

For Such a Time as This
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

Isaiah 2:2-4

In days to come
the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
³ Many peoples shall come and say,
'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.'
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
⁴ He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

The second reading is by the environmentalist and writer Naomi Klein, taken from this year's Ware Lecture, the major lecture given annually at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly:

The future is up for grabs. As Kim Stanley Robinson observed, "We are all now stuck in a science fiction novel that we are writing together."

Writing it together, that's the key point. No one knows how this ends because we haven't written it yet.

The great Arundhati Roy made a similar observation, comparing the pandemic to a portal. "We can choose to walk through it," she wrote, "dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it."

That, my friends, (Naomi Klein continued) is precisely what is happening in the streets. A movement, led by Black people and young people but welcoming to all races, gender identities, religions, and generations, has done the work of imagining a radically different and more beautiful world, and they are already fighting for it.

Let's do whatever it takes to walk through the portal and join them.

Sermon

Is Unitarian Universalism in any way uniquely prepared for such a time as the time in which we are living?

Well, I don't know about "uniquely," but I do know that our history and our UU faith do have particular gifts to offer and strengths to bring to these times of uncertainty, upheaval, and challenge, these times filled with worry and anxiety, these times filled with what may feel like overwhelming social and political issues.

What are those gifts, and what are those strengths?

I'm going to begin a response – which is about all I can do this morning – with a visual aide, one you've been looking at all morning – and for many years: this stole.

As many of you may remember, this stole was a gift from you to me on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of my serving here at Old Ship as your minister. The design evolved from a long conversation I had with the woman who created it; but it is more accurate to say that the design evolved over the course of my life, and in particular my life as a Unitarian Universalist since about 1960, when my parents joined their first UU congregation.

The primary and most easily visible feature of the stole are the two columns featuring the various symbols of the world's religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism; with two additional symbols at the top of each column: the whole earth, and our Unitarian Universalist flaming chalice.

How is all this relevant to the question of what particular gifts and strengths we bring to this time? Pretty simple actually. It is a reminder, to me anyway, that our Unitarian Universalist way of religion encourages us to draw upon wisdom and inspiration from all the world's faith traditions in order to meet any moment in time... including this moment in time... on the one whole earth, as our UU flaming chalice symbolizes the values we find expressed in multiple ways in the various traditions and in our own UU principles: truth, freedom, justice, peace, the right of conscience, caring, community.

For example, we heard a reading this morning from one of the Hebrew prophets. The prophets are fierce in their calls for justice, so I'm inspired over and over again by their fierce, unflinching messages – inspired and shamed more than a bit, for I know the ways I fall so short in heeding their calls. As I am also inspired and shamed by Jesus – who was, among the many things he was, an inheritor of the prophetic tradition – and who in like fashion called us to care for the least of these... with love.

Another example: From the Buddhist and Hindu traditions I am invited to remember what I too easily forget, which is that I am not essentially an isolated individual self, that what I routinely call "I" is not all that I am, that I am also in some way beyond words part of, in some mysterious way identical with, a larger Self... and that maybe I should live and behave a little more as if I knew this!

Further, the traditional practices of meditation within those traditions help me to be grounded in the midst of the uncertainty, worry, fear, and chaos of... any time... and certainly of these times.

I could go on, and you may have particular strands of the world's wisdom and philosophy from which you draw inspiration, and which help you remain centered and more peaceful than you might otherwise.

There's something else, something really important, to say about our particular strengths as a religious movement: this is that we explicitly affirm that one of the sources of our Unitarian Universalist living tradition is science. Think of it: the way of knowing that we call science is one of our religious values! Well, concerning the importance of science especially in these times I think I don't need to say more.

Well... all of this – and more – is named in our Unitarian Universalist principles and in the sources of our tradition, which teach us, among much else, to value and care for one another as we seek to help create a world of greater peace and justice.

One more thing about my stole. The designer added something that was a complete surprise to me. On the reverse side she wove into the stole an extraordinary image of the Old Ship Meeting House! Look...

Which for me is more than just a reminder that we are able to worship in this beautiful old Meeting House.

It is also a reminder that all the sometimes too-abstract values and traditions I've been talking about are manifest, made real, brought down to earth in particular times and places and communities... such as ours.

Which is a darn good thing. Because it is hard, very hard, to keep motivated and to keep moving when you feel all alone, not easy to come anywhere near living up to and from the high ideals and values that all the traditions, including our own Unitarian Universalism, hold before us. So, yes, we need the words and wisdom of the prophets, of the Buddha, of Mohammed, of Socrates... to re-ignite and center our spirits.

And we need each other – to inspire us, to lift us up when we're down, and simply to walk by one another's sides in this journey towards greater wholeness and justice... in these times.

These times in which we live?

Look, if we're not sad and angry at the extent of systemic racism and inequalities in our society... if we're not sad and angry under the hazy skies recently, knowing that the haze here on the east coast was smoke from the wildfires on the west coast, and knowing these fires are far worse because of the over-heated atmosphere, exacerbated further by too much delay and denial by those in power... and if we're not sad and angry in the face of threats to our American democracy, flawed as it was even before now... then maybe we haven't really been paying attention.

But our sadness and anger can too easily turn to despair and depression – which, though human and understandable, helps no one.

What then?

Once again: Bring to mind and heart whatever words and teachings inspire us, remember who we truly are, not alone but intimately connected one with another and with the creation...

and then – as individuals and as a community – do one thing to address the piece of suffering and challenge in the world that most breaks our heart. And then the next thing.

In the spirit of the Jewish tradition of tikkun olam, repair of the world, each of us doing what we can do – and no better time than Rosh Hashanah for such resolve.

I'll draw towards a conclusion with words printed in our hymnbook from my colleague in ministry, Mark Morrison-Reed:

It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. 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.

So that maybe, just maybe, we'll be able to walk together through the portal named by Arundhati Roy and Naomi Klein, the portal to “a radically different and more beautiful world” – the sort of world Ruth Bader Ginsberg worked tirelessly to help create, the work we must, yes at this appropriate season of Rosh Hashanah, new year, new commitment... that we must continue.

For how long? However long it might take... since in fact in spite of the urgent feeling of the present moment, we are also part of a long story, not over yet – may we do our part as best we can.

So may it be.

Benediction

From the great 19th century reformer and abolitionist, the Unitarian minister Theodore Parker:

Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere;
its temple all space;
its shrine, the good heart;
its creed, all truth;
its ritual, works of love;
its profession of faith, divine living.

May it long be so.