

LOVING OUR NEIGHBORS:
DURING THE HOLIDAYS AND CONTINUING
December 14, 2008

Our great covenant, that document that both defines our faith and holds our congregations into an association, consists of both what we call the Principles and Sources of Unitarian Universalism. At the beginning of our church year I proposed exploring each Source in some depth. This month I skipped the third source in order to concentrate on the fourth, because our tradition celebrates both Hanukkah and Christmas which are expressions of both intimately related faiths. Often we celebrate the Solstice and Kwanzaa too, however, they belong to other traditions.

Here are the words of the fourth source, including the preamble:

The living tradition we share draws from many sources:
Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.

This section of our covenant, the Sources, strives to be inclusive of all the varied strands that form our tradition. It is vague, as in the third source that I will explore in January. "Wisdom from the world's religions", it says. What world religions? What kind of wisdom? The covenant also is specific, as in the source we are exploring today. We can pinpoint Jewish and Christian-well, sort of anyway.

Jewish history encompasses at least 6000 years, and Christian 2000. Every time a new document surfaces in the dry and preservative air of Israel, our understanding of what those faiths meant and taught must shift. And, just when scholars were sure they had explored, discussed and defined all such documents; lo! And behold! more surfaced. And our concept of early Christianity shifted to early Christianities. Thus, in defining my task today, I caveat that I am using current commonly accepted understandings of our heritage; knowing that they have already shifted for scholars, and will eventually work their way into general understanding.

Although the faith developed by the Hebrews in ancient Israel contributed many great ideas to our understanding of a faith to call upon our devotion, I will lift up two for our contemplation today. They are the use of covenant to define a religious community, large or small; and the prophetic tradition that defined God as supremely interested in justice for all people. Both of these ideas developed over time, and are, I contend, still under development in our own faith tradition.

The idea of covenant was common in the ancient Middle East. It was basically a contract between two individuals, who called in a third, transcendent entity to oversee the fulfillment of the contract. When two tribal leaders found that their herders were trying to use the same land for their flocks, they would meet and negotiate a settlement. They often built a cairn of stones to mark a boundary between one tribe's grazing land and another's. Then they would make great promises, swearing upon one or another's god that they would fulfill those promises. Henceforth Tribe A will graze their flocks on this

side of the boundary, and Tribe B on that side. And, if I intentionally stray, may Baal or Astarte strike me blind.

Then came Abraham-or somebody similar. Abraham was what Marcus Borg calls a God-intoxicated man. Abraham heard the voice of God telling him to leave his home, along with his wives and his children, his nephews and their families, and all his flocks, and seek a new land. God may have, of course, decided to issue this call because He observed that the Abraham's tribe was beginning to squabble over the land available in his present location.

God appeared to Abraham, and made a promise, or covenant with him. Go, he said, to the land of Caanan. It is a fair land. Go, with your flocks and your family. I will take care of you. I will make of you a great people. I will be your God, and you will be my people. Abraham followed God's charge, and God kept his promise. This shifted the idea of Covenant. When you make a contract with a transcendent being, it is more than a contract, it is a divine promise, or covenant.

The idea of covenant continues through the history of the Hebrew people and their faith. The point of the story of Noah is that God promised, or covenanted, that He would never destroy the world by water again. And He placed the rainbow in the sky as a sign of his promise.

Judaism is based on this idea of covenant. When one gives and receives a promise from a transcendent being, one is part of a larger whole and owes loyalty and devotion to that whole. Unitarian Universalism also places great emphasis on this tradition.

Abraham's covenant with Yahweh, or God, was a personal covenant. God promised Abraham that devotion to his worship would result in two things: God would take care of Abraham and his family, and God would develop a great nation from his descendents. God was a jealous God, so Abraham had to promise that he would worship Yahweh alone. Clearly at this time there was more than one God.

The idea that Yahweh was the ONLY God developed as did the nation of Israel. However, over the 6000 years or more of the history of the Israelites, it did emerge. No longer did the Israelites worship the gods of the Canaanites and their neighbors. ... Or did they? Much of the role of the prophets was to call their compatriots back to the worship of the one true God. It was a continuing battle, and the old gods died slowly. Gradually however, a new covenant emerged. It was a covenant between God and the Jewish nation, no longer merely between God and Abraham, and his descendents. In a sense, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, are children of Abraham. As are Unitarian Universalists.

God became, in the Hebraic tradition, "a light unto the nations", and our forbears claimed He was the one true God for all people, at all times and places. Under the covenant, those who worshipped Him were part of the covenant, and thus protected; and those who did not, were fair game. Since the definition of who was truly worshipping correctly shifted often, wars between and among the children of Abraham were often and vicious.

Covenant remains however, one of the defining characteristics of Judaism-and of Unitarian Universalism.

The prophetic tradition within Judaism was also a defining characteristic. It manifested itself in many forms, but the one I want to lift up is its call to justice. Amos is one of the prophets who influenced later Christianities, and even later Unitarians and Universalists. It was he who said, let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream. This phrase, and the vision it represents, inspired countless preachers in Christian and UU pulpits. It inspired Theodore Parker, one of our great abolitionist preachers, and it inspired Martin Luther King, Jr., who read and admired Theodore Parker.

And there is Micah, one of the early prophets, who was asked, What is required of me? The answer was to do justice, practice mercy and walk humbly with your God. This too, entered into the lexicon of Christian ministers, and their successors, Unitarians and Universalists. The prophets of ancient Israel inspired many generations of the faithful to strive to enact a fair and just society. This is an heritage I proudly claim for my faith.

Jesus of Nazareth entered the history of our combined faiths approximately 2000 years ago. He followed in the tradition of other great prophets of Israel. He taught the history of the faith, and combined it with an updated version of how he understood its teachings. He was a healer of great skill, again, not unusual for his time and place. He also emphasized justice and mercy, and especially, love. He was, let me emphasize, a Jew. His book of knowledge was the Torah. His greatest teachings, such as the Golden Rule, were re-phrasings of earlier Hebrew teachings.

His agenda was not to start a new religion, nor was it to become the Messiah or Savior of Israel. He challenged the norms of his time and place, especially those that said one must bow to the conquerors, the Romans who ruled through Jewish kings. He lifted up the value of modest people who were faithful. He taught through the use of story. That is why we have parables, such as that of the widow's mite.

Clearly he was a charismatic-a preacher whose personality infused his teachings and interactions with those around him. His followers, or disciples, were devastated when he was brutally crucified, as were many of those who trespassed Roman law. However, his disciples were so infused with the spirit of this God-intoxicated man, that they could not remain quiet and let his teachings die and his spirit disappear from the face of the earth.

Jesus hewed closely to the faith of his fathers in his teachings.

When asked what was the essence of the faith, he replied that one loves God with one's whole mind, body and heart; and that one loves one's neighbor as oneself. This is a paraphrase of what the great Rabbi Eliezer taught much earlier in Israel's history. Both Jews and Christians state one of their core beliefs as loving one's neighbor.

By about 40 years after his birth, people were beginning to write down the stories he told, and the teachings he shared. In another 20 years or so those

who followed him thought him so great they began to write stories about him that demonstrated what they thought were his god-like qualities. And when their stories were collected into what we know as the New Testament, we who later read it learned beautiful stories of his birth, such as the one Luke tells. As Christianity was Romanized, and the calendar adjusted, celebrations of his miraculous birth were combined with earlier celebrations. The practice of a great Holiday during the darkest time of the year brought light and feasting into a time of fear and want. It became a time of feasting, of carolers, (people of the lower classes who extorted treats from those with wealth), a time of excess and drunkenness-which led to the first War on Christmas.

When the Puritans committed regicide in England, and gained power in that powerful country, they condemned the practices surrounding Christmas. The birthday of the Savior of the World, they said, should not be celebrated wantonly, but soberly. One does not have a holiday for feasting. One works, just as Puritans always work, and contemplates the great gift God gave his people, the gift of his son. This ethos was transported to our shores by the first settlers in New England. Christmas was celebrated in their sober black and white clothing, with a restrained greeting of "Happy Christ's Mass."

Unitarians are to thank-or blame-for the great change. However, before we explore this further, let us review what we have learned thus far. The Jewish and Christian heritage that so influences our faith contributed three great things, in my reading. The first is the practice of covenant. The second is the emphasis to the study and practice of justice. And the third is the love of one's neighbor, which combined with a love of justice, encourages us to work toward the realization of the beloved community, where all are equally cherished and cared for. Christianity gave us Jesus as a model for our living-a model who, because he is envisioned as an inspired human, enables us to hope to emulate his love and work.

Now, as to how his birthday celebration resurged in popularity. Let us first examine the work of Dickens, who was closely associated with Unitarians. One of my colleagues, the Rev. Edward Frost, posted the following in an online chat.

The excerpt below is from a review in this past Sunday's NY Times Book Review of yet another book about "A Christmas Carol." ...The review is by Kathryn Harrison. Her exclusive use of the masculine gender is a bit odd in this era, esp. by a female writer and some translation may be necessary.

"Replacing the slippery Holy Ghost with anthropomorphized spirits, the infant Christ with a crippled child whose salvation waits on man's-not God's-generosity, Dickens laid claim to a religious festival, handing it over to the gathering forces of secular humanism.

If a single night's crash course in man's power to redress his mistakes and redeem his future without appealing to an invisible and silent deity could rehabilitate even so apparently lost a cause as Ebenezer Scrooge, imagine what it might do for the rest of us! " (by Kathryn Harrison)

When Dickens wrote "A Christmas Carol," he was not reflecting the reality of Christmases remembered, nor of his contemporary Christmas. Scrooge was a stand-

in for the majority of Puritan businessmen. Dickens' vision of a kinder, gentler, Christmas, and especially his evocation of Tiny Tim as a loving Christ Child, encouraged the evolution of Christmas into a Winter Holiday based on sharing, gift-giving, and the love of one's neighbors.

Liberal clergy and some lay leaders began writing Christmas Carols. We will later sing It Came Upon the Midnight Clear, written by American Unitarian minister Edmund Sears. I already shared the story of Charles Follen, who brought the practice of decorating Christmas trees to these shores.

Much as we contemporary UU clergy may decry the over-commercialism of Christmas in these times, we cannot deny our history. Nor should we. The Winter Holidays, coming from many traditions, but centered on Christmas, come at a time when we need to celebrate. We need to celebrate and feast together before we enter the coldest time of the year. The light shifts, and slowly the days grow longer. It is a promise that spring will come, that the plants upon which we depend, will grow again.

However, there is a time of scarcity coming, a time when it is good to remember that we love and care for our neighbors. It is good to remember that we are a people who covenant to behave ethically and lovingly. It is good to remember that justice demands attention always, perhaps especially now. It is good to remember that there are models of ethical and loving living in our heritage. One of them was Jesus of Nazareth.

Let us enter into this season of love and rejoice.
Let us enter into this season of giving and be generous.
Let us enter into this season of celebration and be glad.

Shalom and Saalat.
Blessed Be and Amen.