

“Who Do They Say That I Am?”

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Unity Church–Unitarian

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CALL TO WORSHIP:

We cannot shrink from suffering if we are to live fully.

We cannot turn away from grief and loss.

But neither must we submit to violence or sanction cruelty.

To face suffering and accept it so that the seeds of hope and life can take root will enlarge the spirit.

But to accept the tyranny of an oppressor who sows despair and hopelessness will destroy the spirit.

May we have the wisdom to know the difference and the courage to face it.

Come, let us worship together.

READING: from The Divinity Address — Ralph Waldo Emerson

Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty, he lived in it and had his being there. Alone in all history he estimated the greatness of man. One man was true to what is in you and me. He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his World. He said in this jubilee of sublime emotion, “I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think.”...He spoke of miracles; for he felt that man’s life was a miracle, and all that man doth, and he knew that this daily miracle shines as the character ascends. But the word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain.

READING: The Second Coming — William Butler Yeats

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;

Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out

When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight; somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with a lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

READING: from Proverbs of Ashes — Rebecca Parker

When Jesus' crucifixion serves as a metaphor for spiritual processes of transformation, or a mystical illumination of God's abiding presence, violence is justified as sacred. In this mode the infliction of pain can be re-inscribed as a holy action. Violence can be justified as a disciplining of the spirit...

The spiritualizing of suffering makes God the author of all pain, who can use pain to edify or purify human beings. Dying and rising with Christ can easily become crucifying parts of ourselves in internal purgation of the unholy; or crucifying other human beings for a holy cause.

The mysticism of the cross teaches that violence is God's way of transforming people and communities into greater spiritual well-being. It clouds the realities of human violence in a haze of spiritual glory.

God is not the author of human violence and does not sanction cruelty and torture. To inflict pain on ourselves is not virtuous and to inflict it on others is not edifying or transforming. Sparing the rod does not spoil the child. It is not godly to beat our children or ourselves.

We have to face pain more squarely. When grief and loss come to us, we cannot comfort ourselves by saying God is testing us or offering us a blessing without this divine sanction.

We have to learn to grieve full out and face forward, without covering over the realities of human cruelty and violence.

The dark night of the soul is this difficult. It is a night without comfort, without shield, without warmth. T.S. Eliot expressed this in "East Coker"

*I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God.
 ...wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; yet there is faith
But faith and hope and love are all in the waiting.*

SERMON: Who Do They Say That I Am? — Rob Eller-Isaacs

This morning we join our Christian brothers and sisters all around the world who have already begun the season of contemplation and penitence, which leads to Easter. The Lenten tradition goes back to the earliest days of Christianity. In many ways it parallels the Days of Awe in Jewish tradition or the fast of Ramadan in Islam. It, like Advent, is intended as a time to set aside distractions and self-indulgence in order to consider one's priorities, to make amends with those one has wronged and to bring one's life back into alignment.

Religious liberals are unfamiliar with this scale of religious practice. We don't know how it feels for the entire community to forgo desirable activities or favorite foods as a way to reinforce a contemplative season. Our individualism combines with our inherent suspicions about centralized authority to make such unified action unlikely. But there are moments when we get a glimpse of how shared religious practice feels. When the congregation settles into silence and seems to breathe as one there is an intimation of the power of shared practice. When we sing a cappella and it really works, or when we witness our children Coming of Age with the whole church cheering them on, a sense of solidarity takes hold, a sense of shared purpose born of shared practice. There are lessons to be learned from the Lenten traditions and a variety of ways which we as individuals and perhaps even as a community might benefit from it.

What shall we give up for Lent? Candy, liquor, meat — I doubt we could come to consensus on what best to sacrifice. But wait, I have an idea. Let's give up "The Passion" for Lent. I'm not usually the type to condemn a film I haven't seen. It goes against the grain. But I know all I need to know about Mel Gibson's film to recommend against seeing it. The film is the latest and most invasive example of a theological perspective, which is antithetical to all we represent.

I want to draw a distinction between Christianity and Christendom. Our free church is nourished and informed by Christianity. Christianity is a faith tradition, which reflects the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Christendom yokes that life and ministry to the ambitions of empire. What began, I'm convinced, as a faith born of love, was perverted by the desire for centralized power. What began as an empowering faith — a faith that encouraged service, healing and compassion — was twisted by Christendom so that it might serve the goals of subjugation and conscription. The suffering of Jesus has been used by what bell hooks calls "dominator culture" to justify human suffering. By making a film that asserts that the key to Christian faith is the magnitude of the violence inflicted upon Jesus, Mel Gibson takes his place in the long, appalling line of patriarchs who in the name of Jesus preach a hateful, abusive theology.

What about our much-vaunted commitment to theological diversity? Don't Mister Gibson and his cohorts have a right to their opinion? Of course they do. But "The Passion" is not an invitation into conversation. The literalists who have catapulted this film into first place on the list of highest-grossing releases are not hoping for a conversation. They believe Mister Gibson is telling the truth. They believe in the triumph of violence. And if they are not stopped, people and principles we hold dear will be in gravest danger. I resist alarmist language but, my friends, I believe we are on the verge of cultural warfare in this country and that you and I cannot afford to cross our arms and wait and see.

I resist dualistic thinking. I hesitate to impugn the motives of the misguided millions flocking to the theaters. But it matters what people believe. History has shown that people who believe that

suffering is redemptive, fundamentalists of every stripe, medieval thinkers all, will justify violence as sacred. John Dominic Crossan, the great Roman Catholic theologian, co-founder of the Jesus Seminar, makes good sense when he calls "The Passion" religious pornography. And no, I won't go see it and neither should you.

Matthew, Luke and Mark all tell the same story. Mark tells it most simply.

Jesus and his disciples set out for the villages of Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do they say that I am?' They answered, 'Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, others one of the prophets.' Peter replied, 'You are the Messiah.' Then he gave them strict orders not to tell anyone about him.

Jesus goes on to predict his arrest, his trial and his death. When Peter reacts against his master's prophecy Jesus says, 'get thee behind me Satan, you think as men think not as God thinks.' When Peter blurts out that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus neither confirms nor denies Peter's claim. Instead he gives strict orders that the disciples are not to tell anyone. I don't believe he insists on secrecy because he's afraid. He's already well aware of what's to come. He knows he will soon be arrested and tried and that then he will be crucified. But I don't think he's afraid. I think Jesus is concerned that people will expect him to lead a coup d'état against the ruling elite. Peter is forever trying to get Jesus to become the literal King of the Jews. Jesus has no intention of seizing power by force. His life and ministry are testament to the power of compassionate cooperation.

A literary allegory from another source may help to make this clear. Jose Saramago, the Portuguese Nobel Laureate, in his masterpiece entitled Blindness, tells the story of a nameless city in which a relentless plague has caused almost everyone to lose their sight. It begins when one man quite unexpectedly goes blind. His terrified wife rushes him to the office of a nearby ophthalmologist. Finding no observable damage or indications of disease the doctor assumes the blindness is both psychosomatic and temporary. Then he himself goes blind as do all those seated in his waiting room. Widespread panic ensues as blindness spreads like wildfire through the city. The government takes immediate and repressive measures to attempt to isolate the danger. The blind are forced into an abandoned asylum where conditions quickly become intolerable.

For some strange reason one person retains her sight. No character is named in the story. The one who still can see is identified only as the doctor's wife. The question she must ask herself is this. Should I let people know I still have my sight or should I keep it a secret? Here is where the Saramago story intersects with the story I told you from Mark. Like Jesus, the doctor's wife decides to keep the fact that she can see a secret. Had she revealed her unique gift she would either have been thrust into leadership against impossible odds or else been drowned in a sea-swell of agonizing envy. Instead she used her gifts to help the others find their way.

Jesus might have simply been another hero. He could have fallen into line with those who have always led us into battle: the few, the strong, the proud. But Jesus would not bow to old conventions. He would not allow Peter and the others to wield him like a weapon but insisted instead that they lay down their temporal ambitions. Was he a healer? They would also heal. Was he a leader? They would also lead. Was he a preacher? They would also preach. Was he the child of God? They would also realize in time that we are all God's children.

While Christendom has come to worship Jesus as a God, we would follow Jesus as a man. While fundamentalists of every stripe would have us see their version of the truth as true and threaten those of us who don't believe with hell and worse, we have no choice but to stand firm in our belief both in the power of love and in the ultimate triumph of compassionate cooperation.

So let us then join hands and hearts with those around the world who see beyond the fearful lies that masquerade as truth. Let us renew and strengthen our commitment to proclaim the gospel of transforming love. In this season of relinquishment let us sacrifice the safety of our reticence and stand strong against those who would turn back the tide of human liberation.

May it be so and amen.