

It Is Written

A service by Michael Stark, August 20, 2006
Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church

Call to Worship

If you look at the back of your order of service, you will see the seven Unitarian Universalist principles. They might be familiar. Below these principles are the part you may hear less about, a living tradition which has many sources. Keep the idea of a living tradition in mind; you'll be hearing more about this idea today. But let's start with the idea that this living tradition has six sources, and among them you will find:

Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;

Yes, Jewish and Christian teachings are in there. Despite this, it often seems to me that UUs are comfortable hearing the thoughts of Thich Nah Hahn, but not so comfortable with Jesus of Nazareth. This somewhat reflects that fact that many UUs have come out of bad experiences with fundamentalist Christianity.

But there it is, the UUA put it in writing. There is something in Jewish and Christian teachings worthy of attention, and with all due respect to Thich Nah Hahn this is where I am headed today. I'm not going to focus on the discomfort, but rather on how Jewish and Christian teachings inspire me.

I am searching for two forms of inspiration when I read scripture. The first is an understanding of creation and humanity, the second is strength and support for putting my beliefs into action, to love our neighbors as ourselves. The second part is the hard part. Jesus teaches that we should not only love our friends, but also our enemies; that one should be more forgiving than seems humanly possible.

In fact, neither the inner spiritual life nor serving others without reservation is inherently easy, and I need a lot of help to even come close to that mark. Much of this help comes to me from the good people of this congregation; I also find some the help I need by looking at the Jewish and Christian teachings for the essential truths behind the literal scripture.

As we enter this hour of worship, let us be thankful for all the great spiritual writings and music that inspire us. Today we will sing hymns that are well-known tunes in Christian churches. One such Christian hymn is "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" – but since we are in a Unitarian Universalist church would you please rise as you are willing and able and join in singing #303, "We are the Earth Upright and Proud."

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Reading: Genesis as Read by Apollo 8 Crew

William Anders: For all the people on Earth the crew of Apollo 8 has a message we would like to send you.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.

Jim Lovell: And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day. And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.

Frank Borman: And God said, Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so. And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas: and God saw that it was good.

And from the crew of Apollo 8, we close with good night, good luck, a Merry Christmas, and God bless all of you - all of you on the good Earth."

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Part 1: Finding Meaning

In the beginning. Part of why I chose to start with Genesis is the obvious reason; that it is the Judeo-Christian creation myth. I chose the version as read from Apollo 8 in honor of my own personal religious journey.

First, creation myths. Genesis is certainly not the only one out there, but it is a perfectly respectable member of the family for creation myths. Last Easter, Carla Miller led a presentation of “I Stood Upon a Mountain” in which the narrator met several people who in response to the greeting “Wonderful World” invoked their own creation myth.

These myths included the universe coming from an egg that split to form sky and earth, the word of God as in Genesis, from a world of fire as some Native Americans believe, or in modern science’s Big Bang.

And while the rationalists among us may prefer the big bang, it is still a scientific theory. This means it tracks the observable evidence as known so far, but it also means it can be revised with new evidence, as Einstein’s Special Relativity did for Newtonian Mechanics, or be refuted outright, as geological evidence did to the Biblical literalist’s theory that Creation happened 6000 or so years ago.

And rational scientific theory can never fully answer the question of why. No matter how well you tease out and represent the laws of nature, you can’t fully explain why the laws are what they are. So in my mind, there is still room for mythology.

Read metaphorically, all the creation myths in “I stood upon a mountain” hold up pretty well. They are similar in that they start from a single source – be it the egg, the Word of God, or a world of fire – and the rest of creation as we know unfolds from this source.

This is not unlike how science tells us life unfolded from the big bang to the present day, as long as you don’t read mythology literally. The sequence in Genesis – light and dark, land and sea, living beings – is the right sequence as long as you don’t think it took exactly 6 days of 86,400 seconds each.

Anyway, creation is, and Genesis is as good a metaphor for how it unfolded as any other. The choice of reading Genesis as it was read from Apollo 8 is a personal one. I was 10 at the time, and the picture of the globe you see in front of this pulpit was taken by the Apollo astronauts and published for the world to see. Looking back, I think that this provoked my first religious impulse, a “wonderful world” moment of awe.

I had seen that religion was important to people the previous year, when I saw pictures of Israeli soldiers celebrating at the Western Wall, a holy site from which the Jordanians had banned Jews for 19 years.

But this photo from Apollo 8, along with the astronaut’s reading, was where it became personal. Our co-ministers have already talked a lot about the greater theological importance of these events, I will talk about how they mattered to me, although at the time I didn’t express things in the religious terms that I use now.

I think the main message I took, as cliché as it may sound, is that where there is life there is hope. Apollo 8 was launched at the end of 1968, which is a year I became much more

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aware of what was going on around me, whether it was the Vietnam war or the importance of baseball.

1968 was also a very bad year for our country. We faced the assassination of Dr. King and Robert Kennedy, a police riot at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, and the height of the war of Vietnam. The latter meant over 14,000 dead Americans for the year, including over 1,500 during the February Tet offensive alone. [casualty figures found at www.rjsmith.com/kia_tbl.html]

And amid all this, from way out there in space we saw our whole planet without the artificial boundaries we set up; and the astronaut's Christmas blessing was not just to America, but to "all of you on the good Earth". How cool is that?

A year that seemed to threaten all the progressive changes of the civil rights movement and the Great Society ended with a note of hope. And while the astronauts could have chosen many things to say, they chose Genesis, so this particular scripture will always have this association for me.

And as bad as 1968 was, we can look back and see that this hope was not unjustified. We did endure and did go forward, maybe chastened but not defeated. And what wonders we have seen. In 1968 the cold war was full on, we never imagined we'd see the Berlin Wall fall in our lifetime.

In 1968 homosexuality was still in the headshrinker's dictionary of mental disorders. Who would have imagined openly gay TV personalities such as Ellen deGeneres or a show like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, where gays are helping straights solve *their* issues.

And who in 1968 would have imagined women who can bench-press their husbands – Julie Foudy's wonderful one-liner – playing for a world championship in a sold-out Rose Bowl. In 1968 this was OJ Simpson's building. Indeed the arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice. And while Genesis the creation myth doesn't say this, a photograph and a Bible reading from space did say this to one 10 year old child. Wonderful World.

Besides hope for the world at large, scripture, particularly Christian scripture, offers hope to the individual. For me, this comes with the most powerful, comforting and troubling Christian ideas – the ideas of forgiveness and redemption.

These ideas are found throughout the Christian Bible – Jesus admonishing that he who has not sinned should cast the first stone at an adulteress. Jesus then telling this adulteress to go and sin no more. Jesus suggesting that forgiving seven times is not enough – seventy times seven is more the thing. Luke chapter 15, verses 11 through 32, better known as the parable of the prodigal son, ties these ideas together particularly well.

First, what is comforting and troubling about these concepts? The comforting part is straightforward – who among us hasn't felt the need for forgiveness, or for changing our ways for the better. If any such person is here, some of my talk will be a nap opportunity for you.

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The troubling part for me, at least as I was growing up, is that forgiveness seemed to be granted too readily. In my teen years I thought of this as the “Hitler deathbed conversion” problem. One of the things about growing up in the 1960s and 1970s is that the enemy toy soldiers were all still Nazis rather than Soviets. So Hitler was always the ultimate bad guy.

Anyway, the way I thought of Christianity, Hitler could convert at the last minute and not pay for his crimes, where Gandhi, who was a non-Christian but aware of Christianity, would roast in hell for all eternity. Even back then, I had the UU sensibility of wanting my beliefs to make sense, and this made no sense to me.

Now Christian theologians would point out that I was grossly oversimplifying, but this is how I thought growing up. It is also why as an adult I was delighted to find a religion that doesn't require reason to be tossed out the window. So let's break down the parable of the Prodigal Son; then we will hear the whole thing put to music.

The story starts with the prodigal son getting his inheritance while his father is still living, going off to foreign lands to blow all his money, at which point he goes hungry. Obviously a major mistake. The prodigal son must have come to an epiphany something like “what was I thinking?”

While few of us mess up on such a grand scale, all of us have had this “what was I thinking?” experience. There are things we've said or done that we wish we hadn't, things we haven't said or done that we wish we had, and all sorts of regrets associated with sex and drugs and rock and roll. The list goes on.

What comes next is the son's realization that his father's servants live better than he does now. He decides to return home and ask his father to forgive him and for a job as a servant.

The concept of forgiveness is an interesting one. Jaco, bless his heart, knew I was giving this sermon and lent me a book by James Rowe Adams titled From Literal to Literary: The Essential Reference Book for Biblical Metaphors. Unlike this sermon, which is organized around specific passages of scripture, this book is organized around concepts such as God, prayer, and yes, forgiveness; and examines how the concept is treated throughout Jewish and Christian scripture.

In describing forgiveness, Adams maintains that forgiveness is God's business and more than that it is not a good idea to put another person in control of your spiritual well-being, rather than God. On the other hand, an apology offered to another without expectations is OK. As an agnostic, I'm not sure I buy the God part, but I do like the idea of making amends regardless of how you expect a wronged party to react.

And this is exactly what the prodigal son is doing. He is not asking for his previous position to be restored, he is asking very little – just to be treated as the humblest of his father's servants.

The father's reaction is more generous than expected. He throws a feast and welcomes his son back into the family. The metaphor for straying from and then redemption in

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Christ is somewhat obvious, but I think the idea of redemption can be applied in a wider range of situations.

Redemption is the other term I looked up in Adams' book, and this term has an interesting evolution. In Hebrew scripture redemption is closely linked to the liberation of the Jews from oppression, be it by Egyptian, Babylonian or Greek.

It is only with Christianity that the biblical idea of redemption becomes associated with liberation from sin or despair. This idea I think has carried into Unitarian Universalism from its Christian source. We all have burdens, sometimes called baggage, that it would be quite liberating to lay down.

To have someone like the prodigal son's father treat you with generosity and understanding is doubly liberating. And this is what the more inclusive, liberal churches in the United States are trying to accomplish. In my unbiased opinion Unitarian Universalism is at the top of this list, but I have to give a shout out to my sister's United Church of Christ, the Quakers, and Reform Jews as well.

I think one of the great divides in American religion, if not THE great divide, is between the bridge builders and the wall builders, between churches that welcome all to lay down their burdens and find redemption, and those who only welcome the right kind.

The UCC in particular has put out a couple of television commercials that make their point – one contrasting themselves to a church with a velvet rope and a bouncer, and one where the church has ejection seats that toss out the wrong kind.

(<http://www.stillspeaking.com/resources/indexvis.html>)

The story of the prodigal son doesn't end there, though. There is still the matter of the other son. Those of you who have siblings might imagine how you'd react if your brother or sister were shown the same extravagant favor as the prodigal son, and after such major mistakes.

In this parable, the father reassures the second son that he will receive what he is due. By implication, that means the past has not been undone, the first son's lost money remains lost. He may well move forward and make himself a new fortune, but the old one is gone.

To me this ending is reassuring. It would smack too much of the easy forgiveness that bothered my younger self if the son had his entire fortune returned; particularly if it had come at his brother's expense.

In this parable, the prodigal son is redeemed without costing the other son – the one who had always been the dutiful one – what he was due. I may not have a precise handle on what grace and redemption mean, but I am sure it is not a zero sum game where one person winning redemption means another is diminished.

That is my take on the prodigal son, broken down into little parts with my commentary. I'm pleased to introduce Zoe Mulford, visiting from Manchester England, to tell the whole story in song.

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Reading: Matthew 25:31-46

From Today's New International Version

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

37 "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?

'40 "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

44 "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

45 "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

46 "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

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Part 2: Faith in Action

This reading from Matthew is my favorite Bible passage, as it is a clear call to justice. More than that, it links salvation and good works. Now we UUs have a different concept of salvation, if any at all, but I do believe we fall onto the side of good works mattering.

I tend to divide Christians into “John 3:16 Christians” who make belief in Jesus as their personal savior central to their theology, and “Matthew 25:40 Christians” who build their theology around faith in action. Some of my biggest heroes are Matthew 25:40 Christians; Jimmy Carter and Bono being the most notable in today’s world.

Faith in action has another meaning; the idea that our beliefs are dynamic, that as our knowledge and history changes our religious posture does too. The phrase “revelation is not sealed” is one I learned at this church. We already know that Biblical interpretations evolve; it’s been a long time since someone has openly preached that slaves should obey their masters, and it is hard to include the phrase about wives obeying their husband into modern wedding vows.

But I am also open to adding text written after the first century A.D. to scripture, right up to text written in my lifetime.

I will illustrate this by treating Dr. King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” as scripture. He was writing to white moderate preachers outlining the theological basis for non-violent direct action, and motivation for why they should speak out more forcefully on the issue of segregation – hence I think the term scripture should apply as it does to Paul’s letters.

But first, let’s talk about Matthew 25:40. I get myself into trouble when I use this in debates with religious conservatives on the Internet. They correctly point out that I am no theologian, and that I keep coming back to this one passage. In my defense, progressive Christians who know their stuff much better than I do also seem to return often to this passage – even from this very pulpit.

Two or three years ago an old activist comrade of mine, Wayne Merrill, came here to talk about his ministry to the homeless in DC. He made it very clear that from his Christian perspective this separation into saved and not saved based on helping the least among us is fundamental to Jesus’ message. As the last line of the reading said, “they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

Or as Michael Moore once put it in a speech, “You cannot get into heaven without a permission slip from the poor.” As a UU I certainly am not buying the Christian concept of heaven and hell, but I do subscribe to the larger message that how one treats the least among us is a window into one’s character.

This passage also stands as the representative for a perspective that permeates the entire Bible, both Hebrew and New Testament. I learned this by watching C-SPAN, of all things. I was channel surfing and saw a replay of Bono speaking to this year’s National Prayer Breakfast, with President Bush and many other notables in the audience. Most of them even seemed to be listening.

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Bono said that there are over 2,000 mentions of poverty throughout the Bible, and since he is a Christian and I'm not I'm inclined to believe him. Given that the most generous accounting lists less than a dozen passages condemning homosexuality, none of them in the gospels where Jesus is preaching, one can form a quantitative understanding of the relative importance of these two issues.

The other thing I want to mention about Bono's speech is that he was plugging the fight against extreme poverty around the globe. Extreme poverty is a trap that is virtually impossible to get out of without help, and has been described as being "too poor to live".

I did find some hope in Jeffrey Sachs' book The End of Poverty. The first piece of good news is that once the first steps have been made away from extreme poverty, countries as poor as Bolivia and Bangladesh can progress further on their own. The other piece of good news is that the resources are there to address extreme poverty.

Diverting about 20% of the US military budget to fight extreme poverty would meet the commitment posited by the UN's Millennium Development Goals, while leaving us with triple the military spending of Russia and China combined. The North Koreans and Syrians of the world are negligible in comparison, so unless we intend to fight entire world we can indeed make this change.

We UUs understand this compelling need to address poverty through our principles, particularly respecting the inherent worth and dignity of all people and working for justice, equity and compassion in the world.

But to combat poverty will require working with progressive Catholics like Michael Moore and Bono, and with progressive evangelicals like Jimmy Carter or Jim Wallis. Perhaps we can even find common ground with moderate evangelicals like Rick Warren. The common ground with all these Christians might be found in this passage, which is consistent with our principles if treated as a metaphor.

This brings me to the unfolding of new scripture, as represented by "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." To do this letter justice probably requires an entire sermon – auction bidders who are in the sermon hunt please take note. But I will hit some of the highlights.

In one sense, this letter is already in our scripture, as the first two paragraphs of Reading #584 in our hymnal are lifted from the letter. These paragraphs talk about a network of mutuality, and how injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. Stirring words, but there is much more to the letter.

Dr. King starts by outlining the steps that lead up to the non-violent direct action that landed him in jail. He then asks the rhetorical question, "Why direct action? Isn't negotiation a better path?" He answers himself by saying that the purpose of direct action is precisely to foster the tension needed to compel negotiation that otherwise would never happen.

Remember, Dr. King was writing to moderate white clergymen, who supported him in principle while saying "not so fast" or "too soon". Later in the letter, King writes,

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“Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was ‘well-timed’ in the view of those who have not suffered unduly.”

This passage speaks to a lot of us who are quite comfortable, myself included. Why marriage equality now, when there’s a war on? But in my mind, respect for people’s worth and dignity should not be deferred, and this passage is a useful and needed reminder.

There is a lot of anti-oppression work that goes on in UU churches and the larger denomination, mainly aimed at sexism, racism and homophobia. But there are all sorts of groups who raise their voices.

At the 2005 UUA General Assembly, I attended a workshop on trans-racial adoption, led by Asian-American youth who had been adopted from overseas – not a crowd that one would intuitively expect, yet they had something to say.

This can happen here, too. We had Lea Carlson add transgendered people to our “Welcoming Congregation” certificate in the foyer; who knows who might be the next to raise their voices right here at Paint Branch.

Another point King made was to provide a means of distinguishing just and unjust laws. He calls a just law “a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God.” Many UUs still have issues with the concept of God, but our UU principles are exactly what is meant by moral law – at least I think so.

In particular the first and seventh principles tell us what we are expected to respect – the inherent worth and dignity of **all** people and the interconnected web of **all** Creation. The seventh principle actually uses the word “existence”, not “Creation”, but is this really a large stretch?

This was a pretty fast blitz through Dr. King’s letter, and I will end with his attitude towards extremism, and what ours should be, as well. Dr. King wrote at great length his initial dismay at being labeled extremist, whereas he saw himself as falling between accommodation of and violent resistance towards segregation.

But upon reflection, Dr. King took satisfaction being tied with extremist prophets such as Jesus, Amos, Paul, and Martin Luther; as well as Jefferson and Lincoln. For each of these voices he poses a rhetorical question, for example, – “Was not Martin Luther an extremist: ‘Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God’”

As the quote at the top of the order of service indicates, it is important to decide what kind of extremists we want to be. I answered in part for myself by talking about global poverty, and about people who are still raising their voices to demand that their inherent worth and dignity be respected. What sort of extremist do you want to be?

Our last hymn will be familiar to those who came out of Christian churches as “Onward Christian Soldiers”, written by Arthur Sullivan of Gilbert and Sullivan fame. I thought this was much older, but the original captures the triumphal spirit of Victorian England – and perhaps of the less attractive aspects of today’s America. But please rise as you are willing and able to sing the UU version with recast lyrics – Hymn 114, “Forward Through the Ages”.

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Closing Words

Scripture can intersect our lives in unanticipated ways – be open to it

A simple story from scripture can make a profound point – listen

Scripture sounds many calls to action – act

And scripture is still being written. Wonderful World.