

“And then it happened...”  
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Do you remember the first time you realized you could read – and the wonder and magic you felt? It was fascinating – wasn't it – that those black lines and circles on the paper made letters, and when you put them together – the letters made words that meant something, either tangible or intangible. When I taught ninth grade English we read and studied William Gibson's play, "The Miracle Worker." On one level it's a story about Annie Sullivan, the teacher who taught Helen Keller to understand sign language. As you know, sign language is a visible language and because Helen was not only deaf but also blind, the sign language was spelled out in her hand. It's hard enough learning a new language – let alone a visible one. How do you teach that this (sign for water) means this (spell w-a-t-e-r) which is this substance in the glass. And that was the miracle – that these letters (spell again) make up a word (sign again) that means this thing. It is a miracle we often take for granted – so easily...yet the power of words is like the power of music – incredible and almost unexplainable.

Some of the most powerfully written words exist in the various sacred texts from the world's religions. There is a power there and people have used those words, various verses to strengthen positions or issues. It behooves us to be knowledgeable and well-versed in the sacred Scriptures of faith traditions. An example: a pastor went one Saturday afternoon to visit church members. At one house, it was obvious someone was home, but nobody came to the door, even though the pastor knocked several times. Finally, the pastor took out his card and wrote: "Revelations 3:20" and stuck it in the door. For those who don't know: Revelations 3:20 says, "Behold, I stand at the door and

knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him and he with Me.” The next day, the card turned up in the collection plate. Below the pastor’s message was the notation, Genesis 3:10. That one says, “I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked and hid myself.” They say you can use Scripture for almost anything...(and this is the kind of stuff you find when you clean out minister’s files)

It is no surprise how deeply imbedded the Christian scriptures are in our culture and there is good reason. One of the reasons I think they have lasted so long is because of the stories they tell. I was especially struck by this fact when I saw the film a year or so ago “Walk the Line.” That film told the life story of Johnny Cash. A scene that has stayed with me, even now is this: it takes place when the young Johnny and his brother Jack are lying in bed one night. Jack is reading the Bible and Johnny is talking to him. In the conversation it comes out that while Jack wants to grow up to be a preacher, Johnny prefers singing to reading. Johnny finally asks Jack, “why do you read the Bible so much?” Jack looks at him and says, “I have to know the Scriptures. If I don’t, how am I going to know which story to tell to help people?”

And some of them do help, you know. Stories, whether we are aware of them or not, are in our lives – in our consciousness. I think a good story is one that tells us something about our own selves. It draws us into reflection about our own lives. The Prophet Muhammad knew this. Along with recording the Scriptures that make up the Koran, he also wrote another book that’s called the Sunnah. It’s a book full of stories about his life and his example, living as the Koran describes. It’s said that the Sunnah and

its stories address almost any issue one might experience in life – at least in a life lived around that time.

Islam, Christianity, Judaism are all religions that rise from what some scholars call the myth of history. Religions from this myth have at their center a story and a written scripture that gives guidance for living in this world.<sup>1</sup> Those scriptures are full of stories...like this one: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. The God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.”<sup>2</sup>

Noted author and scholar Karen Armstrong writes that there were many creation stories in ancient times and these were stories filled with violence.<sup>3</sup> In Sumerian tradition, the story involves a male and female deity fighting and though the male god is victorious – it is through violence that the heavens and earth were created. But with the ancient Hebrews there is no violence in their story. The world and all that exists is created by speaking words. When things were created, they were judged as good. The first creation story ends with “God saw everything that was made, and indeed, it was very good.”<sup>4</sup> I have wondered how our lives and our understanding of this world might be different if the story just stopped right there...with it being seen as very good. But the stories don’t stop there – life intervenes and the stories speak to life’s reality. The Passover story for

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<sup>1</sup> These ideas are presented in the book, World Religions Today, edited by John L. Esposito, Darrell J. Fasching and Todd Lewis.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis, 1:1-5 (chapter 1, verses 1-5), The HarperCollins Study Bible, NRSV

<sup>3</sup> From a talk she delivered at Neighborhood UU Church in Pasadena. April 12, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 1:31

instance is one told every year by folks who are Jewish and celebrate Judaism. It is a story told from an oppressed group of people longing for freedom. Still today, this story serves as a reminder and offers hope to those who long for freedom in their lives – in their spirits.

In the Christian scriptures there are several stories that the Rabbi Jesus told that offered hope and comfort. The gospels according to Matthew, Mark and Luke tell many of them. The stories about the lost coin and the good shepherd can remind us of the importance of the individual. Stories about water turning into wine or two fish and five loaves of bread feeding thousands gently keep fresh before us that miracles can happen when we share what we have with our neighbors.

And then there are some stories that might not be so useful – or are at least questionable. Perhaps these are the ones that encourage us to be about the business of reinterpreting the stories rather than give the whole book over to the far religious right to claim for their own. See, I do think it is our job as a liberal faith to reinterpret scriptures into messages liberation rather than oppression. Like the poem in the reading earlier in the service, we need to reinterpret these stories and our relationship to them. We need to know and interpret stories that include rather than exclude, that promote healing and love rather than destruction and hate. From our religious ancestors to the present, we are the ones to do this work.

In the gospel according to a man called Luke, in the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter the Rabbi Jesus tells a story about a banquet. It is a dinner party in which the host has taken great pains to prepare. “Meals were important social ceremonies. Little was left to chance. People noticed where one sat at the table, who one ate with, whether they washed or not before

eating,”<sup>5</sup> everything was specific and had a reason. All of these rituals determined a person’s social position in the community. The host in Jesus’ story invites his friends and neighbors – many were invited and when the time for the dinner arrived the host sends his servant out to fetch the guests. All of them come up with pitiful excuses and do not attend. The host becomes angry and sends his servant out again – this time to bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. He says that none of those invited previously will have any of his dinner.

Now according to some commentators, by telling this story, Jesus is upsetting the social custom. In the time this story was written down “the powerful and privileged would not ordinarily think to invite the poor to their meals, for this would 1) possibly endanger the social status of the host; 2) be a wasted invitation because you wouldn’t and couldn’t be invited to a banquet hosted by the poor and 3) it would embarrass the poor who couldn’t reciprocate.”<sup>6</sup> Also in this time, people with disabilities were shunned and certainly not invited to a banquet. Having a disability meant you or your parents had sinned.

Author Brett Webb-Mitchell writes in his book, Welcoming the Unexpected Guests to the Banquet, that, “this story in Luke...is an uplifting one where people with disabilities, considered lowly in Jewish society, were transformed into the invited guests to the banquet meal arranged by a most powerful yet gracious host.”<sup>7</sup> In most traditional interpretations, the host in this story represents God. Webb-Mitchell continues to point

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<sup>5</sup> The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX, Luke and John, page 286.

<sup>6</sup> The New International Commentary on the New Testament, the Gospel of Luke by Joel B. Green, pages 550-551.

<sup>7</sup> Webb-Mitchell, page 84.

out that “In each of these stories found in Luke 14:1-24, a person, or persons, with some disabling condition is central to revealing something new about the Kingdom of God...”

I have to say that I don't buy it. Let me be clear, I do buy that Jesus is upsetting the social customs and obeying the spirit of Love instead of day's laws. I do buy that Jesus is including all people in the Kingdom of God. We all have a place at the banquet table. What I am not buying is the banquet story – the story of the host who gets angry and invites people he never would have invited before had the first guests decided to come. And why would anyone want to be a host's second choice? An angry host's second choice? This is not God for me. This is not the Divine as I've experienced it. These stories – they are tricky and they invite us into a close reading.

It's one thing to read and learn from stories...to absorb their wisdom and take comfort from them. But that's only half of it. As Paul Harvey used to say, “and now for the rest of the story.” You see, we are not only readers and tellers of stories, but writers as well. Whether we put pen to paper or fingers to keyboards, our very living, our actions are creating a story. And that story, my friends, is being read by those around you – and perhaps by those closest to you. What story are you telling through your life? What's the story you are creating – that your friends, your children and grandchildren will tell about you? What will your actions, your words, say about who you were in the story? Will your character be viewed as difficult? Playful? Loving? What action will your protagonist take when trapped by fear or when danger looms ahead? Will she take the risk and follow through with the adventure even though she doesn't know what lies at the end of the tunnel? Will he choose to stay put and in doing so, find a deeper meaning in the daily tasks of living instead of riding off into the sunset? In what spirit will the story end?

Broadened that thought for a moment – what story is this church telling to the city of San Diego? We have various chapters on display: the programs we offer, the guest speakers on book tours, the concerts we have. But what will our next chapter say? When we turn the page on a new church year – on a new church budget – what will that say about First Church? It is a collective chapter that we together are writing...I wonder if our next chapter will be a real pager-turner, one that introduces a new idea or character we haven't yet imagined or will it be one that kind of reads like the previous chapters...chapter 2 or chapter 4.

From what I saw, the story of Johnny Cash's life was pretty remarkable. His was a life filled with passion, love, struggle, addiction, and the awesome power of story. Many of his songs told stories about his and other people's lives. His songs touched people deeply because they spoke about the truth of life. At a point when he was struggling to live another day without drugs, his friend (and soon-to-be wife) June Carter and her family took care of him and eventually they took him to church. You see, the stories they heard in their church helped them to have deep compassion for others, to offer help in troubled times. The stories they heard encouraged them to live lives of service, of compassion – to not be afraid of someone society easily deemed as "other". The stories they learned stretched their hearts to welcome more people into their community. I have learned that stories do not have to be literally true to have power and meaning for us – especially stories from sacred texts. And frankly, I don't really care if they are. It seems to me we liberals have taken a detour in trying to prove if stories from sacred texts are literal or not and in doing so, have diminished the power from them.

Focusing on details – could this really have happened – is not the message of the story – it's the spirit of the story that's most important.

So what stories are you needing to hear? Are they in the Christian, Hebrew or Islamic scriptures? What about the stories the Buddha told or those stories from Indigenous peoples faith traditions? Our UU faith finds inspiration in all the world's religions. How might they mingle with our own? Let us take in the many truths about life found in these sources and let them help us write our story – one that tells of a generous, compassionate people who belong to a place called First Church. Let the story say that they are a unique people for they truly practice living their values – they always create more room at the table so all may be included in community; they honor the earth and use its resources wisely.

Can you see and hear the story others are seeing through our actions? We gather together here – because there is something we create together – something that can't be created on our own. We come here to learn and explore, we come here to practice and then go out and practice some more. We come here for renewal, for inspiration from one another and to gather strength to write the next chapter.

...Once upon a time, there was a church that sat at the end of the street and it was very much like many other churches and yet, this one had something special. The people \_\_\_\_\_ and then it happened \_\_\_\_\_.

You get to fill in the blanks – may you do so in love. Amen.