

“Turning toward the Morning”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

Easter & Passover Sunday

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Meditation

Let us remember in these moments of anguished failure
of good will and mistrust of power,
Those great souls of all the ages
who have wrought righteousness in their times,
And made the life we share more pure and beautiful and strong.

Let us remember in our confrontation with evil, violence,
and the worst of which humanity is capable,
That our hope and strength are not exhausted,
That there is life yet to be lived
with fuller meaning and with gladder promise.

Let us remember in the early uncertain days of springtime
Earth’s covenant of life,
And the new generations coming on,
for whom the great adventure has not ended,

For whom we are called to hold high
the dignity and divinity of the human spirit.

Let us remember when the lamp of our hearts grows faint
And we wander in the darkness,
That dawn will surely come,
for this our world is always turning toward the morning.

Reading

“Maror” - Marge Piercy

A bitter cud.
Biting into the bitter, that bites back.
Of all the gross tastes, sweet and salty,
sour, we seek it the least.
We spit it out. But not tonight

Tonight we must taste our bitterness.
Bite into our failure, suck its essence.
We were slaves in Egypt, the Haggadah
reminds us, and we still are,
but who enslaves us to what?

The bone we chew is our own.
Only I can tell myself where
I am caught, trapped, held
fast, bored but comfortable
in the box I know so well.

This is the moment for naming
that box, for feeling the walls,
for studying the dimensions
of the prison I must choose
to leave in my exodus of one.

I can join with no one else,
I cannot walk out with you
until I measure my walls
then break them down.
Darkness into light.

Fear and silence into
cursing. The known
abandoned for something
new and frightening. Bitter
is the first taste of freedom.

Reading

“Query” – Jean Burden

I asked the birds
who sing at night
where they learned their songs,
and what they sang about.

They said, “We learn from
birds who sing by day,
but what we sing about
is hard for us to say.”

“Only those with beak
and wing can fathom joy
in dark and doubt.

The sky may turn to evening
and the sun to moon,
but we sing
of what you do not speak—
how night is sometimes noon,
how any season of the soul
can, with time, be coaxed to spring.”

Sermon: “Resistance and Release”

It’s hardly felt like a very Holy Week.

Hardly a happy Passover.

Whether one identifies as a devout Christian or observant Jew,
whether you consider yourself a UU mystic, a staunch humanist,
or a “Buddha-tarian,” I’m guessing we all might agree
that it’s been a particularly hard week for the world.

Around the Seder table in recent days,
amid the joyous hallelujahs resounding on the today,
in this season when we, here,
are catching our first real sight of spring,

many of us are also holding in our hearts a world of hurt.

I don't know about you, but the headlines,
stacked one atop another in just a few days,
have been, at times, more than I can take in.
And more than I can take.

Dozens of Coptic Christians in Egypt
slain last Sunday, in their churches, while at worship.

Four separate famines unfolding in sub-Saharan Africa.

News this week of the creation of a concentration camp for gay men in Chechnya,
where some have already been executed.

New waves of refugees fleeing Syria and Libya and South Sudan.

Alarming signs that climate change
is happening faster than expected.

And, not least, the rhetoric of war rising again between nuclear powers.

And on Thursday, the dropping on Afghanistan
of the "Mother-of-all-bombs."

It has not been humanity's best week.

And still we gather this morning to sing "Hallelujahs!"
To make a joyful noise.
To praise the arrival of springtime come again.
To celebrate the relentless renewal of life.
And honour ancient stories of freedom and resurrection.

Maybe it's just me,
but all of that feels a really tall order this year,
when hope seems so hard to find.
When we find ourselves living in an "Age of Anxiety."
When despair is, for many of us,
very often the order of the day.

But it is for just such a time

that these springtime celebrations exist.

And it is for just such a time, I believe,
that we exist (you and I),
and are called by Life
to give our hearts and hands in service
to the world around us.

* * *

Through the years, I've heard people say,
after reading through our Seven Principles,
that while they are quite beautiful,
they're so universal as to be meaningless.

So generic that anyone could claim them as their own.

Who, after all, is against
the inherent worth and dignity of every person?

Who could really be opposed to
justice, equity and compassion?

To peace, liberty, and justice for all?

To respect for the interdependent web of life?

“Who?” they ask.

Well, it would seem quite a few.

Looking at the headlines,
I struggle to see exactly how our principles have become universal.

Maybe I'm missing something, but it seems
they're far from being commonplace.

To be sure, even for us,
the Seven Principles of Unitarianism are highly aspirational.

What looks so simple and straight-forward in writing

turns out to be incredibly demanding when put into practice,
requiring devotion and commitment
that doesn't always come easily to us, as Unitarians.

In a word, the principles require faith—
an undying belief, an unyielding trust—
that they are foundations upon which
a better world will, eventually, be built.

The *Book of Hebrews* says that
“faith is the substance of things hoped for,
the evidence of things not seen.”

By that definition, I say, again,
that to uphold these principles,
to truly strive to put them into practice in your life,
is nothing less than an act of faith.

And to live out these principles, even imperfectly,
is nothing less than an act of beautiful resistance
in a world so hell-bent on turning away
from the demands of love and justice.

This is the work to which you and I are called:
to lift high the sacred torch of hope,
in a night that is growing dark.

To hold forth a vision for the world,
a vision of our highest humanity,
a vision deeply grounded in these principles,
a vision we, ourselves, must put into practice, day after day.

We are **called**, quite simply,
to love the hell out of this world.

Now, I know this isn't easy.
And I know this isn't at all easy right now.

Such is the true challenge of keeping faith.

To persevere against the prevailing winds,

to continue on in trust, in resistance, acting “as if,”
even when the signs and signals around us are truly worrying.

And so it is right and good that we turn, again and again,
to stories long-told at this time of year to be reassured,
to find hope, to find strength.

To the story of a people who resisted a pharaoh,
who overcame bondage, and marched to freedom.

To the story of a community stirred to strength and back to life,
after their leader was nailed to a cross for resisting the status quo,
and proving that death could not ultimately overcome love.

To the story of a planet, **which** despite our incessant abuse,
shows to us, over and over, the resilience of life
to spring from the seeming death of winter.

These ancient stories remind us of a truth older than time.

That we are part of a miraculous, marvelous chain of being,
stretching back to the very beginning;
a chain of resistance bringing forth
this present world of possibility.

That we are co-creators with life, with God, with the universe,
in keeping this great and sacred story alive,
and moving it ever onward toward its fullest flourishing.

This makes each of an accomplice to hope.

It means we’re co-conspirators in what happens next.

It means each of us has a vital part to play.

The poet Ann McNeal, in her poem entitled “Faith,”
recasts a story I’ve shared with you before.

The story of the thirsting traveler in the desert,
who reaches a water pump and finds a sealed container of water.

The instructions explain the water is not for drinking,
but must, instead, be poured, down to the last drop,
into the pump itself if it is to bring forth water.

You don't remember it, my children
the endless trek across the dry places
the lone tree with a pump beneath
a few handfuls of grass greening.
One clear Mason jar full of water.
Stop! You must not drink a drop.
This is what you don't know—

You must pour it all down the shaft
your parched mouth watching it disappear
into the workings below, the leather cuffs
and steel pistons. Then you pump.
The steel shrieks and groans.
Nothing comes. Despair closes
your throat. Keep pumping.

More resistance now
your arm protests
then great gushes
speed over your hands
cool your feet
open your throat.

In the end you must fill the jar.
Leave it for the next traveler.

Such is the way of the world, my friends.

We are called at times, at times such as these,
to pour out every bit of hope we have,
every bit of love, every bit of faith.

Do not cling to any of it.
Spend it all, in ridiculously generous ways.

For the pump must be primed.

As the poet warns, for the longest time,
we may only hear the clashing sounds of steel,
as it shrieks and groans.

Our throats may close with despair when nothing comes.

But “keep pumping,” she says.

Keep pumping.

“Faith is the substance of things hoped for,
the evidence of things not seen.”

* * *

In the spring of 1945, the BBC European Service
aired a German-language radio show
in which a number of German prisoners-of-war
being held in England were interviewed.

A transcript of the radio show made its way to Bertha Bracey,
a Quaker educator and relief worker.

She translated the German transcript into English,
and had it printed in *The Friend*,
the weekly magazine of the Quakers in London.

In one of the interviews,
“One P.O.W., identified only as “Prisoner F. B.”,
tells the story that in Cologne,
shortly after the city was liberated,
there was a shelter, “where young Catholics
were keeping some Jews in hiding
because their lives were threatened.

There at the shelter, down in the cellar,
American soldiers found the following inscription
scribbled on the wall:

I believe in the sun—even when it is not shining.
I believe in God—even when He is silent.

I believe in love—even when it is not apparent.”

I wonder whether we might be able to say the same things?

Can you find common cause
with the unknown author of these words—
a person forced into hiding in a terrible time?

Can you affirm a belief in the sun, in God, in love,
when all seem to be missing?

Can you affirm your faith in something,
even when it can't be seen, or felt, or known for certain?

I so dearly hope so.

I hope you have faith, even when filled with doubt.

I hope you know, as the birds of the poem put it,
that “any season of the soul
can, with time, be coaxed to spring.”

I hope, as you travel through the long night,
that you carry deep within you an abiding trust
that “our world is always turning toward the morning.”

I hope you hold fast to the story, whatever it is,
that stirs the hallelujah of your heart,
and makes your life sing.

For this world desperately needs people who know that song.

Amen.