

Are We There Yet?
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Meditation

Yes, the light does grow dim, the darkness does grow deeper...
Yet out of the darkness may there grow light...

That those in the midst of war may find peace...
That those who are hungry be fed...
That those without a home find shelter... and home...
That those whose rights have been denied have their rights restored and honored...
That those who grieve find comfort...
That those who are ill find healing...

And whether we are in the midst of difficult times or easy times, may we learn to be better instruments of peace and help and healing in a troubled world...

May we be among those who bring light and joy to our neighbors and friends...

This season, and always.

Readings

The first reading is taken from the Preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people...

Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom...

Now, therefore,

The General Assembly,

Proclaims this Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.

The second reading is from the words of Jesus and the Buddha:

Jesus said: Do to others as you would have them do to you. (*Luke 6:31*)

The Buddha said: Consider others as yourself. (*Dhammapada 10.1*)

Jesus said: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. From anyone who takes away your coat, do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. (*Luke 6:27-30*)

The Buddha said: Hatreds do not ever cease in this world by hating, but by love; this is an eternal truth.... Overcome anger by love, overcome evil by good. Overcome the miser by giving, overcome the liar by truth. (*Dhammapada 1.5 & 17.3*)

Jesus said: Put your sword back in its place; for all those who take the sword will perish by the sword. (*Matthew 26:52*)

The Buddha said: Abandoning the taking of life, the ascetic Gautama dwells refraining from taking life, without stick or sword. (*Digha Nikaya 1.1.8*)

Sermon

Growing up in the densely packed suburbs of New York, I believed that the world was neatly organized with villages nested in towns, towns in counties, counties in states, states in nations, and nations in the world.

Among other things, this nourished my early belief that it would simply be a natural evolution of things for the political organization of the world to catch up with this neat geographic organization – in other words for the United Nations to become a genuine world government, bringing peace to the world in the same way that a nation could bring peace within its borders. That was my utopian ideal.

Of course it turns out the world is more complex than this. To begin with, a family trip across the country when I was ten dispelled my belief that wherever you are you would be in a village nested in a town, nested in a county, and so on.

And a little history in school dispelled notions of gradual and inevitable progress toward world government.

But ideals are hard to shake altogether.

And maybe they shouldn't be altogether shaken.

So, in college I developed a more sophisticated but still idealistic fascination with utopias. I took a class that studied utopian communities of various kinds: literary (Plato's *Republic*, *Erewhon*, B.F. Skinner's *Walden II*) as well as utopian attempts in the real world (Brook Farm, the Amish, Israeli kibbutz communities... not to mention the various communes spawned by my own generation in the 60s and 70s). It's a long list, both the literary and the historic.

We human beings have for millennia yearned for a way of living, a mode of social and political organization that is better than the way we find ourselves living – since the way we find ourselves living seems so clearly imperfect. So, understandably enough, some of that yearning has for millennia given rise to the utopian impulse, the desire to create some sort of perfect community – whether in isolation from the rest of the world, or including the whole world.

Some of that yearning has also been woven into the religious utopian impulse: We certainly see it in the belief among many Christians in a second coming of Christ and an eternal reign of right and justice

But it has, after all, been over two thousand years since that child Jesus – savior, messiah, or at the least a moral teacher of some genius – was born... so... shouldn't we have come to accept that this better world to come, this final reign of right, this utopia – religious or otherwise – is no better than a mirage, rooted in nothing more substantial than wishful thinking?

Maybe... yet after all this time, we – yes, we skeptical Unitarian Universalists – still for example sing hymns which reflect not only a yearning for this better world, but seem to affirm a certainty that someday we will achieve not just a better world but a kind of utopia.

Just turn to the section of our hymnbook titled... "In Time to Come" (beginning with hymn 139) to find language like this: "Wonders still the world shall witness... they shall know a world transfigured... peace its splendor over all the world has known" and "...the work that we have builded... will live and shine transfigured in the final reign of right" and "Now is the time approaching by prophets long foretold, when all shall dwell together, secure and manifold..." and "Yea, we dip into the future, far as human eye can see... hear the wardrum throb no longer, see the battle flags all furled, in the parliament of freedom, federation of the world."

Heady stuff!

And many of the carols of this season express similar hopes, even apparent certainties – including our final hymn today: the carol "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear" (written by a starry-eyed Unitarian!).

But... really? Do we actually believe that someday peace and justice will be the order of things? Do we believe that the world will actually someday be "transfigured" in "an age of gold"? Do we believe all this?

I don't think I do. Do any of us?

Yet if we don't believe it, why do we sing it?

On the other hand, if we were to choose not to sing it, are we by default choosing despair?

Surely there is reason to despair – a case can be made... often is made. After all, as I've just said we've had before us the sublime moral teachings of Jesus for 2,000 years – of the

Buddha for longer than that. And what have we had to show for it during all those years, all those centuries? Slavery, torture, wars without end, genocide, holocaust, terrorism... not to mention daily unkindness and rudeness. Haven't these people been listening?

... haven't *we* been listening?

Well... we *have* actually.

And there is more than one way to tell the tale. To begin with: it seems to me that we miss the point of these ancient sublime teachings, just as we miss the point of what I would consider to be a recent incarnation of those teachings – namely the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whose 60th anniversary was just this past Wednesday, December 10 – if we believe that the teachings and the Declaration were meant to usher in an actual, real-life utopia, perfection, or were meant to suggest that the world and human beings *aren't* and will always be deeply flawed.

For we *are* manifestly flawed... who could deny it? Why else would we need the teachings and the declarations?!

Yet – here's the thing – we *are* at the same time filled with moral potential.

So... if not utopia... and if we are to avoid despair... what then?

(And before I go any further, I'll note that I've been helped in my reflections this week by a dense but fine book, *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-up Idealists* by philosopher Susan Neiman. This was a follow-up to her book on the origins of evil. You certainly can't accuse her of ducking the big questions!)

Back to my question: If not utopia, if not despair... what then? Simple... but not easy: *moral, ethical, living in the world as it is.*

This has to do with the distinction drawn by philosophers and ethicists between the "is" and the "ought." The "is": of course, is the way things are. Look around, walk your streets, live your life, read the papers, watch the news, examine your own imperfect self – all of this is the "is": Including everything from daily rudeness to a good person's painful death to the terrorist attacks in Mumbai or the holocaust.

And something in us recoils from this "is," knows that none of that is okay. Wishes it were otherwise. Indeed feels it *ought* to be otherwise – more fair, peaceful, just – and that we *ought* to live in ways to help it be otherwise, indeed that as part of our little contribution to the effort we ourselves *ought* to be a little better that we are – a little kinder, a little more peaceful and helpful.

The philosopher's "ought." Which seems to be inside most of us. "The moral law within" it was called by 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant.

Now, from whence *comes* this ought?

That's another sermon, perhaps volumes of sermons – philosophers, theologians, anthropologists, evolutionary biologists, psychologists, neuroscientists, historians... have their quite varied theories.

Inborn? Genetic? Implanted by God? Cultural habit and custom?

But you know what? In the end, I don't think it much matters where the "ought" comes from. What matters is that most human beings *do* in fact have this inward sense of right and wrong (however differently we sometimes interpret it or apply it), what matters is that we *do* in

fact have an inward sense that the world could be better than it is, and that we *ought* to do our part, large or small, to help it become better than it is.

And even if you don't believe that *most* human beings have this inward moral sense it really only matters if *you* do.

In this spirit, just because we realize that our ideals will never be fully realized doesn't mean that there is something wrong with our ideals, or something wrong with our inward moral compass, or something wrong with trying to live accordingly. Our ideals, our moral compass, lead us, direct us in living as we most deeply want to live – regardless of where it takes us... or doesn't.

So the question of my sermon title – “Are we There Yet?” – if by there we mean the “final reign of right” – also doesn't matter much.

To begin with, a mere glance at the headlines makes it clear we *aren't* there.

But still we may want to know: have we gotten *anywhere* since Buddha, since the Hebrew prophets, since Jesus, since Mohammed, since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? Have we gotten *anywhere*?

Well, putting aside another nettlesome philosophical problem – whether there is such a thing as progress in any pure sense – we actually can identify what Susan Neiman describes as “signs” along the way, signs that improvement (a little bit of progress if you will) is possible when it comes to moral and ethical questions and standards and realities. For example – and hardly trivial examples – slavery and torture, while not eliminated, are reduced and no longer considered acceptable by general societal norms. Civil rights, women's rights, gay rights – there have been extraordinary gains just in recent decades.

Yes, as Neiman also allows, all of these achievements and others are incomplete, and any could be reversed... but a huge portion of the world accepts that *this* is now how the world at least *ought* to be – no torture, no slavery, universal rights. Isn't this progress, however imperfect and halting?

And, as she concludes her chapter on hope and progress: “If you believe that progress is possible, you can do something about global warming [or poverty, we might add, or hunger, or homelessness]. If you don't, you can't change anything but the channel.”

So, of course we are not “there” yet – if “there” is some imagined utopia, some world which perfectly mirrors our ideals. Yet though we may *never* be “there,” our ideals, our precepts, our inward moral intuition and reasoning have led us a good distance. Perhaps it *does* just depend how you tell the story:

Beginning with our earliest forbears caring for one another thousands of years ago. How else would they have survived?

Then formulated in what we call the golden rule of the axial age religions – the Hebrew Prophets, Greek philosophers, the Buddha, Jesus.

Then reformulated by the western “Enlightenment” in the 17th and 18th centuries, most notably in what Immanuel Kant called the categorical imperative: Act so that the maxim of your action could be universalized – and treat every other person as an end, never as a means.

Then affirmed sixty years ago this week in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – a declaration imperfectly honored to be sure, but a declaration which for the first time in human history at least attempts to hold all peoples and all nations to account according to accepted

moral and ethical measures which transcend tribal, national, and religious boundaries.
Extraordinary!

Finally, though, perhaps in the end not only doesn't it matter whether we will ever get "there," perhaps it doesn't even matter whether we are getting anywhere at all! Because if we are moral beings – or choose to be, which might be what it amounts to – we will act for what is right regardless of whether we believe that everyone has or could have the same kind of inward moral compass as we do and regardless of whether we think moral progress is inevitable or even possible. We will choose what's right (as best we are able) because it is right so to choose.

This, after all, is what the Buddha taught. This, after all, is what Jesus taught. This, after all, is what the Universal Declaration teaches... not to mention our own Unitarian Universalist Principles.

So the exalted language of our hymns and Christmas carols, a world transfigured, a final reign of right, may not describe the material world as it will ever be. But these words *do* describe our *moral* universe, they *do* give voice to our ideals, the hopes of mind and heart, our sense of how the world *ought* to be *if* it conformed perfectly to our ideals. And so they inspire us to take the next step and the next.

Just as the story of a child born in a stable, cared for by parents, by beasts, by shepherds and wise ones (angels all, if a certain kind of truth be known) – reawakens our heart's knowledge of how we most truly, most authentically, would choose to live one with another, each day:

Moral, ethical, compassionate living in the world as it is.

So may it be.