

# **“To Begin Again in Love”**

**2 October 2005  
Unity Church-Unitarian**

**Worship Leader: Rob Eller-Isaacs**

## **Reading: As for the World – Yehuda Amichai**

As for the world,  
I am always like one of Socrates’ students:  
walking beside him,  
hearing his seasons and generations,  
and all I can do is say:  
Yes, certainly that is true.  
You are right again.  
It is exactly as you have said.

As for my life, I am always  
Venice:  
Everything that is streets  
is in other people.  
In me - love, dark and flowing.

As for the scream, as for the silence,  
I am always a shofar:  
hoarding, all year long, its one blast  
for the terrible Days of Awe.

As for the deeds,  
I am always Cain:  
a fugitive and a vagabond before the deed that I won’t do,  
or after the deed that  
can’t be undone.

As for the palm of your hand,  
as for the signals of my heart  
and the palms of my flesh,  
as for the writing on the wall,  
I am always an ignoramus: I can’t  
read or write  
and my head is empty as a weed,  
knowing only the secret whisper  
and the motion in the wind  
when a fate passes through me, to  
some other place.

## **Reading: Jonah 1:4-6**

But the Lord let loose a hurricane, and the sea ran so high in the storm that the ship threatened to break up. The sailors were afraid, and each cried out to his god for help. Then they threw things overboard to lighten the ship.

Jonah had gone down into a corner of the ship and was lying sound asleep when the captain came upon him. 'What, sound asleep?' he said. 'Get up, and call on your god.'

### **Reading: My Dead Friends – Marie Howe**

I have begun,  
when I'm weary and can't decide an answer to a bewildering question

to ask my dead friends for their opinion  
and the answer is often immediate and clear.

Should I take the job? Move to the city? Should I try to conceive a child  
in my middle age?

They stand in unison shaking their heads and smiling – whatever leads  
to joy, they always answer,

to more life and less worry. I look into the vase where Billy's ashes were –  
it's green in there, a green vase,

and I ask Billy if I should return the difficult phone call, and he says, yes.  
Billy's already gone through the frightening door,

whatever he says I'll do.

### **Sermon: "To Begin Again In Love" – Rob Eller-Isaacs**

I'm thinking of running away. I hoped that I could stay asleep down deep below decks in the hold. I dreamed I could deny the work I have to do. I set sail in my mind for Tarshish far beyond the farthest shore and so do you. But you and I can hear the captain coming. "What, sound asleep?" He'll say. "Get up and pray to your God."

We gather, this new morning just before the truest turning of the year. Tomorrow night at sundown both Ramadan and Rosh Hashanah will begin. For Jews Rosh Hashanah, the New Year is a time for rejoicing, a time to tell the old strong stories, a time for apples and honey. But after the festivities, after the feasting, when the dancing ends and the last notes still sound in the air we're taught to turn immediately to pursue the hardest work we ever have to do. Both Jews and Muslims set aside a period in the midst of what, for most of us is the busiest time of the year to consider our lives, to realign our relationships and to atone for our sins.

The traditional text for Rosh Hashanah is Genesis 22:1-18 called the binding or sacrifice of Isaac. In Hebrew it is called, the *Akedda*. It is among the most troubling stories in scripture. An old man, Abraham is commanded by God to make of his son a blood-offering. His faith in God is strong, stronger even than his fierce father-love for the son of his late years, stronger even than his own good sense. And so he takes the boy up on the mountain and prepares to sacrifice him there. He would have done it too. The knife was in his hand. His hand was raised to strike when the Angel of the Lord said, "Do not raise your hand against the boy." So as the year begins we're asked to wrestle with the story of a stupefying faith.

*As for the scream, as for the silence,  
I am always a shofar:  
hoarding, all year long, its one blast  
for the terrible Days of Awe.*

The High Holy Days, the ten days which begin with Rosh Hashanah and end with Yom Kippur are also called, the Days of Awe. Awe takes hold of us when we experience reverence, fear and wonder in the presence of a power far greater than our own. We are meant to be awe-struck as each new year begins. We are meant to seek out that awe at the turning of the year, not by running toward it but by slowing down enough to really see.

Ten days, Jews set aside ten days to live the way we ought to live every day of the year. Ten days to think about our lives, to confess our shortcomings and our sins, to make amends and to begin again in love.

Jews have a story for every occasion. Two stories frame the Days of Awe. We begin with Abraham and Isaac and we end with Jonah, the Reluctant Prophet. The Book of Jonah, dates from the 4<sup>th</sup> century before the common-era. Like Micah, Jeremiah and the other older prophets, Jonah hears the voice of God. "Go to the great city of Nineveh, go now and denounce it, for its wickedness stares me in the face." Unlike his fellow prophets though, when Jonah heard the voice of God he turned away.

In fact he ran away. He boarded a ship bound for Tarshish as far from Nineveh as it was possible to go. On Jonah's map Nineveh was at one end of the world and Tarshish at the other. But the Lord let loose a hurricane and you know what happened then. I've always loved the story. In Sunday school in second grade we made a great fish out of chicken wire and paper mache. I remember watching it take shape, the sound of tearing newspaper, the smell of the wall-paper paste. Oh how I shuddered as I imagined three days in the belly of that great fish, one even bigger than the huge one we had made. It might have been that Sunday I first began to realize I couldn't run away.

We've begun the new church year with a series of services we call "Our Good News." And we do have good news to share. We celebrate love wherever it rises affirming all the many ways good people choose to live. We recognize the glowing coal of truth in every true religion refusing to submit to any ideology. We welcome to our fold all those of gracious heart and open mind who with us hope to enter through the gates of freedom. This prophetic message, this good news is ours to share. But instead of preaching our good news to all the nations, we hide behind the shield of our reluctance. While millions languish in the wasteland of antiquated, abusive theologies, we smugly refrain from telling the truth as we see it for fear of being seen as evangelical. And why? For the same reason Jonah tried to run away. He was afraid to take responsibility. He was afraid to step into the public square and say what God demanded that he say. And so are we.

There are many ways reluctance can play out in public life, but it shapes our own more intimate relationships as well. We hesitate to tell hard truth to one another. It seems far easier to dodge the obligation. In the short run it may even seem wise. There are many good reasons to refrain from confrontation. After all, one could be wrong. One wouldn't want to judge. And it takes an awful lot of emotional energy and just plain courage to say things like: "I felt excluded" or "Why did you lie?" or "How could you treat her that way?"

In intimate relationships the prophetic takes the form of loving confrontation. It's hard to do. It makes us uncomfortable. At first we fear being rejected. But soon we realize that hard truth told with courage and with love inevitably strengthens our relationships and then we know what we actually fear most is inescapable commitment. Even as we long for love it scares us half to death. It's only when the pain becomes too much to bear we take the risk of saying that it hurts.

Tell me this: When you really listen carefully, when your monkey-mind subsides and you hear your own true voice, who does it say is your neighbor? This is a tough one. Most, though not all of us, lead relatively comfortable lives. Our church is fairly insular, our social lives predictable and safe. This place is such a treasure even if the prophet in me sometimes sees it as a prison. Listen: I'm at least as reticent as you are to reach out to meet the neighbors we have never known. But deep down below the deck where I've been sleeping I can hear approaching footsteps. Soon the captain will find me and he will say, "What, still sound asleep? Get up and call on your God."

I spend far too many days and nights in willful ignorance. Like a foolish child I keep my eyes closed tight and call out, "You can't see me." You and I can't live in the full glare of either wickedness or beauty. We retreat by necessity into the opaque confines of our little lives only coming out when the pain becomes intolerable or when awe just opens up our eyes. By now I hope you know I'm not indulging in a diatribe or trying to inspire you to take unreasonable risks by making you feel ashamed. Ken Kesey told us, "We're all bozos on this bus." Far be it from me to judge anyone who falls short, as I so often do, of true compassion.

Still, the world wants more from us than we're prepared to give. That's why I'm grateful for the framework of our faith. I love the way it calls me out of hiding. I love the way it teaches me to borrow courage from the dead,

*I have begun,  
when I'm weary and can't decide an answer to a bewildering question*

*to ask my dead friends for their opinion  
and the answer is often immediate and clear.*

*Should I take the job? Move to the city? Should I try to conceive a child  
in my middle age?*

*They stand in unison shaking their heads and smiling – whatever leads  
to joy, they always answer...*

Whatever leads to joy, to joy, not to the simple pleasure of the easy way but to the hard-won satisfaction that can only come with the struggle of deep self-reflection.

Tomorrow night at sundown the Days of Awe begin. Why not light a candle as the sun goes down? Why not sit awhile in silence and think about this one sweet life, this gift we share. Then bring to mind the ones you love and ask what needs to be forgiven. Why not light a candle as the sun goes down each evening for the next ten days? Then get up in the morning and just for those ten days attempt to live the life you long to live. Let go of your reluctance. I'll try if you will.

So be it and amen.