

The Seal of Protection

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It's an old story. One of oppression, bondage, and pain. A story of harsh times, hard labor, and uncertainty. It is a story of longing, yearning for freedom, of needing help, a story that demands a miracle and needs to believe it would come. And it is story that is remembered and celebrated every year; a story of singing songs of freedom, a story of hope and yes, of miracles happening. It is the story of Passover.

The back story says that a man named Joseph was sold into slavery by his ten other brothers to men going to Egypt. Once in Egypt, Joseph made a name for himself and eventually found favor with the Pharaoh and began living the good life and had power in that country. He had foresight and planned for future possibilities that would bring riches into the county. However, back in his home country, a famine seized the land and those ten brothers heard that Egypt was prospering. So off they went and as the story goes, though they did not recognize Joseph, he did them and after a time of testing, he forgave them and told them to bring their families into Egypt to weather the crisis. The Pharaoh accepted these strangers into his land and all was well...for awhile.

But it seems the Israelites over stayed their welcome. With the death of the Pharaoh and of Joseph not long after that, a new man came into power who did not

know Joseph. He didn't know that Joseph had helped make Egypt prosper. All he saw were strangers in his land...and they were numerous and the Pharaoh was afraid that they were growing powerful. So this new Pharaoh made slaves of them. Life was bitter and harsh; they were beaten and oppressed; they worked too hard with too little food and rest, in dangerous work places; they needed a leader and found one a man named Moses.

Moses, after some convincing from his God, and with the help of his brother Aaron, addressed the Pharaoh and demanded the Israelites' freedom. To back up his demand, the story says that plagues were visited upon the Egyptians. Water turned into blood, frogs rained down, gnats, flies infested the land and the livestock became diseased. Thunder, hail and locusts were visited upon the land and darkness came as well. And after each of these, the Pharaoh would agree for the Israelites to go but then, after the crisis passed, he would go back on his word – keeping them in slavery.

It was this final plague that ended this evil game of cat-and-mouse; the last one to visit was the angel of death. The story says that this angel of death would pass through the land and the eldest child and the eldest of the livestock would be killed. However, the angel would pass over any household that had the seal of protection on its doorway. The blood was to be put on the two doorposts and the lintel of the house and thus the firstborn of that house would be saved. That same

night, the Israelites were to eat a meal of the lamb and unleavened bread (because there was no time to allow it to rise); they were to eat dinner with their coats on and sandals on their feet and their walking sticks ready. After this plague, the Israelites finally left Egypt and walked into a new part of the story – a new part of their lives as a people, an unknown future that only promised a community willing to work together.

This is the story of Passover celebrated by our Jewish friends and neighbors. And yet, this story is larger than those who are Jewish...have you ever traveled into a new land and found yourself welcome and at home until a crisis happens or there's a shift in attitude or leadership and then you don't feel too welcome. Has it ever felt okay to be who you are, to share your thoughts and beliefs only to question your safety later?

Our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors experienced persecution and ridicule out on the Iowa frontier in the mid to late 1800s¹. It was religious persecution they suffered. As people in the minority theologically, their businesses were shunned and their livelihood threatened because the Unitarians believed in one God, as opposed to their Trinitarian neighbors. Universalists were ridiculed for believing that no one suffered for eternity in hell – that all would be saved and that all were loved. Our ancestors were in need and found courage, safety and hope

¹ See Cynthia Grant Tucker's book , Prophetic Sisterhood for this information.

when they remained banded together and remained true to their deepest beliefs and values. They found protection against bigotry, hate and fear. So what is our seal of protection in times like these? I believe it is our reverence for life – our deep abiding reverence for life, for all life that holds us to our deepest values, that keeps us working for peace, that keeps us in the work of justice long after common sense says we should stop.

This reverence of life may sound too simple – but it is everything. All we do and all we can become is grounded in this truth. A few years ago Meadville Lombard theologian the Rev. Dr. Thandeka spoke to the General Assembly and stated that "Our reverence for the spirit of life – for life itself – is not a creed, an idea, or a thought. It is not a doctrine. It is a feeling – the feeling of being held, loved and cherished." She argued that this feeling comes before words, thoughts or concepts. Our religious tradition, [then offers to us] three affirmations:

First, hold life dearly. Nurture and attend to life, all of it, come what may. [Doing this transforms us into a] justice-seeking people. Second, love life deeply. Know the worth and dignity of all person and treat them with respect. Revere life. This rule makes us a moral, compassionate people. Third, cherish life always. Honor life. Honor the life of others. Our ethics of interrelationship begin here.²

² *From Reverence Revisited (UU World GA Report 2004)*

"Reverence," writes Rebecca Parker, "is a form of love and greets all humanity as sacred. It is something that must be learned and practiced. ...It is a way of life that is manifested in more than an isolated moment of appreciation for nature or awe before its destructive or creative power. Reverence involves full-fledged devotion enacted in deeds of care and responsibility. It involves knowledge, study and attention."³

So how do we live this reverence of life out today, this week? Go back to the story of old – we remain faithful to the truth that we know...that there is a way out of pain, humiliation and oppression. We know that respect of life – holding it as the precious gift that it is and honoring the lives of others, especially those who are systematically oppressed will lead us into a new land. We exercise the freedom we have for those whose freedoms are limited.

We work for justice and continue the work of justice until it is lived out in all our lives. This congregation has been doing exactly that for many years, and even recently this work has been tangible, palpable and evident in the city of San Diego and other communities surrounding us. This faith tradition has long held that civil rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are not special rights but human rights. And lately at least forty of you have been putting your faith into action by working on the Decline to Sign campaign – a ballot initiative that seeks

³ (from Rebecca Parker – book, adapted, *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now*, 2006)

to change our state's constitution and intentionally legalize discrimination against loving couples who happen to be of the same gender. This congregation has made a name for itself among many in this city. Just yesterday, while out running errands, my partner and I started to enter a store. In front of the doors were some young people with clipboards and they wanted to talk. We saw them, took a deep breath and prepared for a conversation. The young woman approached and asked if I would like to sign this pledge; before she could finish her sentence my partner asked what organization was she with? When she proudly announced Equality California – we smiled and signed her petition. We thanked her for her work and acknowledged we might have already signed this at church. She asked what church and when I said First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Diego – a smile lit up her face and she said, "Oh, you're with Jan!" Church member and board vice president Jan Garbosky and several of you have worked tirelessly for the rights of others, to ensure that justice is possible. And there is still more to do – our work is not over; the push is still on and you, we are still needed. Please stop at the Marriage Equality table on the patio after this service for more information.

Reverence for life requires freedom, working for justice and it demands an openness and awareness that miracles are possible. The miracle of life and of love – they abound in the rich fullness that is demonstrated every time this congregation gathers together for worship, for work, for reflection. We celebrate and honor life

and in doing so, we are reminded that all life is sacred. That joy is a part of our lives and that we have reason to sing, to rejoice.

A story from the newspaper last week caught my eye. Marc Schneier, 3 years old and not yet a rabbi, had a knack for getting the attention of adults. The story is told that he like to wander. One night he was nowhere to be found in the synagogue during Yom Kippur services. His frantic mother searched. His stern father, who was officiating, started the service anyway. When the congregation concluded a prayer, the ark holding the sacred Torah scrolls was opened. And inside, waving at the congregants with both hands was the toddler.⁴ I love this story – and wonder how might we hide in the belly of our faith – so that we might move from there as we sing our songs of freedom, do the work of justice and expect and acknowledge the miracles that abound around us.

What is the world you dream about? This is the name of the class we've held this year and it was the check in question for this class recently. People shared deeply. And from their hopes and dreams I can say, when they are achieved, it indeed will be a wonderful world. And one woman's response resonated with me specifically (maybe because I was writing this sermon, but more probably because she put voice to thoughts/feelings I have had for a long time) – she said, the world that she dreams about is a world in which life is held in the highest regard and

⁴ New York Times, Sunday, April 13, 2008; article Backstage with 6 Rabbis, 6 Imams and No "Kumbaya"

because of it, there would be peace. If only we could grab on to that fact, that life is sacred, that we must revere it and protect it – that would give us the strength to continue the work for a world where peace reigns, a world where we all have not everything we want, but enough of what we need; where we our basic attitude about life and others would be one of curiosity and wonder rather than one of suspicion and fear.

How do we go about learning reverence – practicing and living it? I think it starts when we focus our attention and open ourselves to the freedom we have, when we work for the freedom of others and are willing to see the miracles around us. This then becomes our seal of protection in a world that can be filled with pain and hurt, fear and greed. This seal can protect us from attitudes of apathy, resignation and hopelessness. This gift of reverence for life then can become the gift from the night traveler, not the angel of death. But a night traveler who has a gift for us, a gift that sings like a newborn beast, like a child at Christmas / like your own heart; / take this gift and all night, all your life if you are willing, let it nuzzle your face, curl in your palm like a hard stone, liquefy into a cold pond you dive into it; it will hold you like a mossy jaw, a bath of light, an answer."⁵ "It is written in the Torah: I call heaven and earth to witness today that I have set before

⁵ Mary Oliver poem The Night Traveler, New and Selected Poems, 1992, page 205.

you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendents may live." May we do so – abundantly. Amen.

Benediction – For all who see God, may God go with you. For all who embrace life, may life return your affection. For all who seek a right path, may a way be found...and the courage to take it, step by step.