

The Holy Cycles of Life

— An Easter homily by Jaco B. ten Hove — Paint Branch UU Church — April 8, 2007 —

[Immediately follows Y. M. Barnwell's *Spiritual*, performed by the Choir, and earlier Hymn #1000, *Morning Has Come*, plus a story from Africa called *Sis Moon and Brer Rabbit* (about why we have Easter bunnies) and a Flower Processional.]

Each sunset leads us through another night to the sunrise, when morning has come again, and we greet the dawning day with the light of hope shining anew.

We know how this works: night and day; sunset, sunrise. We trust this seemingly eternal cycle, for it guides our own individual nights and days, which—sembled together over some years—we call a life. So it has been for our kind over countless centuries.

What we *can't* know are the particulars, the unpredictable specifics that push and pull us along the pathway of life, weaving personal patterns into the everyday/everynight cycle that holds us in a much larger embrace.

Yes, we can't know at sunset if or how the next day will begin. At dawn we might open our eyes to see that life abounds and open our hearts to welcome its richness among us. Or we might find trouble and woe awaiting our awakening body and spirit, perhaps with challenges that call us into severe struggle.

There are the treasured times of joy and fulfillment, such as when we land the right job or promotion, or have an excellent time with a good friend. Moments like these are, of course, co-mingled with the terrible times, when we might suffer a great personal loss or setback, or agonize over a vicious war waged in our name.

Some days hold *both* abounding richness *and* troubling struggle; sometimes we find either one for many mornings at a time—until something changes, often unpredictably. We just can't know, *for certain*, what will unfold as we go marching in the light of each day's holiness and resting in each night's holiness. Life is a riddle and a mystery.

We can't even know how long we'll each be a part of it all, before we die and our personal energies shift into another form, to return in some new fashion, at which point one new morning will signal our last day in this very human form. That ever-present truth of an eventual, inevitable ending may haunt us, and indeed, as Sis Moon noticed, some "people live in fear and misery thinking that life is nothing but death."

So Sis Moon enlisted Brer Rabbit to remind and reassure everyone that even after death, life goes on. The particular forms of life change, predictably yet unpredictably, and the part we play in it will change, but we can take courage from the example Sis Moon offers. As the evenings warm up in the Spring and into the summer we can go outside much more comfortably and watch the moon move through its seemingly eternal cycles, leaping across the sky by about a fist's distance each night.

And we can also notice that from its round brightness it shrinks and all but disappears each month—into a phase that is tellingly called the *New Moon*—"new" because we know that it will now begin to return again into its fullness, living out the cosmic rhythm of waning and waxing, waning and waxing.

At this time of the year, we also notice that the flowers, in their vast variety, perform a similar miracle, by bursting forth—temporarily—and then gradually disappearing back into the earth, as the seasons also follow our planet's reassuring yearly patterns.

Meanwhile, as another interconnected part of this throbbing web of existence, our human ancestors have long been noticing and telling similar stories about our place in the larger embrace of such cycles. We humans are also a reflection of the patterns woven throughout the whole fabric of our world.

For instance, the Easter story told by centuries of Christians has been an especially vivid way of noticing that even as life leads to death in one form, it offers hope for other paths into the greater whole of existence. In the life and death of the great teacher, Jesus of Nazareth, we see how hope is renewed even in the face of loss.

Jesus died, very sadly, on Good Friday, but continued to live on in the eyes and hearts of his followers, as celebrated three days later on Easter Sunday. It is not a coincidence that this story is lifted up in the spring, as our part of the planet is also renewing itself and demonstrating how the harsh winter blanket is only a temporary loss. Life emerges again in new forms but in very old patterns, and we tell the stories, we embody the metaphors that remind and reassure us of our place in the flow of planetary, cosmic history.

It's also important for the Easter Story to include Good Friday, when Jesus was put to death, as an acknowledgement that without endings there would really be no new beginnings. Sunset leads to sunrise, the empty new moon leads to a shiny full moon, death leads to renewed life, as the earth transforms last season's flowers gone into today's beauty.

Yes, we can't really know what the unfolding future has in store for us; life is a mystery. But we can rest in the larger patterns that hold us and carry us all forward, together—the cycles that *for certain* include us and help open our eyes to see that life abounds and abides, with and without us. Thus may we release at least some of the fears that tend to bind us too tightly, and open our hearts as well to let the light of love shine *here* upon each face; and *now*, with those others nearby with whom we can share the spirit of each new morning, like this one!

Life in its rich busyness often distracts us from the appreciative way, but along comes a holiday like Easter, which for me is a call to pause and notice the beauty and renewal even as we honor the struggles and loss. Without such a broader view, we might mis-read the natural rhythms of our world, rhythms that require both sunrise and sunset, *renewable* rhythms that hold us all in a larger embrace.

Beautiful old Sis Moon reminds us that even though life is a mystery and we can't know exactly what will unfold for us next, we can know *for certain* that the holy cycles of rebirth will provide a balance to our lives, encouraging us to let the lights of hope, peace and love here shine upon each face. On this Easter, 2007, may these bring faith to guide our journey home.