

“Why Me Lord?”

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Unity Church-Unitarian**

**Worship Leader: Rob Eller-Isaacs
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Reading: from Moby Dick (“The Hyena”) – Herman Melville

There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at no ones expense but his own. However, nothing dispirits, and nothing seems worthwhile disputing. He bolts down all events, all creeds and beliefs, and persuasions, all hard things visible and invisible, never mind how knobby; as an ostrich of potent digestion gobbles down bullets and gunflints. And as for small difficulties and worryings, prospects of sudden disaster, peril of life and limb; all these, and death itself, seem to him only sly, good-natured hits, and jolly punches in the side bestowed by the unseen and unaccountable old joker.

Reading: selections from Stephen Crane

“Truth,” said a traveler,
“is a rock, a mighty fortress;
“Often I have been to it,
“Even to its highest tower,
“From whence the world looks black.”

“Truth,” said a traveler,
“Is a breath, a wind,

"a shadow, a phantom;
"Long have I pursued it.
"But never have I touched the hem of its garment."

And I believed the second traveler;
For truth was to me
A breath, a wind
A shadow, a phantom,
And never had I touched
The hem of its garment.

* * *

I met a seer.
He held in his hands
The Book of Wisdom.
"Sir," I addressed him,
"Let me read."
"Child," he began.
"Sir," I said,
"Think not that I am a child,
"For already I know much
"Of that which you hold.
"Aye, much."

He smiled.
Then he opened the book
And held it before me.-
Strange that I should have grown
So suddenly blind.

* * *

The wayfarer
Perceiving the pathway to truth,
Was struck with astonishment.
It was thickly grown with weeds.
"Ha," he said,
"I see that none has passed here
"In a long time."
Laster he saw that each weed
Was a singular knife.
"Well," he mumbled at last,
"Doubtless there are other roads."

* * *

If I should cast off this tattered coat,
And go free into the mighty sky;
If I should find nothing there
But a vast blue,
Echoless, ignorant,-
What then?

* * *

A man said to the universe:
"Sir, I exist!"
"However," replied the universe,
"The fact has not created in me
"A sense of obligation."

Reading: The Measure of My Days (excerpt)

– Florida Scott-Maxwell

Life is a tragic mystery. We are pierced and driven by laws we only half understand, we find that the lesson we learn again and again is that of accepting heroic helplessness. Some uncomprehended law holds us at a point of contradiction where we have no choice, where we do not like that which we love, where good and bad are inseparable partners impossible to tell apart, and where we- heart-broken and ecstatic, can only resolve the conflict by blindly taking it into our hearts. This used to be called being in the hands of God. Has anyone any better words to describe it?

Sermon: “Why Me Lord?” – Rob Eller-Isaacs

“We’ve found another church,” she said. “We won’t be coming back here anymore.”

This was a bolt out of the blue. She and her husband had been involved and generous members of the church for many years. I don’t like it when people leave. Even though I know no one church is right for everyone, once people come I want them to stay.

I wanted to know why she had decided to leave. I needed to know why, so I asked her. “Two weeks ago,” she said, “you preached a sermon in which you said ‘God doesn’t care.’ I can’t live with that theology. You know we have a son who never speaks. His anger and his isolation is the great wound of my life. I need to know God loves me. I need to know there’s always hope. I need to know God cares.”

She was true to her word. They found another church, a church where nobody talked about God, a church where she could go on believing in a God who loved and cared for her. What gives me the right to confront her naiveté? What gives me the right to say, “Your

theology amounts to self-deception? Did this God who loves you so give you an autistic child for some purpose? Did this God who gives you hope confine your son to the cage where he lives? Is the one whose 'eye is on the sparrow' responsible for all the suffering we see?" She didn't want to wrestle with such questions so she found a church in which she didn't have to.

By dint of fate or fortune though, we find ourselves here in a place which seeks to find a different balance between comfort and a struggle toward the truth.

"Uncertainty is a very uncomfortable state," wrote Voltaire, "certainty is a ridiculous one." Caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place, we choose the hard place, dear companions. Though the world may doubt that we're religious people because we won't recite words that we cannot believe, we ourselves know better. We know our way reflects reality as we understand it. Much as I sometimes may long to believe in an interested God, a God who cares for each and every one of us, I simply can't do it.

The great American poet Adrienne Rich ends her "Cartographies of Silence" with these lines:

*If from time to time I envy
the pure annunciations to the eye
the visio beatifica
if from time to time I long to turn
like the Elusinian hieriphant
holding up a simple ear of grain
for return to the concrete and everlasting world
what in fact I keep choosing
are these words, these whispers, conversations
from which time after time the truth breaks moist and green.*

Our faith is in the conversation. We live without the fences creeds provide.

We also live without the comfort of an unexamined faith. God doesn't care. We cannot count on God for good or ill. The evidence is overwhelming. The good news is that *we* can care. The good news is that most of us are hard-wired for compassion. Do you remember that wonderful moment in Alice Walker's Color Purple when Shug is talking about letting go of her image of God as an old white man? She says:

My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree my arm would bleed"

I *can* believe in a God that creates and inhabits all things, an impersonal God more a verb than a noun, more a process than a thing. But I cannot believe in a God that makes choices. I can't believe that God can be seduced by intercessionary prayer or cajoled into granting good health or good fortune by adherence to any perspective or creed. Nor can I believe ill health or ill fortune is ever rightly understood as retribution in response to human failings.

Long ago our spiritual forbearers rejected the notion that we are "sinners in the hands of an angry God." We turned away from Calvinism. We turned away from guilt-ridden theologies and from the false dualities which have done so much damage to the human psyche. But we continued to pay lip service to a watered-down Protestant image of God. We gave up submission. We stopped

kneeling down but we held on to the image of God as loving father, we held on to the one who “helps and heals and holds us.”

We need help. We need to be healed. We need to be held. But we need to help and heal and hold one another and I’m convinced that to worship that old white man god not only is an anachronism but also leads to prejudice, disparity and division. I don’t think we should have given up the practice of submission. In fact, I think the absence of such opportunities for surrender into faith, impoverish our religious lives. I think we ought to learn to kneel down again. There is no shame in bowing. The shame is in imagining that we’ve been targeted by God for good or ill. The shame is in relying on some God to do what you and I were born to do. The shame is in relying on some God to be what you and I were born to be.

Chief among the Calvinist inversions to which we fall heir is the doctrine that, for lack of a better title, I will call using Norman Vincent Peale’s words, “the power of positive thinking.”

Unitarianism was not the only tradition on which Emerson’s overly optimistic thought had an impact. Christian Science, Science of Mind, the Church of Religious Science and the Association of Unity Churches (a denomination based in Kansas City) all trace their roots to Emerson’s philosophy. Though we and they no longer see human beings as depraved or inherently sinful, they and we still imagine that there is some supernatural force out there, a force whose blessing we can use our minds to court. I don’t believe it’s true. More importantly, I don’t believe it’s helpful to believe such a thing.

There’s no question disease can be exacerbated by poor diet, lack of exercise or inordinate stress. But the inverted Calvinist too easily falls prey to believing that people should bear the blame for any illness or ill fortune that befalls them. If he had only had a better attitude this

never would have happened. If she had just been happier she never would have gotten sick.

Now look, I'm not trying to discredit healing techniques not based on mainstream medicine. Hamlet is correct when he says, "There are more things on heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt in your philosophy." I know that healing touch and yoga and massage, Chinese medicine, chiropractic therapy, and many other approaches to health and healing can be very helpful. My point is simply that the old assumption that God holds us all in his hands has become an idolatry we can no longer afford.

*And I believed the second traveler;
For truth was to me
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And never had I touched
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We have no choice but to settle for uncertainty. It's the only truth we know. It gives me confidence and strength to be part of a church community which encourages its people to make their peace with ambiguity. It's not an easy way to live but I for one would rather live in ambiguity than ease. I for one would rather bow before the mystery than worship a false God.

In closing I want to return to the question of submission. Religious liberals have always demonstrated deep discomfort with authority. We like to keep our democracy high and our Christology low. Having grown beyond the feudal dynamics of Christendom, having rejected that old white man god, we abandoned as well those aspects of Christian ritual we interpreted as reflecting that bankrupt theology. The problem is that human beings by our nature need to

find ways to surrender into faith. When we lost faith in that old father god we thought we had to turn away from faith itself. But it's not so.

"...Pierced and driven by laws we only half understand, we find that the lesson we learn again and again is that of accepting heroic helplessness. Some uncomprehended law holds us at a point of contradiction where we have no choice, where we do not like that which we love, where good and bad are inseparable partners impossible to tell apart, and where we – heart-broken and ecstatic, can only resolve the conflict by blindly taking it into our hearts."

Every great tradition teaches us to balance self-reliance with reliance on a power greater than ourselves. Every great tradition teaches us to gather trustworthy companions around us and create with them safe places, sacred places where we can confidently surrender into faith. I think its time for us to learn to kneel once again; I think its time for us to learn the way humility can help to usher in compassion. I think its time for us to say, "heart-broken and ecstatic, heroically helpless" as we are, this is our church, this is our way, uncertain as I am – I think I'll stay.

May it be so and amen.