

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
“Why the Bible Matters to Unitarian Universalists”
 Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore September 25, 2016

Sermon

If you want to get my attention, send me an email at the beginning of August.

That's when I noticed an email about the Great Bible Experiment to be presented by the Massachusetts Bible Society. The email alerted me to survey data that says Albany is one of the places people don't pay much attention to the Bible. They decided to visit four cities with low Bible interest in the northeast. Albany was one of those cities. They would be bringing a panel of three people to answer audience questions.

And one of that panel would be a Humanist.

That anomaly got my attention.

So I started investigating. I was pleased to discover that the Massachusetts Bible Society has several Unitarian Universalists involved in its Board of Directors. Former UUA President John Buerhens has worked with them. They also sent me an unsolicited copy of the participant and leader guide to the curriculum they offer on the Bible for me to review. As I read through it, I was impressed by the open minded, liberally religious perspective they brought to the Bible.

So I signed up for their road show in Albany on September 12th and arranged with Karen Greene, member of our congregation who appreciates the Bible, to teach the first six weeks of the class (starting October 4th) and see how it goes. (Their road show has now stopped in three different cities. The final presentation will be at Harvard this coming Tuesday night. They plan to simulcast that gathering and we plan to show here at 7pm in B-8. If you're interested, please come!)

As many of you know, I am much more oriented to Buddhism than Judaism, Christianity or Islam. The Bible is not my “go-to” document to guide my spiritual life. Yet it is the root document of Western Civilization and it can be a good source of growth, development and guidance for our religious lives. It is especially good, better than most Buddhist texts, when considering social justice issues. The Buddhist scriptures are excellent for teaching meditation methods but are not very useful for envisioning a Beloved Community. The Realm of God that Jesus proclaimed and the Hebrew Prophets demanded be restored and Mohammed showed the way to realize doesn't show up very much in the record of the Buddha's teachings.

When I decided to go to seminary in 1985, it wasn't because I wanted to become a Biblical scholar. I didn't retain all that much from Sunday school. Yes, I'd learned some of the well-known stories of the Bible like Noah's Ark and Adam and Eve. I learned the Exodus story attending Passover Seders. I studied Jesus in my Western Civilization class so I could understand European history. But didn't know many of the parables except the ones people pick up from popular culture like the Good Samaritan. And I'd heard enough UU sermons over the years to pick up a few other stories, like the story of Abraham and Isaac and David and Bathsheba that are more than a little troubling.

My first Hebrew Scripture (not Old Testament) class in my first semester at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley was an eye opener. We took the Book of Genesis apart and found far more in it than I'd ever imaged being there. Each chapter was packed with the history of the Jewish people, multiple voices and agendas of different editors, two different creation stories side by side, and the central idea of covenant.

The first covenant that God made with Noah happened after the flood. In a fit of what sounds like rage, God is so frustrated with humans bad behavior that God decides to wipe them all out and try again with one devoted, obedient follower and his family. After wiping everybody out in the flood, God recognizes this isn't the solution to make humans behave better. So God promises never to do that again. A sign of that promise will be a rainbow. Later God makes a big promise to Abraham to make him the father of the Jewish people. The biggest promise God makes is to Moses. If you and your people keep my commandments, I will protect you and show you favor. Loyalty to God's covenant will bear fruit and support social harmony and peace.

One of the bedrock principles of Unitarian Universalism is the concept of covenant that comes from the Bible. We can make promises to each other – as members of this congregation – that will bear fruit and support our social harmony and peace. Covenants *make explicit* the promises we make to each other. Covenants also have a way of addressing transgressions of those promises and renewing our promises again.

Covenant has been an enduring idea and transformative practice for Unitarians and Universalists over the years. And the concept of covenant is a grounding principle upon which participatory democracy is founded. It says every person can participate in covenantal promises, be supported by it and be accountable to it. It is non-authoritarian – we can accept participation in a covenant voluntarily. No authority compels us to participate in covenant. We can opt in ... or opt out – although the cost for a Jew of opting out 3000 years ago was pretty severe – banishment and death. Still, today we can gain a lot by participating in an evolving vision of covenant with those who share our values.

Another discovery I made in my Bible class in seminary was the universality of the scripture I read. These were stories of characters struggling with real human problems, especially the problem of building and sustaining community. These stories illustrated bad ways to manipulate community participation as well as helpful, respectful ways. And there were many lessons in how to treat the stranger, the one we may not yet know.

The clash of religion and culture is nothing new to the 21st century. Cultures and religions were right up against each other in the Middle East in those days just as they are today. And class and status differences were even more dramatic. The Bible had already been considering these problems ... and formulating solutions.

And the prophet Jesus of Nazareth was one of the most radical of the bunch.

So when I arrived at the Elks Lodge on Allen Street in Albany on September 12, I was very curious to see how these three panelists speaking for the Massachusetts Bible Society would approach the Bible— especially that Humanist fellow.

Warren, the Catholic Priest panelist, who spoke first, told us he grew up in the African American Baptist tradition. His mother was Baptist and his father Catholic. He reverently told us about his mother who read the Bible daily and used it religiously to shape and guide her life. It is a practice he continues by getting up very early each morning to spend an hour with a passage of scripture in the tradition of *lectio divina*. Through this kind of deep engagement, he spoke of his prayer time as a process of falling in love with the text. He described God as “being identical to love” and the Bible as a record of “love in action.” For him, reading the Bible is a way to internalize that love through the word of God revealed in the Bible.

Tom, the Humanist fellow spoke next. He declared that he didn’t believe in God ... but didn’t need to believe to find value in the Bible. He felt there was a lot in the text for secular people while at the same time putting aside any claim of authority. The stories, teachings, and histories can be sources of inspiration and guidance for non-believers too. He was mostly attracted to the stories Jesus told where he found the most personal challenge as well as the most penetrating wisdom.

Finally Ann, the Protestant theologian (and President of the Massachusetts Bible Society) spoke. She spoke about her journey growing up a Bible literalist to today being a progressive interpreter. She challenged us to encounter the text “as just text” rather than a special God dictated document. The book could convey truth, just as made up stories can convey truth. Truths of the human condition can be and are powerfully illustrated in fiction, theater and movies that have loose association with actual events. Drop the concern about the factual basis of the Bible and treat the whole thing as a great novel of the Jewish and Christian people trying to find their way as communities. When we stop treating it as a rule book, we’ll get far more truth out of it, she claimed.

The audience members were all given cards to write down questions. As each panelist spoke, I furiously wrote down my questions—quickly using up all my cards. I borrowed my neighbor Karen Greene’s cards she wasn’t using to write down a few more. I was grateful the moderator of the panel chose one of my questions. I had asked about the story of Abraham and Isaac.

Do you know this story? God comes to his servant Abraham to test his love and loyalty. God asks Abraham to take his first born son Isaac to Mount Moriah to sacrifice him. Abraham does as he is told, gathers some wood for the sacrificial fire and heads with his son to Mount Moriah. On the way to Moriah, Isaac asks, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.”

At the designated sacrificial spot, Abraham piles the wood, binds Isaac and lays him there. Then he draws his knife and is about to kill him ... when an Angel of the Lord stops him and points out a ram caught in a bush that can be sacrificed instead.

Now ... I don’t know about you, but having God ask for such a show of loyalty seems rather objectionable. And God doesn’t intervene, an angel does with the substitute offering.

This story has never given me warm, fuzzy feelings towards God wondering what kind of gang style initiation God might ask of me. This story I find hard to square with the “God is Love” argument.

I found myself surprised to be very engaged by the Protestant theologian’s answer.

Ann pointed out that this is one of the oldest stories in the Bible. At the time it was likely first told, sacrifice of first-born children was likely common to show one's commitment to the tribal God. It is hard to imagine a more painful and difficult sacrifice to prove tribal loyalty than this, especially if every member of the tribe was required to participate. We know from contemporary practices from fraternities to gangs the bonding power of costly rituals of initiation.

The fact that the God of the Jews *didn't* require this kind of sacrifice was a radical, pro-life, pro-child, departure from the grim rituals of those days. In *this* light, the story becomes a celebration of a Jewish God that *doesn't require human sacrifice* to be appeased. Human cohesion can happen without human sacrifice. *In THAT context*, the story is *really good news*.

Hearing this interpretation moved me. I'm sure I've heard a version like it before, but the way she told it, like a skillful story teller, drew me in. It opened my eyes to a nuance of interpretation I had missed. And that changed my perception of the text. By considering one challenging story, she had shown me the value of her historically sensitive, culturally relevant, progressive approach to Bible study.

I was convinced.

I don't know if her explanation might have moved you but I hope it illustrates the value for Unitarian Universalists to spend time with the Bible. It is the one text that contains the core stories a large percentage of Americans live with every day. And the Bible conveys a powerful message of social justice. Through the Gospels, we discover Jesus was deeply concerned with economic justice with over 500 verses concerned with money and possessions.

If we want to be transforming agents to bring justice, mercy and peace to a troubled world, these are the stories that are going to speak to many Americans. We need to know how to work with them to change hearts and minds in our society.

And in the process, our hearts and minds may be changed too.