



commUNITY

Vol. 34, No. 6

Unity Church–Unitarian

February 2011

PARADISE

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community. We explore each theme in worship and in our newsletter; in covenant groups, guided writing sessions and Wednesday evening programming; and in our community outreach ministries, our literary journal and programs, and many other opportunities. The February theme is Paradise.

In the middle of a Minnesota winter, layered in our sweaters and our fleeces and with muscles clenched against the cold, it can be calming just to conjure the image of a lush green garden, replete with flowers and fruit, washed in warm sunshine in which one can shed the weight of winter wear. Ah, Paradise. The body breathes more deeply whenever the imagination goes there.

So perhaps we can understand why myths and images of primordial paradise arose in ancient cultures around the world. Many creation stories, including the biblical account of Eden, imagine our human origins in a garden of ease and delight and perfection as if to counter the struggle and suffering and failures of the world that we know.

The word “paradise” traces its roots to a Persian word for a walled garden. It recalls old imperial plantings of flowers and trees, sometimes created in the heart of the driest desert. There, within hedges or walls, one could wander amidst well watered beauty and birdsong without worry of ever getting lost and, on the part of the imperial beholders, without themselves toiling to maintain it. In a life of labor and loss, who wouldn’t wish for a place of such peaceful repose and plenty?

At the other end of the Paradise spectrum, heaven awaits with Elysian enticement. “A foolish concept, to be sure,” writer Kathleen Norris admits of heaven, “and apparently irresistible to the human spirit.” And why not? Mythologically, these stories of perfect beginnings and endings can serve as balm to the pain found in the messy middle of living. But if we hold them loosely enough, the stories of Paradise at either end offer more than an antidote to the suffering experienced in between. They can be a clue to truer living here and now, not an escape from this life and this world but a warmer way of being even in the midst of wintery times.

Look closely at the myths and images of the Garden of Paradise, and you will see an eco-system in fine working balance, a sustainable ecology of being. The trees are laden with fruit, the soil untrodden by time, the relationships clothed in trust and no more. Water flows freely, often in four distinct rivers, each running in a different direction so no corner of the earth ever goes thirsty. And abundance is found in neither harness nor shackle,

but rather in proper alignment of each to all and all to each, humans and creatures and plant life held in right relationship with one another.

Did this ever exist? Could it ever come to pass? There are those who have searched the stories to find the coordinates of Paradise. And many a European expedition to the New World was spurred by the desire to find Paradise – and then conquer and claim it. On his third voyage to the Americas, Columbus once said he had found it, somewhere between Venezuela and Trinidad. But to seek a literal paradise misses the larger point of the poetic Paradise handed down through the ages. For at the heart of every Paradise is water – rivers flowing freely with that life-giving substance that will run through our fingers each time we grab it. Not for claim or for conquest, Paradise is lost the moment we pry it from others or hold on too tightly.

More useful, then, might be questions of a different kind. Such as, how does this garden grow in our human consciousness, and where do its rivers flow? Or, how can we conjure its warmth and abundance within us, and how might our hearts be opened and given to one another when we do?

“What are you waiting for,” the singer Patti Cathcart asks. “Believe in me. Isn’t it love in this life that you need? You can offer your soul to an altar of sacrifice, but give your heart to me. Let’s bring heaven down here, let’s bring heaven on down.”

~ Karen Hering,
Consulting Literary Minister

Worship Theme Resources

BOOKS

Saving Paradise, by Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock

Utopia, by Sir Thomas Moore

Island, by Aldous Huxley

FILM

It’s a Wonderful Life (1946) An angel helps a compassionate but despairingly frustrated businessman by showing what life would have been like if he never existed.

Enchanted April (1992) Two married women living in 1920’s London share the misery of empty relationships with their spouses and decide to rent an Italian castle for the spring to get away.