.

And remember, my friends, that begins right here at home.

Baby Rhys, you inspire us to be the best we can be: to open our ears and minds and hearts more fully; to move in stride with change not with anger but with intention, so that some day when you say to us, “This is the world you have worked for on my behalf. Really?” we can say proudly, even knowing that the promised land is not yet reached: “Really. We’ve been doing our very best.”

Who says
in the midst of
this universal
swish and swirl
we should
care for
each other?
(we do, we do, we do)

So may it be.