

Unto You a Savior Is Born

**Celebration of Life at First Unitarian Church
Louisville, Kentucky
December 12, 2004
Rev. Norm Stewart**

~ Never put a period where God put a comma. Gracie Allen ~

READING - *In Broken Images* by Robert Graves

He is quick, thinking in clear images;
I am slow, thinking in broken images.

He becomes dull, trusting to his clear images;
I become sharp, mistrusting my broken images.

Trusting his images, he assumes their relevance;
Mistrusting my images, I question their relevance.

Assuming their relevance, he assumes the fact;
Questioning their relevance, I question their fact.

When the fact fails him, he questions his senses;
When the fact fails me, I approve my senses.

He continues quick and dull in his clear images;
I continue slow and sharp in my broken images.

He in a new confusion of his understanding;
I in a new understanding of my confusion.

RESPONSIVE READING - *The Free Mind* # 592

[I believe that this reading from our hymnal speaks to what liberal religion is about.]

SILENCE FOR REFLECTION

CHORAL RESPONSE

SERMON - *Unto You a Savior Is Born* by Rev. Norm Stewart

Hanukkah has begun.

Let Christmas come, - its story told . . . , its lovely song . . . , love born again; the truth of dream.
[from hymn # 224 which we just sang]

As our guest last week, Ricky Jones might say, I'm down with the Christmas story. It's a great story and I agree with those people that say, "if it isn't true it oughta be."

In the Christian tradition this is the season of Advent, a time of preparation, waiting, and anticipation. In the Christian tradition people are waiting for their savior, Jesus to be born. A savior whom many Christians believe will bring hope, transformation, redemption, and of course salvation. It is an incredibly appealing and powerfully compelling story for anyone. It is especially alluring to those people with little else in their life which gives them hope.

In the Bible, in the second chapter of the book of Luke, beginning with verse eight, we find one version of the Christmas story. Here we read that the waiting was not in vain.

[8] In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. [9] Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. [10] But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; . . . I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: [11] to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

Jesus is born and to steal a phrase from the recent election, hope is on the way. Building on the teachings of the Hebrew Bible, the birth, life and death of Jesus provide the framework for systematic Christian theologies that give adherents hope and a guide for how to live and how to die. The early Christians eventually wrote down their oral stories and made them their sacred scriptures.

Admittedly modern Biblical scholars given the benefit of nearly 2000 years of investigation, second-guessing, and retrospection have found some authenticity challenges in those sacred texts. Nevertheless, if the millions of Christians worldwide are any indication of its enduring power, the Christmas story has stood the test of time pretty well.

It has been said that "real religions" offer salvation stories to their followers. If Unitarian Universalism aspired to be a "real religion" would we have a salvation story? Do we already have such a story within our tradition? If so, how would, or how does, that story read?

I am reminded of a seminar I once took. The instructor would talk about something and then ask us if we had any thoughts about what he had just presented. If he didn't get any response after a while he would say, "well, if you did have a thought what would it be?" That frequently broke the ice and started us engaging in dialogue.

So I ask you, if we do, or if we did, have a salvation story, what would it be?

But before we ask that question, it might be a good idea to consider whether or not we even need a salvation story. The answer to **that** question would seem to depend on how we as a congregation and/or as a faith tradition are doing now? Are we thriving or are we dying? Do we need to be saved or are we doing O.K.?

Which in turn brings up something else that I've been meaning to talk to you about. The discernment process in which this congregation is currently engaged. There seems to be a good deal of confusion about what this process is about and how it will eventually play out.

This is despite:

- several Sunday services here dealing with the process,
- our ongoing critical financial crisis
- a congregational vote to engage in this process - BTW, I think that vote was unanimous
- a comprehensive introductory presentation by the Learning Team at our August leadership retreat
- multiple articles in Steepletalk plus additional discussions in my personal column
- several history gathering meetings after church
- a presentation to our Brownbaggers group, and
- the meeting on November 21 which addressed our perceptions about this church's history

On behalf of the Learning Team, I would like to apologize for any confusion about the process so far and try to clarify a few things. The first and foremost thing to know about this process is that **our ultimate goal is to discern [as a congregation our] church's vocation in the world today**. I think that means - why are we here and who are we called to serve in our community and how?

Equally important to know is that the Learning Team is not going to figure out the answer to that question for you. It is the Learning Team's task over this church year (and longer if necessary) to steer the process toward an eventual decision of what kind of a religious community we are going to be.

Ultimately, you as a congregation must decide what the answer to that question is.

So what have we learned so far? Now that we have completed the history collecting phase we will be writing a report based on our findings to date.

However, we have already confirmed that as we had suspected we are indeed stuck on the plateau between being a pastoral church and a program church and that we are ambivalent about getting off of that plateau. Very briefly, a pastoral church is a church where everyone pretty much knows everyone else and the minister knows everyone. When your in the hospital, the pastor visits you, when you are sick the pastor comes to your home. The pastor is the head honcho and most decisions happen only with the approval of the pastor.

People tend to like the personal attention they get from the pastor in this type of church.

In a program church decisions are made by the board and the program committees of the church, often with little direct involvement from the minister. Things like Adult Religious Education are no longer primarily organized and taught by the minister. Much of the day-to-day pastoral care work is done by pastoral care associates. Programs such as music tend to be far more comprehensive and there are more opportunities for community service and justice work.

What the Learning Team has discovered so far is that the First Unitarian Church of Louisville is a textbook example of a church stuck on the plateau between a pastoral church and a program church and even more significantly we have been stuck there for a long time.

To get a little more specific, we discovered that in 1971 this church had 265 members. Thirty years later in 2001 we had 265 members. Today, in 2004 we have about 265 members.

In one of our recent focus group meetings I asked one of my favorite questions. It is a question that I hope many of you have already heard and are thinking about. The question is, "do you think there are twice as many people in this area who could use a church like ours?"

What do you think?

When I ask that question, I generally get two kinds of responses. The first, from the optimists, is something like, "sure, there are probably more than twice as many."

The second, more cautious type of response is, "I don't know if there are twice as many." At that point I look the second responder in the eye and ask, "do you think that there is one more person in the area who could benefit from a church like ours?" I have yet to find anyone who didn't think there was one other person who could use a church like this.

If we all believe there is at least one other person and we are not all thinking of the same person, then there are twice as many people who need a church like this here in Metro Louisville. What the discernment process is asking us is, "are we called to serve those people? If so, what does that mean we must do?" And conversely, if we are not called to serve them what does that mean we must do?

At the meeting where I asked the question about twice as many people, everyone of the responders was an optimist and believed there were twice as many people who need a church like ours. When I asked, "are we called to serve them and what does that mean we should do?" I got a response that pointed to the ambivalence we really have about moving out of the plateau - particularly if that requires moving in a direction that would mean serving twice as many people. The response was something like "when twice as many come we'll figure out how to deal with them."

At first that may seem like a legitimate response. After all it seems that on average we get about 5 new visitors per week. Look around you, they don't really strain our available space all that

much. However, if we have 5 visitors a week, that means we have 250 a year, 2500 in 10 years and that we have had about 7,500 visitors over the past 30 years!

Now a question all discerning church members should be asking themselves is how we can have 7500 visitors coming toward us over a 30 year period and still not grow by even 1 more member?

Something is going on and we need to get a better idea what it is.

If it is any consolation the numbers for the Unitarian Universalist Association as a whole look about the same as our own.

So why am I talking about this with Christmas just around the corner - especially after I advertised that I would be talking about saviors and salvation stories?

It is because I believe we may be dying both as a congregation and as a denomination and that we may need to find some way to save ourselves pretty quickly. My belief is not original and I must give credit to the Rev. Davidson Loehr for bringing it to my attention in his lecture entitled "Why Unitarian Universalism Is Dying." Type "Why Unitarian Universalism Is Dying" into Google and you can find the article. For those of you who don't do the internet we can probably make copies of the talk available.

The UUA claims to have experienced modest growth over the last 30 years while other more mainline traditions have in fact been slipping in numbers. Loehr challenges those claims and points out that during that same 30 years or so the American population has actually grown by about one-third, somewhere between 30-35%.

Loehr argues, I believe somewhat convincingly, that the lack of growth in our numbers while the general population grew by a third translates into a 25% loss in our numbers - as a percentage of the population. That is hardly good news for us or for the UUA.

Can we be saved? Do we have or can we find a compelling salvation story to attract and retain sufficient people to this and other Unitarian Universalist congregations to assure not merely survival but a vitality befitting a religious path that I honestly believe should be among the most respected in all of recorded history . . . past, present and future.

Loehr believes that the primary reason we may be losing ground is that we have shifted our core focus away from being a liberal religion to being a collection of political liberals.

Now I suspect there are some or perhaps even many of you who are quite happy to have a place where political liberals can feel comfortable and validated in times like these. A place where political liberals can feel safe or at least safer, at least on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights. A place where political liberals actually have the power to shape an institution in which they participate.

However, if our central organizing focus is political it means that we organize differently than if our central organizing principle is liberal religion. It also means that we attract and retain different kinds of people. At a recent discernment meeting it was suggested that perhaps what we were about was being a place for people that didn't fit in any where else. That could be yet another possible core organizing principle.

Depending on which core organizing principle or calling we eventually arrive at in our discernment process, be it political liberalism, liberal religion or something else still, some people may ultimately decide this is not the right place for them to call their church home. There could be some among us now who may eventually feel less welcome here.

If we ultimately choose to make liberal religion the core organizing principle here and if you believe that you have already found "the Truth, the light and the way," - be that truth Humanism, Paganism, Buddhism, UU Christianity or whatever, - you might even find yourself compelled to organize another church where the Truth which you have found is the core organizing principle.

In 1918, it appears quite clear to me that this church was organized as a home of liberal religion. Then Rev. Dilworth Lupton wrote these words that I shared with many of you a few weeks ago.

The fundamental principle of the Unitarian faith is the entire freedom of each individual to think [their] own religious thoughts, unhampered by creed or any final authority whatsoever, except [their] own conscience and reason.

[see also William Ellery Channing's The Free Mind which was written nearly 100 years before Lupton.]

If you question whether or not we currently are primarily a liberal religious organization or a group of political liberals, I would call your attention to the fact that so far the Learning Team has discovered in a 40 year history of this congregation that nearly every conflict has been about a social or political issue. [Only theological or quasi-theological issue was whether or not to affiliate with CUUPS 15 years ago.]

And, if you go to the UUA website you will see a picture of Bill Sinkford, the current UUA President. A year or so ago it was he who called for the use of more language of reverence in our Unitarian Universalist churches.

Nonetheless, there are only three words on the home page that would give you a clue that we were a liberal religious organization. The most prominent of these is the banner at the top of the page which mentions over *1000 liberal congregations*. The word congregation is used several other places on the page and down at the bottom left there is a link to the *Religious Leader* newsletter.

By comparison the headlines and major links point to:

UUA President Criticizes Networks over UCC Ad Refusal

Moving Forward After the Elections: UU Justice-Making

Sinkford Arrested while Protesting at Sudanese Embassy

Same Sex Wedding Planning Guide

State By State Coverage On Same Sex Marriage Issues

Please don't get me wrong, I believe that all of those items involve noble social and political activity. However, if I were some sort of spiritual seeker and I came upon the UUA home page not knowing anything about Unitarian Universalism - except that the Beliefnet.com questionnaire I just completed told me that I am one of them, - I might be just a little confused. I might even think I had mistyped something into Google - because I was looking for a religious organization.

"So what," you might ask, "is liberal religion if it is not a collection of political liberals?"

If you were here a few weeks ago, you may recall me mentioning politicalcompass.org, a website that is a sort of Meyers-Briggs-like socio-political-economic type indicator. When I told people that Lisa Willner and I and most UUs I knew scored in the same section of the profile as Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi and the Dalai Lama most of you seemed somewhat smugly satisfied with the results. I would suggest that merely points to the fact that we are a bunch of like-thinking political liberals more than it suggests that we are a congregation of liberal religionists.

I am by no means totally clear on this myself but here is some of what I think so far. I am sure that it will be subject to much personal revision.... as well as input from you all.

- Liberal religion is more about our questions. Liberal politics is more about our answers
- Liberal religion is coming to *our own conclusions* about our personal values concerning the most *intimate and ultimate* issues in our lives.
- Political liberalism is about acting on some of our values
- Liberal religion asks over and over again, "what should I do with my life?" - and allowing us to *come to our own conclusions*.
- Political liberals often try to convince others what they should do with their lives.
- Liberal religionists generally have not yet found "the Truth, the light and the way." They *do not place a period where God placed a comma*. They believe, *more will be revealed*.
- Like Andre Gide {pronounced-Zeed}, liberal religionists tend to, *Believe those who are seeking the truth; [and] doubt those who find it!* And, I believe that they would tend to agree with Gandhi that *we can pursue the truth but not possess it*.
- Liberal religionists routinely ask themselves, "am I in the right place to support my personal growth and spiritual journey now?"
- Political liberals tend to know what is right and what is wrong. They especially seem to know the "right way" things should be. I know that I certainly do. In this regard political liberals are not really all that different from political conservatives except of course that we "really do occupy the true moral high ground" - unlike the political conservatives.

- Perhaps political liberals and conservatives are both entrenched on the moral high ground.
- There are many more places where political liberals can feel at home than there are where liberal religionists can feel at home.
- I believe that liberal religionists can make room for political conservatives, moderates, progressives and liberals in dialogue and a common search for higher ground somewhere beyond the moral high ground.
- I believe that liberal religion is open, inclusive, expansive, multi-faceted and aspires to help us find strength for our journey by helping us find what is *highest and best* in ourselves and *permissioning* us to come to *our own conclusions*.

Personally, I believe that liberal religion can be a compelling salvation story for many more people than we currently serve. It can be the ultimate reality series - a story that can bring hope, redemption and transformation into people's lives.

As I said before, if we were to become a primarily liberal religious organization rather than a collection of political liberals or a group of people who don't fit in elsewhere, I suspect many of us could discover that this congregation may not be the most appropriate place for our current spiritual journey.

Please stay tuned in the months to come as we further explore this idea of liberal religion and where this congregation is headed.

For now, however, may we enjoy the holiday season however, whenever, wherever and with whomever we can.

Cheery Mishmash . . . Amen . . . and Asé

CLOSING SONG - *We've Come to Our Own Conclusions* Mary Grigolia

We have led different lives (3x),
And we've come to our own conclusions,
Yes, we've come to our own conclusions.

We have dreamed different dreams (3x),
We have vowed different vows (3x),
We have prayed different prayers (3x),
We have mourned different dead (3x),
Let us walk arm in arm (3x),

For we've come to our own conclusions,
Yes, we've come to our own conclusions.

CHALICE EXTINGUISHING - words by Elizabeth Selle Jones

CLOSING WORDS ~ by Marjorie Newlin Leaming

Remembering that the universe is so much larger
than our ability to comprehend,
let us go forth from this time together with the resolve
to stop trying to reduce the incomprehensible
to our own petty expectations,
so that wonder, that sense of what is sacred,
can open up our minds
and light up our lives.