

A Comfortable Place

*A Sermon in Anticipation of the Jewish Passover—
and the Congregation's Vote on a Building Loan*

Sunday, April 6, 2014

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Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Invocation by Peter Raible from Deuteronomy

Hymns:

Oh, We Give Thanks #1010. Hineh Mah Tov (How Good and How Pleasant) #392; Spirit of Life #123; Come & Go with Me to that Land #1018.

Choral Song: "Al Shlosa D'Varim," –A.E. Naplan

Reading:

*A poem by Rumi,
a Persian Sufi mystic who lived in the 1200s*

The Road Home

An ant hurries along a threshing floor
with its wheat grain,
moving between huge stacks of wheat,
not knowing the abundance all around.
It thinks its one grain is all there is to love.
So we choose a tiny seed to be devoted to.
This body, one path or one teacher.
Look
wider and farther.
The essence of every human being can see,
and what that essence-eye takes in,
the being becomes. Saturn. Solomon!
The ocean pours through a jar, and you might say it
swims inside the fish! This mystery gives peace to
your longing and makes the road home, home.

Sermon:

Every now and then someone tells me they like this congregation because it's comfortable. Often it's a newcomer, sometimes not. "I like this church, I feel comfortable here." I smile and nod in reply. But inside, I think, "You do? You feel comfortable? Well, just stick around."

I don't say that, but I think it. To me, a congregation is a place for relationships of depth and meaning, not for predictable ease. Of course, in meaningful relationships, there will be times of comfort and ease. It is worthwhile to remember them. But any relationship of depth has its times of challenge or discomfort. For example, you might find yourself here in a meeting of a committee, or maybe of the whole congregation, engaged in a disagreement of opinion or perspective. We have a meeting today, for example! Not always comfortable.

We try to foster a sense of belonging, respect for differences, and ways to be of service. We like to laugh, sing and eat. We look for compassion, inspiration and hope. Predictable ease, however, is not in our mission statement. "We come together to deepen our lives and be a force for healing in the world."

If you are fairly new here, consider that one day you could find yourself so connected to this community that you cannot imagine how you got along without it before. Imagine, down the road you might find yourself making friends and then having to say goodbye to some of them when they move away, or when you do. Some afternoon you might be sitting here for a memorial service or a funeral, recalling how a member touched our community, and touched your life. Here, you might feel the depth of your being stirred, your thinking challenged, and your joy doubled, but if we are doing our job, comfort is not our mode of operation.

In my aspiration, the work of a religious community is transformation. This includes personal growth, joy, depth, and connection. And it means promoting freedom and justice, healing human lives, and protecting the planet.

Transformation is not easy. It does not look simple when a caterpillar becomes a butterfly, and transformation does not *feel* easy when we are in the middle of it. It is not easy when a snake sheds its skin, or when *we* go through changes.

Transformation is not easy for us as individuals and not easy for human organizations.

And this congregation is in the middle of transformation. Alice Mann, an organizational church consultant, has a category for us. We are an “In-between congregation.”¹ UUSS is *between* the creation of our long-range plan and its completion, between this congregation’s approval of the Architectural Master Plan a few years ago, and the financing to enable construction to begin. Big journeys, challenging times in between past and future.

In the past couple of years UUSS has completed other journeys, gone between past and future. Our changes have stretched us, both as individuals and as an organization. These changes have stretched me so much that I’m 1/16th of an inch taller than I was before the members voted to call me to this position in January.

In human history, so much takes place in the time in-between origins of a journey and its completion. The Jewish observance of Passover begins next week. The story is all about the stress of the places in-between, and the tradeoffs between the remembered way things used to be and stretching toward something new.

In the story, Moses and his people are on their way to a new place. Moses faces down Egypt’s Pharaoh for the release of the Hebrews, who have been held in bondage for generations. After a series of plagues on Egypt—blood instead of water in the River Nile, swarms of lice and locusts, and the death of the Egyptians’ first born sons, Pharaoh lets the people go. Moses leads them out.

Then Pharaoh has second thoughts. He orders his chariots and horsemen to go after the Israelites! The army pursues them and pushes them to the edge of the Red Sea. As Moses stretches his hand out over the water, a strong east wind parts the sea, driving it back on both sides. The Israelites walk through on the sea bed, risking their lives in the space between shimmering walls of water, the waves trembling above them. That’s got to be a scary walk to freedom, and a brisk one!

The soldiers pursue them into the sea bed. Then, according the Bible, with a blast of wind from the nostrils of God, the waters fall back, down on the soldiers. Chariots, horses – everything

covered by a sea of water. The Hebrews make it safely out as the water closes behind them.

They are out of Egypt but not yet home. They are going to a home they’ve only heard about. They do not make a quick trip. They wander in the wilderness 40 years. As you might expect, they complain a lot. “I’m thirsty, and I’m weary.” “My feet hurt.”

In the just the first month, they riot against Moses three times. “What are his qualifications, anyway?” “Does he even have a plan?” They long for the times back in Egypt, when they could eat their fill, and sleep in the same place every night, even though they were slaves there. The security of those days now seems appealing, compared to the risk of the unknown.

Several times during this journey, Moses hikes up and down the mountain, to get close to his God. Moses moans to God about his restless people. Imagine, 40 years of hearing “Are we there yet?” Fortunately, God is coaching Moses on what to do and say. Sometimes God even sends a miracle.

“The people are complaining of hunger!” Moses reports. God sends manna from heaven. One morning the people wake up to find that edible grains have settled on the ground overnight, like the dew. They sweep up the grains, ground them into flour, and bake bread from the manna.

As the story goes, only a few Bible chapters later, the people are again complaining. “No more manna! We’re sick of it. Yuck! If only we had meat to eat,” they cry. “Oh, how we remember the fish we used to have in Egypt--for free, and the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions; but now there is nothing but this manna.” (How ungrateful.)

Moses goes back up the mountain: “Where am I to get meat to give to all these people? My Lord, why did you do this to me? Why did you give me this job? I didn’t ask to be their mother! I am not able to carry them alone; they are too heavy! If this is the way you are going to treat me, just kill me now.”

Instead of doing that, God teaches Moses how to delegate. God coaches him on recruiting volunteers, and on training and supporting them. God says: “Your people need a Nominating Committee.” And then God provides another miracle, for the peoples’ carnivorous hunger.

Flocks of quail are flying by on their migration, and a great wind knocks them all to the ground. The people go out and gather up the birds. They feast on roasted quail, and bread from the manna. Perhaps this the Bible's first mention of a Passover dinner, or seder. Or maybe it was a Service Auction Dinner to cheer folks up for the next part of their journey.

Their journey continues for a long time. They wonder: "Will the future be worth all we are putting ourselves through? Can't we go back to the way things used to be?" For the rest of their journey, this pattern continues: doubt... worry... complaint... remembering only the good parts of the way things used to be.... Then comes a renewed sense of hope.

They move on toward their new home.

Unlike Moses, as a minister I have never pursued coaching from God. I'm sure I can't afford it. But I do seek advice from seasoned experts and ministers. Several years ago I attended a workshop with the Reverend Peter Steinke, a consultant who is a liberal Protestant.ⁱⁱ You might call him a marriage and family therapist for congregations, providing support in times of change and stress. Often he's called in when there's a terrible conflict, when behaviors over a disagreement are not honoring the values a congregation espouses.

He listens well, but as an outsider he does not take a stand on a disagreement at hand. He gives advice for healing and better communication, yet he does not call himself a mediator. Mediation is too narrow, too close to the situation. In the workshop he told us, "I'm not interested in mediation but in levitation."

Hearing a gray-haired Lutheran praise *levitation* was amusing. But what he means is not bodily elevation, but lifting our vision. When dealing with a conflict in an organization or a family, his task is: "How I can get them out of their frozen places so they can move on?"

He calls for a wider view, a larger perspective on the action, stepping back from the fix in which we find ourselves. The late Rabbi Edwin Friedman called this "going up to the balcony" to take a bigger view of the problem. He said that lay leaders and ministers have the job of inviting everyone to take a balcony view. Getting above the stressful uncertainties, out of the details, and seeing a bigger picture.

What consultants advise is what Moses does in the story. In times of doubt and frustration, he hikes up the mountain. The walking restores him, and gives him new ideas. Going up the mountain gives him a wider view, so he can say to others, "Look wider and farther." This advice is one line in the poem "The Road Home," by Rumi, the Sufi mystic. He observes the struggle of a hurried little ant. It's darting along the floor of a threshing-room, clinging to one grain of wheat. It's worried that all there is to count on, is what it can carry right now.

He says the ant is "moving between huge stacks of wheat, not knowing the abundance all around." The poet urges the ant, "Look wider and farther." He says to the ant and all of us: See all the possibilities in front of you, and around you. See all the potential at hand. See the resources within you. Look wider and farther.

In the Bible story, after 40 years of travel, not all the people make it all the way to the Promised Land. Moses is one of those who don't make it. But before he dies, the aged man comes down from the mountain one last time. He says he will not arrive at the Promised Land with them, but he can see it. They cannot always see the better place ahead, but by keeping on, keeping together, and keeping the faith, they reach it.

Moses does not make the full journey, but his presence and encouragement along the way have made a difference.

During the steps we've made here toward making our building expansion a reality, I've learned from conversations with ministers who have been in a situation like ours right now. Across the continent are many Unitarian Universalist congregations who felt a similar range of feelings as we do now. In particular, our board of trustees, our building committee, Rev. Lucy and I have sought support from the UU Church of Davis.

That congregation had its own setbacks as it made the journey to a beautiful expansion and renovation of *their* main building. They kept working together, kept walking toward their goal. Their goal was not a promised gift of property from God, but a future home they envisioned together.

For us, I can envision that, as they have done, we will mark the progress of our project with parties and feasts along the way. We'll have better bread than manna, *of course*, and vegetarian options for those who do not eat quail. On the road from

groundbreaking to ribbon-cutting, there will be doubts, worry, some complaints, hard work, and a few refreshing surprises. I don't expect a miracle from afar, but I won't reject one if it comes.

Talking to others, and having them listen to me, always helps *me* to look up and look out, levitate my thinking and let go of some of my worries. It can help me to look wider, farther.

To see all the possibilities in front of us. To imagine the potential at hand. To remind myself and invite us all to give thanks for all the resources within us and among us, every step of the way.

Any thriving organization is always on a journey to a different place, a new life, new forms and functions. The promised land is always ahead of us. We may envision it but we cannot predict precisely what it will be like when we arrive. And we are always arriving. Always arriving, and always moving ahead. We are moving ahead together, and arriving together.

In the Bible story, the people guide themselves the rest of the way to their goal. Moses has inspired them, their trials have tested them, and they have encouraged one another. As they near their destination, the life of that community sounds and looks more and more like a celebration, with parties and prayers of thanksgiving, dances and feasting. They keep the faith, and keep on going.

Here, as we move through stressful times, we can remember that we have one another. We share support, encouragement, and patience.

We help one another carry the work of our congregation, in pursuit of our mission and our vision. We remember to look wider and farther.

We help one another keep a balanced perspective, keep the faith, and keep on going. And we help one another to appreciate the journey, and give thanks, every step of the way.

So may it be. Blessed be and amen.

ⁱ To see Alice Mann's Alban Institute books, including *The In-Between Church: Navigating Size Transitions in Congregations*, please see me.

ⁱⁱ To borrow a copy of Peter Steinke's *Health Congregations* or *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*, see me or search the titles online.