

What Are We To Do Now?
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
September 17, 2017

Readings

from Isaiah chapter 1

Hear the word of the LORD,
you rulers of Sodom;
listen to the instruction of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!
¹¹ “The multitude of your sacrifices—
what are they to me?” says the LORD.
“I have more than enough of burnt offerings,
of rams and the fat of fattened animals;
I have no pleasure
in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.
¹² When you come to appear before me,
who has asked this of you,
this trampling of my courts?
¹³ Stop bringing meaningless offerings!
Your incense is detestable to me.
New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—
I cannot bear your worthless assemblies.
¹⁴ Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals
I hate with all my being.
They have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.
¹⁵ When you spread out your hands in prayer,
I hide my eyes from you;
even when you offer many prayers,
I am not listening.

Your hands are full of blood!

¹⁶ Wash and make yourselves clean.
Take your evil deeds out of my sight;
stop doing wrong.
¹⁷ Learn to do right; seek justice.
Defend the oppressed.^[a]
Take up the cause of the orphan;
plead the case of the widow.

“Beginners” by Denise Levertov

*Dedicated to the memory of
Karen Silkwood and Eliot Gralla*

*“From too much love of living,
Hope and desire set free,
Even the weariest river
Winds somewhere to the sea-- “*

But we have only begun
To love the earth.

We have only begun
To imagine the fullness of life.

How could we tire of hope?
-- so much is in bud.

How can desire fail?
-- we have only begun

to imagine justice and mercy,
only begun to envision

how it might be
to live as siblings with beast and flower,
not as oppressors.

Surely our river
cannot already be hastening
into the sea of nonbeing?

Surely it cannot
drag, in the silt,
all that is innocent?

Not yet, not yet--
there is too much broken
that must be mended,

too much hurt we have done to each other
that cannot yet be forgiven.

We have only begun to know
the power that is in us if we would join
our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

So much is unfolding that must
complete its gesture,

so much is in bud.

Sermon

The other day I ran to the top of Turkey Hill here in Hingham, one of my frequent routes.

I sometimes do indeed see turkeys along the way, but I also often see cows.

As many of you know, as you approach the top of Turkey Hill Lane the fields of the Weir River Farm are to your left. That morning the farm cows were in one of the upper fields, mostly huddled together.

It was a beautiful morning, no storm coming – and no predators that I could see – but the cows were huddled together.

Well, this what herd animals do – whether in a peaceful field on the South Shore of Massachusetts or in the Serengeti plains of Tanzania and Kenya. It is a form of protection against predators, who can more easily pick off a solitary animal.

Perhaps you've seen video of the migration of wildebeests and zebras in the Serengeti: Two million wildebeests gather near the beginning of the year and at no apparent signal, one day, one moment, off they go on their two thousand mile journey – as they have done for, it is thought, a million years. Thousands die along the way, most of exhaustion, a few by way of a leopard or lion. But the herd makes it, two thousand miles, and then after a time, back again.

The herd, sticking together, survives the journey – as it has done for millennia.

So far as I know, the cows of Turkey Hill migrate only as far as the next field, and mostly at the direction of their human caretakers. But the message is the same – true for the turkeys too, as long as we're talking about Turkey Hill: stick together and your chances are better than going solo.

In her book *Living Beautifully with Uncertainty and Change*, the American Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron quotes from “The Prophecy of the Hopi Elders” which had been published in the year 2000:

At this time in history, we are to take nothing personally, least of all ourselves. For the moment we do, our spiritual growth and journey come to a halt. The time of the lone wolf is over.

We humans, western humans especially, American humans in particular, too often get it backwards. We forget that we, too are if not herd animals, certainly social animals; and that our survival, much less our thriving, depends on sticking together.

The time of the lone wolf is over, if ever it was a good idea.

Thing is, though, though we humans may be social animal, unlike cows and wildebeests and turkeys, we are also a predator species. And in the history of our evolution this has sometimes served us quite well – in fact served us well indeed during the hundreds of thousands of years we were primarily hunter gatherers.

But, as the Hopi Elders warn, maybe not serving us so well anymore.

Today, then, I'm asking “What are we to do now?” And the operative, critically important word in that question is “we.”

Because whatever else we do in relation to the multiple crises we face in our nation and in the world: crisis of leadership, crisis of division, crisis of racism and white

supremacy, crisis of health care, crisis of refugees and immigration, and above all, in my book, crisis of climate change and climate justice... Whatever we do, we must do it together and stick together.

Starting close to home, right here at Old Ship, our shared covenant affirms this.

In our covenant, we name the context of values we share, as affirmed in the seven Unitarian Universalist “Principles”, and then we outline a movement, if you will, in the context of values and in the context of community, from nurturing our individual spiritual and ethical development, to caring for one another, to serving life as we seek greater justice, peace, and ecological sustainability... together.

Personal spiritual practice and development? You bet, but supported in community.

Jesus frequently is described as going off alone to pray, but then always returning to his ministry of healing and teaching in community.

The Buddha taught meditation, often a solitary pursuit, but also named the importance of the *sangha*, the community of monks and by extension the community of all who seek to awaken and grow into more compassionate human beings.

So there is a rhythm to our lives suggested here. It will look a little different for each of us, depending on the sort of person we are, but there is a rhythm, from the personal to the communal, inward to outward, breathing in and breathing out.

For me, as I’ve described to you before, I begin my day in mostly solitary ways: My morning run, not only keeping my body reasonably fit, but helping keep me grounded in the natural world. Reading the newspaper over breakfast, so I know something of what’s going on in the political and social world, and then, with my tea – well, actually first I read the sports section, particularly during the baseball season (we need diversion too!) – then reading from an ancient or contemporary wisdom text to ground me in the spiritual wisdom of the ages, to put into perspective whatever the news of the day might be; and finally writing a bit, reflecting on some of what the morning has already brought to me.

Then into the social, community fray of the day: the office, emails, phone calls, sermon preparation, visits, and so on. But a little more grounded and present than I would be otherwise.

We each find our ways of staying personally grounded and present in the midst of the communal responsibilities of family, friends, work, and the wider world. But we must find those ways – it seems to me in these times in which we live more than ever.

And it is a critical part of the mission of this Old Ship community, as I’ve suggested, to support us in that grounding, in that personal spiritual and ethical development, to enable us to better meet both the personal and shared challenges we face.

So on one level, our Old Ship answer to the question “What are we to do now?” is to keep on doing what we have long been doing or striving to do, as reflected in our covenant.

More specifically, when it comes to the challenges we face in our nation and in the world?

Well, it is for us together, often through our Social Justice Council, to discern what we can best do together. What specific gifts, talents, and resources do we have that best can meet some particular portion of the world’s woe?

For as I noted last week, paraphrasing and extending a thought from one of you, though it takes a village to create more justice, peace, and ecological sustainability, we

don't have to be the whole village. We just have to discern what piece of the work we are best suited to do.

Now, we could take and mostly waste a lot of time and energy pointing fingers at those responsible for the increase in division and hate, re-emergence of white supremacy and racism (which never really went away after all), pointing fingers at those who deny climate change even in the face of evidence as clear as Harvey and Irma, as clear as an unprecedented number of western wildfires, and so on.

But pointing fingers won't get us far – in fact can take us further away from where we truly and most deeply want to go; and pointing fingers gets us off the hook a little too easily for our role in contributing to cultural and political divisions, our role in warming the atmosphere, and so on.

Elsewhere in her book *Living Beautifully*, Pema Chodron writes: “What’s happening on our earth today is the result of the collective minds of everyone on the planet.”

Rather, then a better use of our time and energy is to pick ourselves up, nurture our hearts’ kindness and compassion and love, and continue to do what we can – which might be more than we thought we could: To serve a meal at Father Bill’s, to lobby for immigration reform or health care reform, to contribute to hurricane relief, to reduce our carbon footprints and lobby for clean energy and climate justice, to meet the overarching slow-moving yet ultimately most perilous emergency of our time.

Last spring at our annual meeting we gave ourselves some marching orders in regard to all this, affirming the Social Justice Council’s recommendation that we focus our social service and social change efforts on “protecting vulnerable communities.” Well, plenty to do there! But again, though we surely can’t do it all, together we can discern what we can do best.

Together.

Not waiting until we have completely clean hands ourselves, but in the spirit of the prophet Isaiah, who was reading the signs of his times, as we can surely read the signs of ours... in his spirit to do our best to:

stop doing wrong.
Learn to do right; seek justice.
Defend the oppressed.

Well, to draw to a conclusion for now: Optimism may be hard to come by these days in the face of all that’s going on in our nation and in the world.

But not so hope. For hope is not particularly dependent on outward circumstances (better not be). Hope is far more a quality of the heart. As our opening hymn put it, in words we often sing: “I’ll bring you hope when hope is hard to find.”

Which moves me to affirm that whatever else we do as a congregation and as individuals, we can be among those who choose to bring hope to situations that may seem hopeless and to people who may feel hopeless, hope in the form of a helping hand, a welcome meal, hope in the form of showing up at a rally or march in solidarity with those at the margins of our society, hope in the form of changing a light bulb, changing a politician, changing ourselves. Hope in the form, however else always in the form, of love.

In this spirit we heard Denise Levertov earlier:

But we have only begun
To love the earth.

We have only begun
To imagine the fullness of life.

How could we tire of hope?
-- so much is in bud.

“We have only begun”?!

Well, actually I take her words as a hopeful message in itself.

We think we’ve already done so much and failed, because look at the mess of the world? Well, no, there is more to do, so much more to do; and in fact we have no idea, no idea whatsoever what will come of it. How could we think we are that smart? Smart enough to throw in the towel?

We are *not* that smart.

Instead, may we keep in mind that every day, likely every hour of every day, that we have the opportunity to work on our own minds and hearts, change the way we look at things, understand others, open our hearts to a wider range of the human family, the family of life – deepen our love.

And every day, from our loving, kind hearts, we have the opportunity each of us and all of us together to do something that improves the world, at least our part of the village of life, the herd of humanity and of life on the planet, always remembering with my colleague, Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed, that:

The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done.

Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.

Together.

So it is. So may it be.