

Order of Service
Poetry of the Psalms
Sunday, November 16, 2008



Call to Worship and Chalice Lighting

Here we are in a new time.

Hopefulness and enthusiasm are replacing

Frustration and dejection.

New projects, new initiative, new demonstrations for justice

Are bubbling up all over this nation.

The young are speaking up

And acting up for a better world.

We come together this morning

Excited to be part of a new time.

We hold hands in solidarity

For a better tomorrow.

Meditation and Prayer

All our lives long we are seeking

A place of belonging

Not only just knowing that we belong

But a felt sense that we do belong.

Readings Psalms 15 and 121, trans, Stephen Mitchell

Psalm 15

(With thoughts of remembrance to Martin Luther King Jr.)

Lord, who can be trusted with power,

Evergreen UU Fellowship ~ Rev. Bruce Davis

and who may act in your place?
Those with a passion for justice,
who speak the truth from their hearts;
who have let go of selfish interests
and grown beyond their own lives;
who see the wretched as their family
and the poor as their flesh and blood.
They alone are impartial
and worthy of the people's trust.
Their compassion lights up the whole earth,
and their kindness endures forever.

Psalm 121

I look deep into my heart,
to the core where wisdom arises.
Wisdom comes from the Un-namable
and unifies heaven and earth.
The Un-namable is always with you,
shining from the depths of your heart.
It's peace will keep you untroubled
even in the greatest pain.
When you find it present within you,
you find truth at every moment.
It will guard you from all wrongdoing;
It will guide your feet on your path.
It will temper your youth with patience;
It will crown your old age with fulfillment.
And dying, you will leave your body
as effortlessly as a sigh.

Sermon *Poetry of the Psalms* Rev. Bruce Davis (2440)

When I was getting ready to leave the practice of medicine, there were many people I wanted to say good-bye to. Some folks had been with me for more than twenty years, so I wanted to tell them about my plan in person.

To the question, "Why are you leaving us?" I experimented with several different approaches. To say I was "retiring" just didn't cut it. "You can't retire, you're too young! And besides that we need you!" Nor did fly-fishing our

Washington streams seem to be a good enough answer. So I tried something really extreme. I told the truth.

I said that after many years as a family doctor I wanted to expand my conversation with people to matters of the spirit. I told them that my *Call* to medicine had evolved now to be a *Call* to ministry.

The response when I leveled with people was remarkably positive. “Well of course you’re going to be a minister. We’ve seen it all along. We were wondering when you were going to figure it out!” I appreciated their words. Some even brought small gifts to send me on my way to a new career.

[I’d spent my practice years in south-central Seattle, so the gifts reflected the multi-cultural origins of the folks I’d worked with. A couple from China who spoke little English when I began to work with them many years ago brought me a small picture of a dragon, symbol of the spiritual journey in the ancient Chinese wisdom traditions. A family of Quakers I took care of gave me a book by Parker Palmer called, *Let Your Life Speak*, a must-read for seekers on a path of Spirit. A first generation Russian immigrant gave me a bottle of his favorite Vodka. I wondered what this had to do with his spirituality or mine, but I did put it to good use at my retirement party. (124)]

A Jewish woman I’d provided care to for many years gave me her favorite translation of the Hebrew Psalms to guide my way. This was a precious gift because even as a youth, the Psalms were one of the most significant parts of the Hebrew Scripture to me. Her gift reminded me that my path into ministry was not beginning now, but began decades ago, before even I decided on a career in medicine.

Psalms are poems of love. The Greek word *psalmos* is the origin of our word “psalm” but the Hebrew word that the psalmists themselves used is ZMR, meaning “to pluck the strings of a musical instrument.” What this suggests is that the Psalms were written to be sung, often with a harp as accompaniment. We often use the idiom, that love “pulls at our heartstrings.” The intention with the psalms is that they resonate not only on the musical harp but equally in the human heart.

The Psalms of the ancient Hebrew tradition were written in the territories of Israel. The oldest Psalms are 3300 years old. They were written by ancient Biblical

writers, including among many others Moses, Solomon, Asaph, and David. More than half of the Psalms in the current Bible were written by or for King David who lived 3000 years ago.

David was a king of shadow and light, both. On the one hand he was a powerful military king, merciless with his enemies. On the other he experienced the deep and poetic sentiments that we find in the Psalms. His relationship with and image of the divine is thus bifurcated between a power of judgment and protection and a beloved presence and companion. If we consider his level of consciousness or spirituality from the perspective of the seven human chakras, David appears to have operated partly from a first chakra fight or flight response and partly from a fourth chakra intention of heartfulness and relational love. The Psalms that arise from this latter energy are the ones that speak to us most deeply.

So long ago were these poems of love written and sung that we would be shocked if we could hear them in their original form. For most people in the West, based on the evolving piety of the Christian Church, we imagine a shepherd strumming a lyre in a pastoral setting in Provence or Cornwall. Our image is likely to be of a shepherd with white skin, though the psalmists themselves were surely of a swarthy, Middle-Eastern complexion.

Recently I heard a rendition of the Psalms being sung in an authentic way. Far from what has evolved in our Western piety, these songs reminded me much more of Arab chanting. I was caught for a moment by the profound difference between how I imagined these lyrical poems might sound in their day and the very foreign drone of Psalms given in authentic voice.

Like much of the ancient Hebrew tradition, the ancient Psalms have evolved into our present time. Just as the musical context has undergone huge transformation from then to now, so the language of the time has been replaced by new language. Not only am I referring to the historical movement of language from ancient Hebrew through Greek into Latin and finally into modern French, Spanish, English, and the like. I am also referring to the fact that the ancient ways of speaking about life's meaning in images and concepts have also evolved dramatically in three millennia. We need a translation of the ancient Hebrew to be sure. But we also need a translation of the world context if we are to know at depth what the Psalmist was experiencing.

Soon after I became a Unitarian Universalist, a minister named Marvin Evans, ordained both as a UU and as a Methodist, preached a sermon entitled “Spontaneous Translation.” He spoke of a practice that has been enormously valuable for me. Marvin presented a list of religious terms that had arisen in the Judeo-Christian tradition from ancient times—terms that were now translated into English but that nonetheless held fast to the ancient worldview.

His assertion in this wonderful sermon was that we need not adhere to those worldview-bound terms, but may translate those terms into language that is meaningful in our own lives now. He further asserted that we will not all translate ancient terms in the same way, because the meaning of a word for one person will be dramatically different from its meaning for another person. By “spontaneous translation” he suggests that we can learn not to ponder and wrestle with every word of an ancient text but to move quickly as we listen or read, appreciating in the word what is actually meaningful in our own lives right now.

[What Marvin was talking about here I’ve further understood in the distinction between a “literal” interpretation of an ancient text and a “literary” interpretation of the text. When we are using a literal approach, we do our best to come up with the modern English word that most closely approximates the original word as it would have been used in its own time. A literary approach looks at the image or concept implied by the ancient words in a way that makes sense and provides meaning in the context of our lives now. (93)]

Perhaps the most familiar of the Psalms is the twenty-third. Let’s look at this from a vantage point of spontaneous translation, much as Stephen Mitchell did with our readings. Let’s just consider the first line and see where it takes us.

It says: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

In the context of ancient times, the word “Lord” made sense as the highest, the protector because the community was structured around Lord as leader. In the best of circumstances the Lord was beloved, as a good father or mother might also be. Through the movements of history, especially the populist and democratic movements of the Enlightenment in eighteenth century Europe, the word “Lord” began to imply an autocratic leader in a political sense. The Age of Reason brought us to notions like our first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of each person, and our fifth principle, upholding the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process. Many of us did not want a Lord to direct us or judge us.

If the word “Lord” doesn’t fit for me as the beloved most-high, around which I might center my life, what word or image would better serve me *now* to get at that intention. From twelve-step spirituality we have the phrase, “Power greater than myself.” From the indigenous Americans we have the words, “Great Spirit.” Early Christians used the terms Light, Life, and Love to name God. Many such images may come up for us as we translate from ancient times to now. Such terms as “Light” or “Spirit of Life” or “Universal Consciousness” or “The Sweetness of the Infinite” or “the ineffable Mystery” may resonate better with the strings of our own personal heart than the term “Lord.” Nor does this concept require an overt theological underpinning. Love universal might refer to the highest capacity of our human-ness without reference to anything beyond the full human potential.

The word “shepherd” here is, of course, a metaphor, and as such it is open for our interpretation. But what “shepherd” meant in the ancient world is very different from what it means now. For one thing, the sheep were a major part of their agrarian economy. What image might now give that same sense of being gathered in community under the watchful, guiding and protective eyes of the beloved? Who are our shepherds now, and what do they do?

“I shall not want,” suggests that I won’t be without what I need. But think how dramatically our needs have changed since ancient times. “Need” for us may mean that I don’t get caught out without an umbrella or a cell phone. In ancient times it took no more than a year’s drought for many to perish. “Want” was much more basic then than it is now, and for me the psalmist uses this word to imply that basic level of need. What is it that we really need as human beings in our time? I’m reflecting on the beautiful article about Jim Strickland and his family in a recent edition of the *Everett Herald*. Our lives could be significantly simplified to address our fundamental needs, getting rid of superfluous stuff, winnowing down our lives to what matters most.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Where does that go for you? For me it’s something like this:

“Loving Mystery of Life you are my guide to the things that matter most.”

Now those are words that I can live by! The practice of spontaneous translation would have me learn how to interpret almost instantaneously as I read or hear the language of the Psalms. Imagine what value I might find in these ancient love songs, written three millennia ago. Imagine the unity I would feel with

the people of that time as we both declare our essential relationship to Life. Nor is such reading limited to the Psalms because all of the scriptures of the world's ancient wisdom traditions will open to us with this practice.

This spring I'll offer a series as part of our Evergreen Adult Programs, in which we will delve into the scriptural traditions of the world. Our goal is to learn more about extracting truth and meaning that otherwise would lie hidden to us, as a miner probes the mountainside for signs of gold.

One of the great psalmists of modern times was Walt Whitman. Growing up in a Quaker family, son of a carpenter, Whitman's poetry encourages us to an expansive appreciation of truth. It is no wonder that he's been adopted by Unitarian Universalism as one of its own psalmists. In his words:

We consider bibles and religions divine—I do not say they are not divine; I say they have all grown out of you, and may grow out of you still; it is not they who give the life—it is you who give the life.

The Christianity that came out of the counsels of the fourth and fifth century decided that no writing after about the year 100 had the authority and inspiration of God and would therefore not be included in the Bible. Whitman disagrees, as do most Unitarian Universalists, suggesting that revelation is now and always will be open. Whatever we call that deep source of inspiration, as it emerges creatively into the words and music of our own time, we are participating in the growth of new scripture. The community of persons is ever declaring truth and meaning, to share with the present and the future.

So what are the Psalms of our own time? What are those loving expressions of truth and meaning that strum the lyres of our hearts? These will not be the same for all of us. For one of us it might be a sonnet by Shakespeare, for another a ballad by Bob Dylan, and for yet another a song from the Beatles. Nor are the new psalmists old or academic; like our new president elect, let us look to the young for inspiration.

This from the singer Jewel. Her sentiment here resonates with the excitement I feel as our nation embraces positive change.

Don't worry mother, it'll be alright

And don't worry sister, say your prayers and sleep tight.

It'll be fine lover of mine.

It'll be just fine.

Lend your voices only to sounds of freedom

No longer lend your strength to that which you wish to be free from.

Fill your lives with love and bravery.

And you shall lead a life uncommon.

I've heard your anguish.

I've heard your hearts cry out.

We are tired, we are weary, but we aren't worn out.

Set down your chains, until only faith remains.

Set down your chains

And lend your voices only to the sounds of freedom.

No longer lend your strength to that which you wish to be free from.

Fill your lives with love and bravery.

And you shall lead a life uncommon.

Surely the psalms of our time, the cannon of fresh scripture, abound. Yet, I invite you one more step. What is the song of life that is written on your own heart? What sweet music of love might you strum that will declare your relationship with the source of your life, in a way that will inspire the lives of others? What prayer emerges from the center of your being that may touch with love all those you care about?

Pick up pen and paper, pick up your paints, pick up your old guitar, and get work. For it is you who give the life, ever more abundantly.

Amen.