

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206

3.15.15 Sermon: "The Journey to Jerusalem"

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Sermon

The last several weeks, we've heard a lot about the courage of the men and women who journeyed to Selma to non-violently fight injustice and oppression. When the call rang out from Dr. King, those literally called on the phone, had to weigh the dangers and the potential benefits. They had to wrestle with putting aside their jobs and family responsibilities. They had to confront the fact that they might die in Selma - as two Unitarian Universalists did. It was easy to feel the pull to go and bear witness to injustice. It took courage to face the fears ... and go anyway.

I'm sure it took courage for Jesus to go to Jerusalem too. And we know he had fears. One of my favorite stories in the Gospels is the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus prayed and asked for the bitter cup to be taken from his hands. He didn't want to die. He could have run away, hid and come back to protest another day.

He didn't.

Now, we don't know much about why Jesus went to Jerusalem. We can't be absolutely sure he did go there, or that he was executed there. Biblical scholars have hardly any verified historical facts about the fellow. Scholars have precious little evidence of his life independent of what was written down by his followers. And they didn't write down the same stories. And when they did, they probably copied from each other or from sources we no longer have. Each Gospel writer had his own agenda and told Jesus' story slant to make his point.

So, when we strive to find meaning in the Christian Scriptures, we need to acknowledge that we are not working with fact. Most likely, what we are working with are Jesus sayings or quotes that people found memorable and emblematic of his message. Nothing got written down about his life that we know of, until, at the earliest, 20 years after his death. Even so, all the sources we do have share agreement on some basic events of his life. One of them is going to Jerusalem and getting crucified there.

The stories we do get agree Jesus created a disturbance at the Temple in Jerusalem. That conflict with the money changers probably brought him to the attention of Roman authorities who watched everything that happened in the Temple. That was enough all by itself to get him crucified by the Romans. There wasn't anything novel about this form of execution of either. People were crucified on a regular basis by Rome as a way of putting fear into the populace and keeping them in line. Because there wasn't much unusual about his death - this may be why we don't have an independent record of it. His body probably hung on the cross

until scavengers consumed his flesh and his bones fell to the ground mixed with the many, many others who had been crucified before him.

What we do have to remember Jesus though, are stories rather than bones. And like folktales and legends that have been refined by being told and retold again and again, they carry meaning distilled, refined and honed in the retelling. And the more we examine these stories, the richer the meaning that can be found in them.

I invite you today to enter the Gospel story of the Journey to Jerusalem with me to see if we might find a little of that meaning - meaning that transcends the story just the way Shakespeare's plays can reveal powerful truths about human existence.

The Journey to Jerusalem is most clearly told in the Gospel of Luke. In chapter nine, he announces the beginning of that journey that takes another ten chapters to accomplish. This is a little surprising because it was about a three day walk from where Jesus was reported to be at the time. This and other anomalies in those ten chapters lead scholars to question how well the author of Luke knew the geography of Palestine.

Luke puts three stories close together in chapter nine that are also found in Matthew and Mark. The first is the execution of John the Baptist, the one who baptized Jesus. We **do** have independent historical evidence of John's existence and death. He was immensely popular, probably more so than Jesus was at the time. King Herod feared he might use that popularity for political purposes and cause trouble. So he imprisoned then executed him and thus made him disappear.

All three Gospels refer to Herod's fear that Jesus might become another John. From Herod's vantage point, he couldn't see the differences between them, their practices and their message. From Herod's perspective, Jesus was a rabble-rouser like John, gathering followers who might turn into revolutionaries and provoke violence, or more dangerous, provoke Rome.

The final story Matthew, Mark and Luke share is the story of the transfiguration. Jesus goes up the mountain with three of his disciples. They see him praying and his garments shining with bright white light. Then Moses and the prophet Elijah appear and speak with him. In Luke's version, they give him the direction to go to Jerusalem. Moses and Elijah are the rock stars of prophet-hood in the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus gets his direction from the A-list prophets.

I wonder if these three stories are critical elements in his decision to go to Jerusalem. I imagine Jesus must have been heartbroken and angry when his teacher was killed. Even though he didn't follow John's practices of fasting and abstaining from drink - Jesus came eating and drinking wine - I expect Jesus revered him as the teacher who opened the way for him.

Jesus also learned that Herod now had his eye on him. If he continued to gather large

crowds, do healing and teach about the coming reign of heaven on earth, Herod might imprison him too. Jesus had been teaching using the term "Kingdom of God" to explain what a just society might look like. And it sure didn't look like the oppressive colony Pilate and Herod were governing. Even though he spoke in parables to disguise his message, Herod was on to him whether he was planning a revolution or not.

So between being angry and grief stricken over the death of John, feeling the pressure of Herod's spies and having a vision of the Kingdom of God that rejected the Kingdom of Rome, Jesus took on the mantle of prophetic witness to travel to the center of the Jewish Universe, the Temple in Jerusalem, with a stinging judgment to deliver.

Political and cultic leaders being forced to endure prophetic critiques was a time honored Jewish tradition. Jews have a covenant with God that supersedes any state authority structure. If the King wasn't following the covenant, especially by abusing the vulnerable of society, a prophetic voice was an appropriate way to bring the grievances of the people to the seat of power. In a sense, this was their process of checks and balances to keep the king from abusing his power.

Rome didn't quite work that way, especially among those who were not citizens. Palestine was an occupied territory. Those who made trouble were thought of as criminals and terrorists. Rome wasn't interested in squabbles between Jews. Order and tax revenue collection was what they cared about. Jesus was a troublemaker who had to be dealt with harshly to keep things under control. He was arrested. His disciples scattered. He was tortured, humiliated and executed. End of story ... or so it seemed at the time.

The story of Jesus had far more resilience than Jewish and Roman leaders had expected. The movement Jesus started didn't die but started growing. And his death and the events after his death definitely were instrumental in that growth.

During Lent, Christians remember Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, the events there, his death on the cross and their faith in the reports of his return to life. Right in the middle of the Lenten season this year was the 50th anniversary of Selma. Back in 1965, Lent had just begun on March 3rd with Ash Wednesday. Bloody Sunday was March 7th.

For those of us who are non-Christian or do not follow the Christian calendar, Lent still can be useful. In this chilly fallow period before we experience the rebirth of spring, we can reflect on our own journeys through life. We can reflect on our own response to the call to address injustice in the world. It is a call we get daily in the newspaper, on the radio and television, and streaming into our devices across the Internet.

Last weekend at the UU Living Legacy Pilgrimage, speakers like the Rev. Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed who spoke to us at our joint service two weeks ago, helped the participants see that the work isn't finished by any means. The Supreme Court rolling back the Voting Rights Act of 1965 has made it harder for many people to have access to the polls. The biased application of

police power against people of African descent has re-created the Jim Crow south across the nation. In September, ABC news reported “1.4 million voting-age black men — more than one in eight — will be ineligible to cast ballots because of state laws that strip felons of the right to vote.”

To better appreciate the unfinished work that remains from the 1965 Selma to Montgomery march, I recommend those who are willing to watch a video recording of the Rev. William Barber who also spoke at the Pilgrimage. An NAACP leader, he serves the Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro, North Carolina. He has led the “Moral Mondays” civil rights protest movement. It started in North Carolina two years ago and is spreading to other states including New York. He is my kind of guy because he has organized a coalition of 90 some advocacy groups to focus on moral issues. Voting and civil rights, public education funding, health care and a living wage, are some of the issues they work on from a moral framework rather than a political one.

Paying attention to the 50 year anniversary of Selma and practicing a UU version of Lent can direct our attention out of our personal concerns and toward these larger social concerns. The Prodigal Son gets his wake up call feeding the pigs better than he himself ate. Many northern white UU ministers who went to Selma had little appreciation of racism until they saw it first hand. Jesus spent time with the outcasts of society. He knew their plight. So too, we can use Lent to awaken ourselves to larger social concerns that are creating suffering to which we may not have a direct personal connection.

Listening to Rev. Barber and participating in the Moral Mondays movement is one way to raise our awareness. Capital Area Against Mass Incarceration or CAAMI is another. The work of the West Hill/West End Development project led by Arlene Way is yet another way. There are many others.

And once our awareness is raised, once we’ve built some relationships and found allies, our personal response will become clearer. No one of us can fix these systemic problems in our society. But each of us can contribute our attention, financial support, voice, presence and vote to move these problems toward resolution.

Jesus answered the call to Jerusalem. UU ministers and leaders answered the call to Selma. Those movements have not died but have survived. There is a resilience to the truth that is the source of their call, that will not let these movements die even as they endure storm after storm.

The question each of us must consider is which side am I on? What risks am I willing to take? Am I willing to move and stand with those who share our values and our concerns? Am I willing to answer an inner call to put my body, my voice, and my commitment behind fairness, equity and compassion giving life the shape of justice? And if not now, when?

The choices are personal. The work is social.

None of us do that work alone.

When we do step forward individually,
we join the common work for the good of all,
and we do it ... together.

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