

PALM SUNDAY AND PASSOVER Our Judeo-Christian Heritage!

Some of us Unitarian Universalists who have come from Christian backgrounds aren't that interested in hearing about Jesus and Christianity every week. Whether or not we value the teachings of Christianity or what we understand to be the message of Jesus, we often go on overload when we hear too much of it. I don't often quote the Bible or talk about Jesus, though I still own that I am more influenced by what I think Jesus was about than by any other teaching or tradition. This period in the spring when Jewish Passover celebrations tend to converge with Palm Sunday, Holy Week, and Easter is one of the most important for both our Christian Traditions and Judaism. This is no accident, as Jesus might not have been in Jerusalem had he not gone to celebrate Passover. The drama of Christian Holy Week depends on Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on the way to celebrate Passover with his disciples.

In Christianity, Palm Sunday is the celebration of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem. It is remembered as a time when followers lined the streets, laying down clothing and palm fronds before his procession. It has often been celebrated in churches with a procession of children waving palm fronds, preceding Jesus on a donkey or church leaders. Traditionally, the palm fronds used this year will be saved and burned to create the ashes placed on believers' foreheads next Ash Wednesday to begin the Lenten season of preparation for Easter. The lofty music sung or played for Palm Sunday services often nearly equals the music of Easter Sunday itself. From the parades on Palm Sunday, through the darkness of Holy Week with the Passover Meal betrayal of Jesus by Judas and the denial of Jesus by Peter, the capture, trial, and crucifixion, and the Resurrection on Easter morning, the story of Jesus is collapsed into an 8 day Passion Play. Easter culminates the passion saga of Jesus and is also remembered as the period leading to Pentecost and the beginning of the Christian church, though both stories are more complex and are remembered differently in various early writings.

Though Christians often give it little thought, the drama of Jesus' Passion story was set by the main gospel writers into the Jewish celebration of Passover. This was no accident, either recalling the actual history of Jesus' last days or connecting Jesus inextricably to one of the most important stories of Judaism, the Exodus from Egypt led by Moses and the return to the Holy Land. One of the oldest poetic passages in the Hebrew Bible, the song of Miriam in Exodus 15:21 recalls the Exodus and is remembered as part of Passover: "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and rider he has thrown into the sea." Just as Yahweh is remembered as protecting and giving a new life to the people of Israel, Jesus became associated with the idea of a personal resurrection or new birth for Christians.

Now Jesus, who was a Jew who prayed to God, probably had more of a Jewish understanding that salvation is for the whole community, as in the Exodus, rather than just for the individual. The few passages in the New Testament gospels possibly exploring personal salvation as opposed to the benefits of righteous behavior may well be later additions. Remember, the canonical gospels were written after Paul's Epistles, those letters that really formed the early Christian communities. It was almost certainly more from Paul's letters than the gospels that Jesus first came to be known as Christ, the Greek word for Messiah or Savior. Paul, also a Jew and a Roman Citizen, surely knew the power of claiming the Jewish Messianic hope and took pains to explain how Jesus, already Crucified and gone probably ten years before Paul's vision on the road to Damascus, could fulfill that expectation.

Many of us who have found our way to Unitarian Universalism no longer find much power in the Judeo-Christian myths. Even though many offer archetypal and heroic images which speak broadly to the human condition, they have too often been literalized as if they were historically accurate. In this modern scientific age, beliefs in the veracity of the stories have become tests of faith rather than sources of wisdom. Even scientists and historians might have found wisdom in Judeo-Christian stories as much as in Greek, Roman, and Celtic stories, but for the demand made by Fundamentalist Christians that they literally believe the stories.

The celebrated entrance into Jerusalem leads to a time of darkness as Jesus' followers desert him and he is put on trial. Similarly, the departure from Egypt leads to a time of wandering in the wilderness for the Jewish people as they leave behind what had been a relatively easy life as a captive but fairly well-treated people and grow into the People of Israel. Most people as individuals as well as most organizations go through periods of testing, times wandering in the wilderness, facing trial and tribulation on the way to a greater maturity. Both the chosen son and the chosen people are put to the test, challenged to become bigger than ordinary life, to make choices or accept choices that are painful, to let go of ordinary life and move to a higher realm. These are lessons that any human being could appreciate if they weren't taken so literally. There are higher meanings in these stories.

This human journey we each traverse has painful and difficult times. It is surely not all a bed of rose blossoms. Some people face difficult challenges every day of their lives while others seem, at least at first glance, to live a charmed life. But it is part of the human condition to learn by the challenges we face, the mistakes we make, the failures and losses we experience. Both the entrance into Jerusalem and the exit from Egypt are celebrated as triumphs of the human spirit, and yet each had its darker side. Jesus's parade was a triumphal entry that soon led to darkness and death. The Jew's Exodus from Egypt led to a long period of wandering, disillusionment, despair and struggle. Each eventually led to a more positive outcome, but neither was the wonderful experience advertised at first. And at a personal level, Moses and his generation never made it into the Promised Land and Jesus arguably became something entirely different, eventually being elected into the divine realm 3 centuries later.

It has been said that none of us will escape this human journey alive, but what we do with our lives does make a difference. Many do not believe in any heaven, but most of us believe that we alone can choose the world we will leave for our children, grandchildren, and future generations. The things we learn on our journeys, the ways that we affect other people, the writings and songs we leave behind all can make a difference. The ways our children and grandchildren remember us will affect the ways that they interact with their children and grandchildren. We each leave some legacy, good or bad.

Our hopes and dreams, our Promised Land, may never be reached, but the journey can be passed on to future generations. Even if there is a heaven, the legacy we leave here is vitally important. To share what we have learned with future generations is vitally important for the future of the earth and humanity. No matter how much fanfare we get for entering the city, we cannot really know what lies ahead. All we can really do to make a positive difference is to live the best lives that we can. We cannot know for certain whether we will experience anything beyond this life, but we can do our best to leave a better world for our descendants. Who knows what Promised Land they may discover because of our wanderings in the wilderness?

During this last week of Lent, this Holy Week for Christians, I invite you to take some time to think about the legacy you will leave, the things you have done to make this a better place for future generations. There is always more that we can do, always more that we can strive for, always more to learn, but what are the things we have already accomplished? Whose lives have we touched in positive ways? What institutions have we made better by our work? How have we made things better for our families? From time to time, it is good to assess our lives to see if we have done and are doing what we want to do, whether we are living up to the values and principles we espouse.

Whether or not we consider ourselves Christian or Jewish, our Judeo-Christian heritage was essential for the development of Unitarian Universalism and continues to influence who we are as a movement. The theological views that became hallmarks of Unitarianism and Universalism came from the early days of Christianity. Unitarians believed like the Jews in a single God, while Universalists believed that a loving God would not send anyone to hell. Today Unitarian Universalists believe many different things, with some believing in God or the Goddess, while others do not. Unitarian Universalism could not have developed as it did without the roots in enlightened liberal Christianity. The influences of the enlightenment and early deists and Unitarians like John Adams and John Quincy Adams, friends of Unitarianism such as Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin all shaped this movement. Universalists began organizing in 1793 and quickly took stands and became active in all kinds of progressive social efforts such as abolition, education, and support of rights for women. Transcendentalists opened the door to study Eastern religions.

Modern Unitarian Universalism stands and builds upon the courage, wisdom, and curiosity of 19th Century religious liberals and upon the religious alternatives discovered, explored, and believed by religious leaders throughout the Christian era. Early Unitarians were labeled heretics when Trinitarian views won the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. while Universalists were named heretics with the condemnation of Origen in the 6th Century. Heresy comes from a root meaning choice, so we heretics are those who choose an alternate path and embrace alternate beliefs. This week we look back to celebrate the alternate paths chosen by Moses and Jesus.

We remember the past, and we allow the wisdom of the past to help us choose the path forward. Religious exemplars like Moses and Jesus, Buddha and Confucius, Mohammed, and others help us to discern the best way forward into the future. Teachings of love for others, acceptance, respect, and the quest for justice for all persons as well as for the earth and its other inhabitants help us to see more clearly and act more in line with our 7 UU Principles. In remembering the wisdom of the past we are reminded to listen to the beliefs, hopes, and dreams of others, even as we share our own beliefs, hopes and dreams. Within the core of the many traditions we find the best of the human spirit, the clearest expressions of hope for the future, the deepest respect, the greatest love, the broadest commitment to justice.

In this all, we recognize our calling, our obligation to put forth the best of religion, the best of humanity, the greatest hope for a sustainable future. For we remind ourselves here of all that is needed, all that is possible, all that we can accomplish together to bring peace and love and sustainability to our world. This is the dream expressed in our 7 Principles and in our community gathering, this is the commitment we make when we join Unitarian Universalism, this is our quest, our pathway, our journey.

Friends, let us go out to build a better world! Today, tomorrow, and forever as long as we are able! So may it be!

Shalom, Salaam, Namaste, and Amen!