

Following in the Footsteps
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Call to Worship

We come into this house of history:

May we learn from our history.

We come into this house of a free religion:

May we be reminded here to use our freedom wisely.

We come into this house of love and kindness:

May we be inspired here to live our love and kindness.

We come into this house of hope:

May we leave here committed

to helping our hopes for a better world to be realized.

Reading

From *Lifelines*, by Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Forrest Church:

Let me make it simple, for it is simple. For us to be here more than a billion billion accidents took place. All our ancestors lived to puberty, coupled, and gave birth. Not just our parents, grand parents, great-grandparents. Take it all the way back to the beginning, beyond the first Homo sapiens to the ur-paramecium... (everything)...that happened from the beginning of time until now to make it possible for us to be here.

...The universe was pregnant with us when it was born.

...And how does this affect the way we treat others? I hope it means we will treat others as being as unpredictable, unexpectable, and amazing as we are. In the womb of the universe when God first gave birth, they too have run a billion billion gauntlets, emerging against almost impossible odds to walk here beside us on this planet. They are more than neighbors. They are kin, honest to God and hope to die kin.

Sermon

Twenty-two years ago I began my ministry among you.

How did my life's path lead here? How did I make the decisions, one after another, that eventually brought me here to Hingham's Old Ship?

As modern Americans – well, really as Americans of almost any time in our history – we like to think that we can shape our own destinies, create ourselves anew, start fresh as if we had no history.

But then I look at where I've ended up for these past twenty-two years, and I have to wonder whether there have been deeper currents pushing me one way rather than another. For how is it that I became the 20th minister of the church whose first minister was my great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather? How did this happen, when I didn't even know of this connection until after I arrived here? Should we just say coincidence and leave it at that?

I just don't know what to make of it.

I do know that 375 years ago next September Peter Hobart arrived with his wife Elizabeth, four children, other Hobarts and other families from Hingham, England, and settled

here, new Hingham. And I know, we know, that Peter then became the first minister of this, our First Parish in Hingham, a church which was, as in all the Puritan settlements, at the center of the life of the town.

And I know this too, that all these generations later, when I was in search for a church, the search came to an end here, as I sought and you offered me the pulpit of our First Parish. And only later did I learn from an aunt that one of the lines of our family tree led back to Peter Hobart.

Now it is true that Peter, by his first wife Elizabeth and second wife Rebecca, had many children who lived to adulthood; which means that there are thousands, probably tens of thousands of Hobart descendants. So maybe my arrival here is not such a coincidence. Maybe most of us are Hobart descendents, even though most may not know it.

But I *do* know it, and that I should have followed in my ancestor's footsteps so precisely, without even realizing I was doing so is... well at the least intriguing.

Of course maybe I've only nominally followed in Peter Hobart's footsteps. The resemblance of our two life journeys may be superficial only. Two such different times, after all, two such different circumstances, two such different theologies.

Yet... though the times and the town have changed (in so many ways we could list), though our theologies surely are radically different, even so in the words of the title of a recent history of Hingham, perhaps not all is changed.

Hear, for example, some of the words Peter Hobart spoke to his congregation these eleven generations ago not long after their arrival here 374 years ago. Then hear words from one of my first sermons from this pulpit a mere twenty-two years ago. Perhaps with a little reflection you'll agree that maybe not all is changed, that there may indeed be deeper currents than we might have thought flowing from then until now.

Peter's words:

The Hobart party had first spent some months on the more settled north shore before moving here to Bare Cove, soon to be Hingham. So Rev. Hobart first asked his listeners, his congregants, his fellow-citizens, why they should have thought to "leave our friends and neighbors of Boston, Salem, or those of other plantations already settled and affording the comforts which this, our new-found habitation, ill presents."

His response?

"Each has his answer; but underlying that answer must be one strong, harmonious thread which is to be wound into a fabric whose warp and woof will build manhood and womanhood comparable with that sturdiness which has made our neighboring colony, Plymouth, the bone and sinew of today's New England."

Hobart continued, noting the beauty of this corner of the creation: "Nature and nature's God smile kindly on this new Hingham and its adjacent country." Then he outlined the envisioned future for their new settlement of Hingham, affirming that: "As we sow so shall we reap. Others of our faith and kin hearing of the good works we perpetrate here will come to make common cause with us." Hobart goes on to invite hard work in this beautiful land. He invites friendship and cooperation with those he calls "the red people." He affirms that they, the settlers "must be a community of Christian folk, law-abiding, non-disputatious, working for common good, united in purpose."

Finally, he reminds his fellow settlers of their first purpose in having made the journey across the sea: that "God may be worshipped as our consciences dictate, with none to say nay; our rulers in a land where the people voice their selection will be from our own midst and kind; the laws will be of our own making... And the church in which we shall worship our own god will arise from our own feeble hands."

He concludes with a brief prayer to God for grace and strength of “heart, mind and body” for all that lies ahead.

Now let me share a much briefer passage from one of my earliest sermons – one I preached to the Old Ship search committee, and then eventually to the entire congregation. On that day a mere two or so decades ago, I concluded with the following words, which I do believe echo the essence of Hobart’s message:

What’s a blessing – really?

No easy answer – and yet the simplest of answers: Surprise. Awakening. Fullness of life. Love. Presence for and with another human being. The answers of experience, life lived, the circle of blessing received and given, growing awareness of how life is indeed, in John Muir’s delightful phrase, “all hooked together.” And a deepening knowledge of life as blessing, awareness of moments, and of moments stretching into generations, may yet be enough, for each of us, and for all of us together.

On the face of it, this is quite different language from Peter Hobart’s. But it seems to me that there is something at the heart of both Peter’s and my messages that represents a deep common current or thread. I’ll put it another way: Amidst whatever hardships life may pose, notice and experience the blessings of life – call it God’s gift, Nature’s gift, mystery’s gift, it doesn’t much matter... it is gift. Notice the gift. Notice and experience the blessings of life, even as the blessings are sometimes, and for some of us all too often, hidden amidst deep wounds. Notice too the ways in which all of life is “hooked together,” so that we are all linked in inescapable bonds of mutuality.

And then turn and bless the world with our lives, our work done as well as we are able. Isn’t this what both Peter Hobart and I were affirming?

Another of my earliest sermons was titled “To Be of Use,” borrowing a phrase my father had lifted from Joseph Conrad, echoed also in a lovely poem of that name by Marge Piercy, which was read at my installation here at Old Ship.

To be of use.

To do our work, I preached, with faith that our work, our words, our lives ripple into the lives of others, into the world how far we cannot know. In like manner, Peter Hobart had called his people to hard and good work “for the common good,” with a faith that others would be inspired by their example.

So, yes, perhaps though distant in time we are not so distant in spirit from Rev. Hobart and his small band.

Yes, Hobart was grounded in a Puritan theology much of which I – and probably most of you – would not find comfortable or compatible; a theology that affirmed each and every one of us was sinful through and through, a theology that affirmed a God who had designated only a few of us for a place in heaven.

By stark contrast my own theology is more grounded in the here and now of the human condition, in my experience of the wonder of life woven into my grief in the shadow of the tragic sufferings of life.

Yes, I nod in the direction of the great mystery we call God, but my attention is grounded in my/our shared experience of this world and what we might make of it, and how we choose to treat one another, and how we choose to treat the creation which sustains us.

Yet this stark theological difference noted, we are told that Peter Hobart’s sermons focused much more on how his parishioners ought to live a Christian life rather than on fine points of theology. So I would guess that though my great-grandfather many times over and I

could have a vigorous theological and philosophical debate, we would then be able to turn to whatever the work was at hand, echoing Jesus and all the great spiritual leaders of our human history: to strive to bring healing and hope, peace and justice to a world so sorely in need of our compassionate attention.

Finally, though Hobart was not always as “non-disputatious” as he had exhorted his early parishioners to be (there are stories that could be told), he nevertheless began a legacy of welcome and inclusion in this First Parish of Hingham that continued through successive ministries to our own time.

For Hobart, inclusion meant welcoming into baptism children even when one of their parents was not a covenanted member of the church; inclusion meant more liberal church membership practices in general; inclusion meant a warm welcome to the local Indians on the benches of the Meeting House. All in all, inclusion resulted in a far higher percentage of citizens of Hingham as members of the church as compared with most other Massachusetts Bay Colony settlements.

So Peter Hobart might not have been able to imagine welcoming and including Buddhists, Muslims, agnostics, or atheists to Sunday service; and might not have been able to imagine women serving as ministers, or the celebration in marriage of two women or two men. But though a Peter Hobart suddenly transported to our time might find much of this beyond anything he would or could have contemplated... with some reflection he might come around. For after all, we would remind him, it is *his* legacy of welcome and inclusion and freedom that we 21st century Old Ship Unitarian Universalists practice, simply now in our own way in our own time.

So, yes, we (me, you, all of us), however individually we strive to shape our lives, are also carried forward by the legacy of generations, deep currents of life flowing through the generations from distant times to our time: Generations who, whatever language they have used at one time or another, have wished to be of use, have strived to turn the blessings of their lives into a blessing of and service to the lives around them, the world... generations who have over time enlarged concepts of religious freedom, who have helped to open minds and hearts to a wider welcome of ideas and of people.

We are told that near the end of his life – he died at the what was for the time the great age of 75, after over four decades of ministry in Hingham, and not long before the frame of our current Meeting House was built – Peter Hobart lamented what he called “the barrenness of my ministry.”

Well, we all have doubts from time to time about the meaning and purpose and effect of our lives. (At least I don’t think its only Peter and me!)

For me... in those moments when I might doubt the importance or effectiveness of my ministry and of our shared ministry, taking the time to contemplate the great river of life of which we are a part, indeed as Forrest Church reminded us in the second reading, the cosmic river that spans not just generations and continents, but eons and galaxies... oddly reassures and comforts me. For far from making me feel smaller, this vision of who we are in this grand flow of life encourages me in this work we share – perhaps because I feel again part of a great company of generations; so I feel again privileged and proud to be part of this work we share, work whose end we will not see, but which we can choose to carry on and then pass on with love and care, from hand to hand, heart to heart, generation to generation, as the deep and enduring currents of life flow on.

May it always be so.