

## **AFTER THE STORM**

A Sermon Presented by the Rev. Phyllis L. Hubbell

Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church

October 5, 2008

### **CALL TO WORSHIP**

“Today is the first day of the rest of our lives.”

But yesterday there may have been a storm in your old life,

A bad one, a category four or five hurricane of a storm.

We come here each week, happy or sad, laughing or crying,

Rich, poor, Ph.ds and high school drop outs,

Knowing that storms come into each of our lives

Seeking supplies for the next one.

Milk and toilet paper we'll get at the grocery,

Here we seek to understand why the storm hit us three times

While our neighbor was untouched.

Here we seek the courage to start over.

Here we seek to know that we are not alone.

We are not alone. We are never alone.

Come, let us worship together.

### **SERMON**

In the book *Without a Map*, Meredith Hall describes her early life in a small New England town in the 1960s. Her parents divorced when she was in her early teens. Her mother found a new boyfriend and a full time job. At sixteen, Meredith was lonely and hurting. When Anthony, a good looking college senior with a green MG took an interest in her that summer she was

flattered. The night before he was to leave for college they had furtive sex on the beach. It was her first time. It wasn't rape, but it wasn't making love either. A few months later she discovered she was pregnant.

Anthony didn't write or call. When she told him about the baby, he wanted nothing to do with her or it. Meredith didn't tell anyone she was pregnant for months. Eventually a teacher noticed. The school expelled her. The church that had loved her and taught her about love and forgiveness, didn't want her any more. She would be a bad influence on the others. Her school friends refused to speak to her. Her mother sent her to live with her father while she was pregnant. No-one from the church called. Her father and his new wife hid her in their home, forbidding her to go outside until after the baby was born and given away. The doctors drugged her so that she slept through procedure as they removed her baby for adoption before she woke.

Soon after that Meredith traveled to Europe and began wandering from country to country. She walked or hitched rides, stole small amounts of money for food, sold off her possessions except the clothes she wore. Meredith stopped talking. Then she stopped eating. She nearly died. Somehow, something in her awakened. She returned to the states. The storm had passed over, and she was left to begin her life again. Her father and mother still were alive. She had to find work. Friends. Love. *Without A Map*, her best selling autobiography, tells how she succeeded.

Most of us, I dare not say all, but nearly all of us, encounter storms in our lives. Some are mere tropical storms. Others feel like Hurricane Katrina. Some are brief and violent – rape, a mugging, a spouse's fatal heart attack. Others stall overhead with relentless destruction over many years – prejudice, child or spousal abuse, addiction, bankruptcy, eviction. These storms are the nightmare gifts that keep on giving – keeping us awake nights, stalking our days. They return to keep us erupting in anger, huddled in fear, unable to trust, unable to grow, unable to love. Long after the winds have died down and the floods have subsided, the water damage may suck away all of our energy for living.

How do we let go? How do we heal? The damage itself is hard enough, but the open wounds we carry offer breeding ground for new damage. We may become defensive, oversensitive, pushing away new friendships, new love. The storm may shatter our faith, leading us to question the goodness of any God, any universe, that would allow such things to happen. If our church or

our friends at church appear unsympathetic, if we think some are taking sides against us, if we think we hear them blaming us instead of taking us in their arms, we are wounded again. We thought the church stood for the bedrock values they taught us. Now we may discover that the people who attend, maybe even the ministers who have stood as role models to us for years, seem to fail us, even betray us when we need them most.

Ministers hear such stories often from people who finally one day dare to give our churches a try, hoping that we will be different. We like to think that Unitarian Universalist churches are different. Yet, our members, our ministers, are also flawed, imperfect people, striving to live out our values, but failing in big and small ways. And we, too, are flawed, imperfect people who may hear blame where none is intended, who may be unable to distinguish the voices of loving friends who want to help us to grow from rejection.

How do we keep from picking at the scabs? How do we heal the wounds that prevent us from moving on? From learning who we can trust? From being attracted to people capable of sustaining relationships? From becoming people who are able ourselves to be good spouses, parents, friends, and yes, church members and trustworthy ministers. Not perfect, but good. Psychologists have written best selling books on this subject and I certainly commend them to you. But we are a church, not psychologists. We speak easily about societal problems, but what does our religion, our faith, our spirituality have to offer when times are hard personally? Where is there comfort for the afflicted? Where are there opportunities for healing?

We come here with many different theologies. This faith of ours recognizes the presence of ambiguity, of uncertainty, of differences of opinion about fundamental religious questions. That makes it difficult to offer set answers to hard questions. But the truth is that easy answers often fail us when we need them most. To preach the existence of an all knowing, all powerful, ever present loving God who washes away our failures and offers us unending love may be comforting, but is of little help when that God seems to be saying “no.” “No,” when we ask that our innocent child be healed. “No,” when a hurricane destroys our home and drives our employer into bankruptcy.

The answers we need most during the storm’s aftermath are the hard answers. These answers take hours of reflection or prayer. These answers

lie hidden in the sometimes conflicting words of wisdom from the wisest men and women of all faiths and all times. They may require long years of study to make our own. These answers may require us to sit in silence listening to those we may distrust, listening and breathing, listening and weeping, speaking our truth in turn in the same respectful, sacred silence.

We will not reach the same answers. Answers may not even be what some of us need to heal. We may find comfort in the music. We may find solace in the beauty of this sacred space where people have come with their joys and sorrows over many years. We may need acceptance that we have never been sure of elsewhere. We may need a place to come out as who we really are.

We may just need to feel that we are not alone. This room is filled with the compassionate spirits of parents who have miscarried; with children and adults who have struggled with depression, questioning whether there is anything to live for; with people who come here after losing their jobs; homeowners who face the loss of a home; newly separated men and women scared of a future alone; women and men struggling with addictions; perhaps even people who face criminal charges for actions taken in a time of weakness or foolishness. We are not alone.

Often, we come here for the first time because we are in need of something a therapist can't give us. This religious community offers us inspiration, beauty, and hope. It offers us contact with something greater than ourselves, which some here call God, but which has no one name. It offers us membership in a community of wounded souls, striving to make our lives mean something, striving to grow into better, more whole people -- seeking compassion, doing justice, walking humbly with the Spirit of life and love as we discover it in our lives.

As our Jewish neighbors prepare themselves for the new year and our Muslim neighbors complete their month of fasting and reflection, may we, too, consider our lives and what lies ahead. It is never too late to let go of the past. It is never too late to start again. It is not an easy road we travel together. Nor is it free from stormy weather. But rainbows are always waiting beyond the clouds. Together, we can share our burdens.

Let us let go of the past and embrace our future. We are not alone. We are never alone.

Source

Hall, Meredith. *Without a Map*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2007.