

# Where is God in These Times?

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church) Unitarian Universalist

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*(text from live-streamed worship)*

## Call to Worship and Lighting of the Flaming Chalice

Though at a distance, we have once again gathered in spirit.  
May our time together bring comfort to those who need comfort.  
Bring inspiration to those who need inspiration.  
Bring all-embracing love – God’s other name – to... everyone!

I light the flaming chalice of our Unitarian Universalist faith,  
Today may this be a flame of justice, a flame for true equality, as we hold in our hearts the people of Minneapolis, and hold in our hearts with solidarity all who suffer and too often die because of the color of their skin.

## Meditation and Prayer

May we now pause, slow down, breathe into this moment, become more fully awake to this moment we share in spirit...

And from this deeper presence in the moment, our hearts’ yearnings arise, prayers to the God of our hearts, God of all blessings...

This day, in addition to our prayers for all in need during this time of coronavirus... the yearnings of our hearts bring prayers for the family and friends of George Floyd, prayers for justice in Minneapolis, prayers that we might finally someday not too far off, complete the work of centuries, work for racial justice, for economic justice, for true equality and freedom for all.

All as we offer prayers of gratitude... for the helpers and healers during the pandemic and for all the courageous justice-seekers in our troubled land too filled with division and hate, for all who seek to make the world more fair and all her people one.

## Readings – from various ancient traditions

Unnameable God, my essence, my origin, my life-blood, my home. (Psalm 19)

The kingdom of God is within you. (Luke)

The kingdom is inside you and it is outside you. (Thomas)

Do not despise the world, for the world too is God.

Wherever you turn is God’s face. (Muhammed)

Self is everywhere, shining forth from all beings,  
vaster than the vast, subtler than the most subtle. (Upanisads)

The tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.

Every being in the universe is an expression of the Tao. (Tao Te Ching)

The Great Spirit has made us all.

...forms of worship do not matter to the Great Spirit; what pleases the Great Spirit is the offering of a sincere heart. (Seneca)

## Message – “Where is God in These Times?”

James Baldwin wrote:

"If the concept of God has any validity or use, it can only be to make us larger, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of him."

Well, amen to that! And more important than ever.

In the newsletter earlier this week I noted I'd be speaking to the topic, "Where is God in these times?" and I noted that the topic, in general terms, had been invited by the high-bidder for a sermon topic at last year's Merrie Market auction. Who was, by the way, John Sneath, who a few days ago emailed to me the age-old question of how we might "reconcile the God who creates all things good *and* bad... and the God who is at my side loving me through the pain and suffering."

As for God in *these* times? 100,000 Americans lost in just a few months from Covid-19... including people of color at much higher rates than whites... and another African American man brutally murdered by a white police officer... and all the anger and outrage which has more than understandably followed.

God in *these* times?

Well, one way or another, in every time, troubling questions such as John's arise.

John went on to suggest in the same email that maybe it's "easier to reconcile if we stop personifying God and think of God in a more Taoist way."

Well, this would be closer to my approach – to think of God as the ordering principle, the way (which is what Tao means) that the world works, the way of the cosmos – physically and morally – with which we can align ourselves... or not, at our peril.

But this is all too abstract for this moment. So here's the nub of it for me – *these* days more than usual: Whether you conceptualize God as personal or impersonal or even if you dismiss "God" altogether – the important, essential, question it seems to me is not "Where is God in these times?" The essential challenging question posed by God, by Tao, by the moral arc of the universe, by conscience... is "Where are *you* in these times?"

The God of the Hebrew prophets did not want worship through ritual and offerings – "I despise your feast days" that God said. Rather, in words often quoted by Dr. King, "let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

"Where are *you*" that God was asking through the mouths of the prophets.

Paraphrasing Jesus, what are you/we doing to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, release the prisoners...?

The God of our hearts today, by whatever name or no name at all... perhaps just call it conscience... asking us what are we doing to heal the divisions in our nation, what are we doing to finally bring equality and justice to African Americans – 150 years after the end of slavery,

fifty years after the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts – what are we doing to bring the same freedom and privilege that those of us who are white take for granted to *all* Americans, regardless of color, background, religion, gender.

And if our personal experience of some reality we would call God helps us to respond to such questions with both our words and our deeds, then all to the good.

A few weeks ago I talked about the Buddhist notion of “awakened heart” (*Bodhicitta*). Well, who could watch the video of George Floyd’s last moments under that officer’s knee without your heart breaking and awakening? And why does our heart break? Because we know and experience in our hearts – even when we might forget with our minds – that we are brothers and sisters, all one family, knit together, again quoting Dr. King, in “an inescapable network of mutuality.” So that when one suffers, we all suffer, when one can’t breathe, we all can’t breathe... our hearts awakened to compassion, “feeling with,” our hearts awakened to love.

Echoes of those words we heard from James Baldwin: “If the concept of God has any validity or use, it can only be to make us larger, and more loving.”

Well, concepts by themselves don’t make us more loving – but concepts grounded in experience can.

I shared a poem by Alice Walker a couple of weeks ago in which she wrote that we show our love for America by loving Americans, taking real pleasure in the colorful turban of another American, real pleasure in the “eagle feather in a grandfather’s braid” of another American... and so on. Can’t we see the beauty of each and every one of our American sisters and brothers, the lovely shades of skin, the varied accents and many tongues spoken among us, the delicious foods of all nations shared among us?

And know that each is equally precious to mother and father, sister and brother, dear friend. And each deserving of the same freedoms and opportunities.

Do I do enough to right the wrongs of generations? To end mass incarceration, to bring equal treatment under the law to all, to bring equality of health care and food security to all?

No I don’t. But together we must.

Where is God in all this? If God is anywhere, I’m with Whitman who wrote almost two hundred years ago that he saw God in every object, in every face, in each hour of the twenty-four. That surely means in the face of George Floyd, in the faces of his family... everyone. If God is anywhere, God is surely in the hearts of those demonstrating and speaking for justice, God is in the voices of the lawyers and prosecutors who will, we surely hope, bring all those police officers to justice. If God is anywhere, God is with the police chiefs and mayors who are speaking out against what they too had witnessed.

(And if God is anywhere, God is also in the beauty of these spring days, nourishing us for these times and for all times.)

The name “God” less important, far less important, than our experience of oneness with others and with the world all around... our experience, as I said last week, of beauty, of truth, of

goodness. God of no names, many names, beyond all names, the power that creates and sustains, that comforts in the midst of suffering, that guides us in the ways of love and justice.

After all, God in these times of pandemic and injustice can't be different than God in any other time. The names mattering far less than whatever it is that sustains us and nourishes our spirits, whatever it is that opens us to experiences of awe, wonder, and compassion... whatever it is that guides us in our striving to live lives of use to others, lives that contribute to peace-making and to justice-making... so, once again recalling those words of James Baldwin, whatever it is that makes us larger and more loving.

So may it be.

**Hymn** – Amazing Grace

### **Closing Words and Benediction**

Names matter less than the spirit...  
than kindness,  
than truth, beauty, and goodness,  
than justice,  
than our heart's love.

May we bring that justice-seeking love wherever we go.

Be well. Be safe.

Take care of yourself, take care of one another... take care of everyone!

As best we can...

May it always be so. Blessed be. Amen.