

WHO'S AFRAID OF THE BABY JESUS?
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship
December 11, 2005
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There is a hill, or a rock, along the west side of the Dead Sea called Masada, on whose crest sits the remnant of an ancient hilltop garrison. Originally built up by King Herod, not long after the birth of Jesus, it was surrounded by a high stone wall and has long views in every direction. At the outbreak of the Jewish War, Masada was captured by a band of Jewish Zealots. After Jerusalem fell, once again, to the Romans in 70 C.E., Masada remained for three years the only point of Jewish resistance.

The Roman governor Flavius Silva decided to suppress this outpost and marched against Masada with a total of ten to fifteen thousand troops, who established eight camps at the base of the Masada rock and surrounded it, leaving no escape for the rebels. Using Jewish slaves and prisoners as labor, they built a ramp to the top. With a battering ram, they began their assault on the stone wall protecting the garrison.

During the night, listening to the assault, the rebels decided to kill themselves rather than fall into the hands of Romans. Ten people chosen by a lot killed everyone else and then committed suicide. In the morning Romans entered a silent fortress and found only dead bodies. Two women and five children survived the mass suicide by hiding in a cave; their story of the last hours at Masada was recorded by the historian Josephus.¹ I had the great privilege of visiting Masada about two years ago. It is a potent place; its painful history reverberates in the very rocks.

Extreme religious persecution such as this is unfortunately a familiar story. Even if we look only at Jewish and Christian history, the list is seemingly endless. The Israelites killed the Canaanites, the Assyrians killed the Israelites, the Crusaders killed the non-Christians, the Jesuits killed the Socinians, the Calvinists killed the anti-trinitarians, the Nazis killed the Jews... Certainly it's not only about religion...there is usually something of greater value at stake, like land or trade routes...but still, people have forever been identified by their religious beliefs and 'lumped together' for persecution or harassment.

On that same trip to Israel, we met with the woman who founded Women in Black. She is a Jew living in Jerusalem, working for peace, encouraging women to dress in black and stand silently on street corners, as a reminder of all of the horrors of war, of military oppression, and of the wall which is killing the soul of Palestine. She was asked why Israel, now so powerful and politically well-positioned, insists on keeping its thumb on little powerless Palestine. I will always remember her response. She said, "No amount of military power, no amount of ammunition, will ever convince Israel that she is no longer the victim, no longer being oppressed."

¹ <http://mosaic.lk.net/g-masada.html>

I tell you these stories because I wonder about just how deeply fear of religious persecution is imbedded in our very beings. Today we live in a society that espouses freedom of religion. This is not a recent change...religious freedom has been understood, if not legislated, since the 18th century in Canada. Admittedly, law and reality are not the same thing, because we have all experienced being misunderstood or unaccepted. Our parents may have actually legislated religious compliance. You may have felt like a misfit among school peers who easily fell into Christian ways. And some here may well have fallen victim to more extreme religious persecution. But we are no longer children and no longer the victims of such oppression. What will it take for us to believe this?

We have each chosen to be a part of a religious tradition that strives to be inclusive of theological differences. No doubt, many of us have come to this faith because we wanted a place where OUR theological beliefs would be included and honored. I'm sorry to be the bearer of the banner of onus, but being part of this community, this place that embraces us, requires us in turn to be accepting of each person's religious path. Are we to be tolerant of everyone but Christians, everyone but our closest neighbors and our most direct ancestors? Why is this so difficult for us?

There is no question but that Christianity, or its adherents, have wounded many of us. We've been told that our beliefs will send us to hell. Our perspectives and our beautifully creative ways of seeing the world have been squelched and silenced. We have not been seen as having any worth or dignity. Personally speaking, healing from that hurt has been a long process. Though I'm not a psychologist, I think it's safe to say that when we are hurting, we are vulnerable and reactive, and in such a state, even without any active input from the aggressor, it still has its hooks deep within us and we are not free. As long as we must spend so much energy reacting and blaming, we are still hooked.

Much of this is perhaps tied to the fact that we are the minority. It's counterintuitive from this position, but I believe that to attain true freedom, we must believe that, and act as if, we are free. We must open our arms to that which has hurt us. A free spirit is large and welcoming and trusts that there is nothing to fear. I am reminded of that precocious and searching Alice, who falls into Wonderland, and along her journey finds herself being judged in the court of the Queen, surrounded by an intimidating army. Alice takes a breath, takes another look, and claims, "Who cares for you? You're nothing but a pack of cards!" A pack of cards, indeed, a house of cards. Blown up, scary, but ultimately flimsy and insubstantial. Now, maybe Alice was terrified as she uttered these words. But she named the reality, confronted her fears, and was able to stand her own among them. In fact, as the story goes, her words sent the cards tumbling, and transported Alice back to her own world.

I wasn't here last week, but I've heard tell that the Christian message of Advent that was shared was difficult for some to receive. I am pained by this. While I would like this fellowship to be a place that challenges us, I don't think any of us want it to be a place where wounds are re-

opened. Here's the kicker, though. I believe that we, as ethical, thinking, capable adults have some control over whether or not we respond from a place of hurt. This 'control' may come through a fresh perspective, community support, repeated affirmation, through years of therapy (as it did for me), or by simply choosing not to be vulnerable, not to be afraid of that pack of cards. Perhaps part of our awakening is to see that the Baby Jesus and his story is not the evil we resist...the evil is the way in which humans have used this story to oppress and persecute others. We are not really afraid of the Baby Jesus but of the people who have twisted his story AND ours.

I can envision a time when hearing a message of Christian salvation would be no less safe and just as interesting as a message about Hindu reincarnation. Ultimately, they are no different. They are beliefs that I don't prescribe to, but which I am open to hearing about or learning from. They are just a pack of cards. Another example of this is that Unitarian Universalists in the States take the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. very seriously as a holiday; why should we celebrate the birthday of the prophet Jesus with any less intensity?

So, if you do feel fear, where does that reside? Has your history of being oppressed and silenced and unseen led you to a place where no amount of criticism, no amount of ammunition and wall-building is enough to comfort you? And if your reaction is one of repugnance or disgust, what experiences have made it impossible for you to appreciate a Christian perspective? Where's the threat? Dig it out. Face it. If you are Christian, a part of the cultural mainstream, how do you respond to such negative attitudes toward your beliefs? How are we to lead our lives, together, in the context of such distrust and wariness of those around us? Rob Breznsny, in his book *Pronoia is the Antidote for Paranoia* encourages people to accept responsibility for the part they've played in creating their own predicaments, and says that when we're obsessed with how people have done us wrong, we have little ambition to change ourselves.² I do not want to live in a blame fest. It just takes too much energy, sapping me of what I need for chasing and holding onto that which affirms and upholds life. I want to declare the truths for which I do not expect to have to die.³

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, an Edward Albee play, is an intense and warped domestic comedy in which a maverick middle-aged couple play a cruel game of emotional exposure on a younger couple newly arrived to teach at the same college. Behind the verbal rallying is a searing analysis of the ways any of us might lead our lives. Of the four main characters, one is locked in models of the past, one escapes into a make-believe world, one is an

² Breznsny, Rob, "Secrets of Pronoia: How the World is Conspiring to Shower you with Blessings", *The Sun Magazine*, November 2005, Issue 359, p.20.

³ Ungar, Lynn, "Chanukkah"

amoral social climber, and one is an eternal child, fearful of the future.⁴ The picture this play creates is one of a heartbreaking inability to create the new life that each longs for, and this image is also reflective of a civilization that has become too sharp, too skeptical, and too knowing for simple faith. Virginia Woolf, the British feminist writer who so deeply examined the psychological and emotional motives of her characters, and who ultimately went insane and killed herself, becomes in this play, the symbol of that of which they are most afraid, of losing the will to live.

The will not to die, not to succumb to paralyzing fear, can be liberating. The will to live, and to live ever more abundantly, is a holy desire. However misguided our longings may appear, however distorted our responses to our desires, therapist James Hillman insists that psychology regards all symptoms to be expressing the right thing in the wrong way.⁵ He says that we should follow the lead of our symptoms to find the myth in the mess, a mess that is an expression of soul. In other words, we should not discount our fear, but rather honor it, and follow its lead to uncover the deep longing it masks.

Literary critics make a connection between *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and Jung's work *The Undiscovered Self*. Now, I don't suppose you thought, that in coming to a service entitled "Who's Afraid of the Baby Jesus?" that we'd be moving into Jung-territory, but here we go. Hold on. In *The Undiscovered Self*, Jung identifies mass society as that place in which symbolism is lost because of the perpetuation of easy creeds. He then highlights the importance of individual responsibility and freedom, and argues that individuals must find ways to resist joining the mass.⁶ This is accomplished, says Jung, through the exploration of the unconscious that leads to self-knowledge and with it the recognition of the human potential for evil as well as good. Now, for Jung, religion is our relationship to the numinous. It is this experience, this inner transcendence, that provides us with the ground that prevents us from being swept up in a mass. (And even as I say these words, I am aware that this may be one of our deepest fears... the threat of being swept up into a mass and thereby losing our unique individuality.) Jung contends that by following our spiritual impulses to more consciousness of who we are, by discovering our Selves, we can relate to one another, not through the creeds or dogmas, but as enlightened, known human beings, one to another.⁷

Perhaps we have experienced Christmas and much of its trappings as part of that blind, easy, creed-affirming mass culture that destroys symbolism by reducing it to the concrete, leaving little room for a deep and personal self-searching. Perhaps it feels like there is no space for us

⁴ <http://members.aol.com/glasgocitz/plays99/gcwoolf.htm>

⁵ Brezsny, 18.

⁶ http://isbn.sprintbooks.co.uk/0415278392_The_Undiscovered_Self_Answers_to_Questions_Raised_by_the_Present_World_Crisis_Routledge_Classics_S_New_ed.asp

⁷ http://www.meta-religion.com/Psychiatry/Analytical_psychology/religion_the_undiscovered_self.htm

and all of who we are. But, in my quest to reclaim that which has been taken away, I would challenge us to re-claim symbolism, because without great archetypal symbols, we are left in a void of, or at best a dearth of, meaning. Henry Nelson Weiman, a great Unitarian process theologian said that “true progress has a conservative as well as a radical dimension. Progress retains what is of value, even as it rejects what has been proven unworthy.” In other words, let’s not throw out the Baby Jesus with the bathwater. It’s a simple story, rife with symbolism, and whether we are Christian or not, it deserves to be heard; the divine is incarnated here in this life, on this earth, in the humblest of places.⁸ This story affirms the holy in the birth of each child, and we don’t have to believe it really happened, nor do we need to adopt it as the meta-narrative for our lives, in order to learn from it, or in order to hear its promise of something for which we long.

I have learned a lesson from two great feminists...Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether. Each of them comes out of the Catholic tradition. Each of them offers a scathing critique of patriarchy. Each of them works to create a more just world. Yet Daly believes that Christianity is not redeemable while Ruether believes that there is hope for Christianity. This said, should this be your decision, I affirm your right to decide that the story of Christmas is not redeemable for you. My intention today is not to convince you that you need to embrace Christianity, or enjoy Christmas, or to insist that you should like hearing carols blasted through every store aisle for months before this holiday. What I do intend to express, is that our fear, and along with our fear, our disgust and our righteous detachment, does not serve us well. To live in fear is to commit a kind of suicide that separates us from life-giving possibilities. Yes, of course...part of our work is to critique that which is harmful and to call for justice to roll down like waters. It’s just that, as always, our work must begin with ourselves.

Children’s stories and rhymes, like the story of Alice, try to teach us how to navigate the world, a world that can be a hurtful and scary place. The title of today’s message, Who’s Afraid of the Baby Jesus, is reminiscent of the story of the Three Little Pigs who repeatedly and courageously asked, Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf? In this story, as it turns out, there was reason for two of the pigs to be afraid, because their houses weren’t strong enough to withstand the wolf’s mighty blows. But remember, those little pigs were not so intent on stopping the wolf as they were on constructing their own houses. One could say that the metaphor breaks down because the strongest house was the one made of brick, and while this might be true for tangible building materials, our strongest interpersonal boundaries are not brick walls, but are permeable and fluid. We must believe that love is stronger than hate, that kindness is more powerful than aggression. Our focus should not be on those wolves, but on growing and fortifying our own

⁸ Zucker, Amy, “What do You Want for Christmas?”, www.uua.org/CONG/column85.html

sense of our worth, our dignity, our right to believe as we do. We need to come down, out of our hiding, and welcome the presence of the would-be wolves in our pluralistic world.

Christianity is an integral part of our tradition. I am reminded of a piece of Universalist history. As many of you know, Universalists believed in a god of love and universal salvation in the midst of predominant Calvinist beliefs in predestination and punishment. Universalists have even been credited with (or blamed for) being the first to have celebrated Christmas, to hold services on Christmas Day, complete with a tree in the church! How unruly and heathenish of them! They saw clearly that the message of Christmas as recorded in Luke is one of universal salvation and therefore one for celebration...But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people..." Good news of great joy for all the people. All the people. Us. This is a message worth embracing and sharing and celebrating.

Earlier, Peggy read a part of Adrienne Rich's poem, *Transcendental Etude*. At the beginning of that poem, a part Peggy did not read, Rich writes this...

No one ever told us we had to study our lives,
make of our lives a study, as if learning natural history
or music, that we should begin
with the simple exercises first
and slowly go on trying
the hard ones, practicing till strength
and accuracy became one with the daring
to leap into transcendence...
--And in fact we can't live like that: we take on
everything at once before we've even begun
to read or mark time, we're forced to begin
in the midst of the hardest movement,
the one already sounding as we are born....

We cut the wires, and find ourselves in free-fall...

This is one of those hardest moments...facing our fears, taking responsibility for ourselves, learning to love. In this place, with our respect for our differences, with our embrace of the possibilities that love offers - here we find a tether cord that helps us with the difficult tasks of studying our lives and to taking on everything at once before we've even begun to read. And, here, we find the place where we can cut that wire, and find ourselves in free-fall, and find ourselves, once again, caught by a web of interdependency and mutuality.⁹ It is in these

⁹ Presley, Lisa, "Roots Hold Us Close"

moments, during these times of fear and these times of being reassured by each other, that we know once again that will to live and to live ever more abundantly.

May it always be so.

Amen.