

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“Tongues of Fire”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore January 8, 2017

Call to Celebration

This morning we will be connecting to the fire of the prophetic tongue. And one way to do it is to hear one of their voices. Listen now to these selected words from the prophet Joel in chapter 2:

Blow a trumpet in Zion;
sound an alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
for the day of the LORD is coming; it is near,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains
a great and powerful people;
their like has never been before,
nor will be again after them
through the years of all generations.
Fire devours before them,
and behind them a flame burns.
The land is like the garden of Eden before them,
but behind them a desolate wilderness,
and nothing escapes them...
Yet even now,” declares the LORD,
“return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
and rend your hearts and not your garments.”
Return to the LORD your God,
for God is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;
and God relents over disaster.
“Fear not, O land;
be glad and rejoice,
for the LORD has done great things!
Fear not, you beasts of the field, for
the pastures of the wilderness are green;
the tree bears its fruit;
the fig tree and vine give their full yield...

“The threshing floors shall be full of grain;
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil...
You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,...
I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.
Even on the male and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit.

Spoken Meditation

Micah 6:2-4, 6-8

Listen, you mountains, to God's accusation,
give ear, you foundations of the earth,
for God is accusing ... and pleading against Israel:
My people, what have I done to you
how have I been a burden to you? Answer me.
I brought you out of the land of Egypt,
I rescued you from the house of slavery;
I sent Moses to lead you,
with Arron and Miriam.

“With what gift shall I come into God's presence
and bow down before God on high?
Shall I come with sacrifices
with calves one year old?
Will God be pleased with rams by the thousand,
with libations of oil in torrents?
Must I give my first-born for what I have done wrong,
the fruit of my body for my own sin?

What is good has been explained to you,
this is what God asks of you:
only this, to act justly,
to love tenderly,
and to walk humbly with your God.

Readings

Some more contemporary tongues of Fire:

Writer James Baldwin:

I do not know many Negroes who are eager to be "accepted" by white people, still less to be loved by them; they, the blacks, simply don't wish to be beaten over the head by the whites every instant of our brief passage on this planet. White people will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this — which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never — the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed.

Animal rights activist and Philosopher Peter Singer:

“As far as food is concerned, the great extravagance is not caviar or truffles, but beef, pork and poultry. Some 38 percent of the world's grain crop is now fed to animals, as well as large quantities of soybeans. There are three times as many domestic animals on this planet as there are human beings. ... While we look [judgmentally] at the number of babies being born in poorer parts of the world, we ignore the over-population of farm animals, to which we ourselves contribute...[t]hat, however, is only part of the damage done by the animals we deliberately breed. — Peter Singer, Practical Ethics

350.org activist Bill McKibben:

We in this country burn 25 percent of the world's fossil fuel, create 25 percent of the world's carbon dioxide. It is us - it is the affluent lifestyles that we lead that overwhelmingly contribute to this problem. And to call it a problem is to understate what it really is. Which is a crime. Crime against the poorest and most marginalized people on this planet. We've never figured out, though God knows we've tried, a more effective way to destroy their lives.

Unitarian Minister Theodore Parker:

I say, solemnly, that I will do all in my power to rescue any fugitive slave from the hands of any officer who attempts to return him to bondage. I will resist him as gently as I know how, but with such strength as I can command; I will ring the bells, and alarm the town ... I will do it as readily as I would lift a man out of the water, or pluck him from the teeth of a wolf, or snatch him from the hands of a murderer. What is a fine of a thousand dollars, and jailing for six months, to the liberty of a man? My money perish with me, if it stand between me and the eternal law of God. I trust there are manly men enough in this house to secure the freedom of every fugitive slave in Boston, without breaking a limb or rending a garment.

Unitarian Women's rights activist Susan B. Anthony

Cautious, careful people, always casting about to preserve their reputation and social standing, never can bring about a reform. Those who are really in earnest must be willing to be anything or nothing in the world's estimation, and publicly and privately, in season and out, avow their sympathy with despised and persecuted ideas and their advocates and bear the consequences. 1860

Sermon

Louise's passion stays with me. I knew her when I served as the UU minister in Port Charlotte, Florida. Her passion was for plants, insects, birds and animals native to Florida. Her yard was, and I expect still is, a reconstruction of native habitat that the first Spanish explorers to visit that area might have seen when they disembarked. She initiated law suits against developers who wanted to cut down the local slash pine trees. She advocated for the use of native plants for landscaping; plants that didn't need any watering or fertilizer to grow. She wasn't someone who had great sympathy for northerners who retired to Florida and wanted to landscape their yard to look like an English country garden. And heaven forbid she found out you wanted to plant an invasive exotic flower or shrub next to your lanai.

Nothing brings up strong feelings like food. I know I've been an "eating prophet" here in response to the UUA considering, then passing, a Statement of Conscience on Ethical Eating. I have strong inner conflicts on eating ethics. On the one side, I desire to minimize the lives lost and destructive impact of corporate farming in the process of bringing food to my table. On the other are the many foods I don't digest well and cause me pain. The foods that are most easy for me to digest are animal sourced proteins. Yes, I strive to source my protein from healthy, sustainable sources that use ethical farming practices. And then, I pass the discount food bin in Price Chopper and bacon is on sale. Some of you know this dilemma, I'm sure. And as we stand there, we have in our head Peter Singer or a PETA prophet chastising us for the way pigs are raised on factory farms.

And every day I think about global climate change as I get in my car to drive here. There is no bus in from where I live on Sunday and riding my bike isn't a good option right now either. Yet, I can see in my mind's eye Al Gore in front of a power point movie of ice sliding into the sea from a glacier. Then Bill McKibben is pointing to the latest concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere which is now over 400 parts per million. Then he lectures me about the positive feedback loops of melting Artic sea ice and permafrost. I sigh as I drive down the hill on the Columbia Turnpike and admire Albany spreading out before me in all its glory.

Each one of these prophets I've mentioned have vitally important information, insights and opinions to share with us that deserve our attention and ought to modify our behavior. But at the same time, their message to us makes us uncomfortable because it interferes with what we might want to do, often what we like doing. In Florida, I didn't find the native plants all that attractive to look at or landscape with but I appreciated their use. There is much about the way pigs are raised and their intelligence that drive me to avoid pig flesh, but I really like bacon. Mass transit is a great way to get around as is bike riding but driving is just so much more convenient.

It makes me uncomfortable to hear my likes and dislikes criticized ... and I need to hear the messages of these prophets too.

The ancient Hebrew kings weren't so fond of listening to prophets either. The ways the powerful like to exploit the weak and vulnerable are fairly universal around the world. I recently listened to scholars on Melvin Bragg's BBC 4 show, *In Our Times*, discussing George Orwell's popular book, *Animal Farm*. It is a lovely allegory of how the pigs attain power and begin to exploit the other animals that we can all appreciate.

We're fortunate that the ones who assembled the Jewish scriptures included many critiques of the leaders as a way to counter-balance their power. A core Jewish idea we inherit as a guiding principle of our religious tradition is the concept of 'covenant.' God and the Jews, over the years, have cut deals. Jews agree to worship one God and follow that God's directives in exchange for protection and favor. Most notably, Moses accepts such a deal in exchange for the 10 commandments. In this system, the power of leaders and kings is subject to this holy covenant.

But given the corrupting nature of power, the kings and chief priests tend to go astray. It is the prophets who call them back to the covenant. In the books of what we call the Old Testament, this process of going astray and being called back happens over and over again. And the lapses have disastrous consequences for the Jews during different periods of their history.

That prophetic critique of institutional and personal power has a long history traveling through Jesus' critique of Jerusalem's collusion with Rome to Martin Luther's nailing of the 95 theses to the Wittenberg church door starting the Protestant Reformation, to Martin Luther King's leadership during the Civil Rights Era calling America to account for the oppression of citizens of color. Unitarianism and Universalism both have been sources of prophetic critique too that have made us a prophetic church.

Our very beginnings were critiques of Trinitarian and Puritan Theology. The early Unitarians carefully read their Bibles and didn't find reasonable support for the idea that Jesus was God. In fact his sacrifice dying on the cross loses some of its meaning if he knows he's God and coming back again after a few days of R & R in hell rounding up people to save. Early Unitarians believed he was, at best, promoted to a God status after coming back from death. But he was born fully human. Rather than a divine being, Jesus can be for us an exemplar of what it is to be fully human. The message and teachings of Jesus can guide us toward whom we can be and become if we follow his example in shaping our identity and character.

The Universalists were less concerned with the nature of Jesus than the nature of hell. They too analyzed their Bibles and believed they found evidence that Jesus' resurrection changed everything, liberating everyone from hell and abolishing it. There might be some time of purification after death for those who lived wretched lives, but eventually all of us would be saved and would enjoy eternal salvation. Jesus' sacrifice for us had done the work of reconciling us with God. We now could freely receive God's grace without fear. Like Las Vegas, the trials and tribulations of the human condition are here in this world and stay here after death.

Our focus then is on life lived in this world rather than mapping out a strategy to escape it and avoid eternal torment. This has made us especially sensitive to the travails of human life and responding to them. As both the Unitarian and Universalist sides of our heritage were influenced by the New England Puritan tradition, we inherited their vision of building a good and just society in the New World along with the Cambridge Platform of 1638 that we still use to organize our congregational life. And when our leaders witnessed injustice, they responded.

One of the notable Unitarian leaders of the abolitionist movement was the West Roxbury minister Theodore Parker. He railed against the injustice of slavery actively organizing resistance to it. Susan B Anthony was a member of the Rochester Unitarian Church. She learned of the suffrage movement because her parents attended the Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls. Anthony fought for the vote for most of her adult life. During the Civil Rights Era of the 1960's, our first UUA President Dana McClean Greeley marched with Martin Luther King in Selma. More recently, UUA President Bill Sinkford promoted religious diversity in our movement through advocating for a language of reverence and our current UUA President, Peter Morales, has been arrested advocating for immigrant rights.

It would take a day to describe all the different ways members and leaders of our movement have stepped up to be prophets or responded to the prophetic voice. One of the ways we do this is by passing resolutions, statements of conscience and actions of immediate witness at our yearly General Assembly. I enjoy looking through them on the uua.org web site as they clearly show the prophetic concerns we share. A partial list of topics include:

- Climate Change
- Environmental Protection including concerns about species extinction, pollution, soil degradation, mining methods, deforestation and habitat loss
- Renewable and sustainable sources of energy
- Ending war and creating global peace, equity and justice including ending nuclear proliferation
- Balancing security, sustainability and immigration
- Racial equality and civil rights
- Women's Rights
- Reproductive rights, and sexual diversity and gender identity Rights
- Animal Rights
- Universal and affordable healthcare
- Fair and environmentally friendly economic development that gives everyone access to wealth accumulation and enjoyment
- Stopping exploitation of the developing world, and
- Democracy and ethical, good government

We often proudly celebrate this prophetic dimension of our religious tradition. What we may lose sight of is the way that speaking out is received by others outside and inside our doors who do not exactly agree with these prophetic proclamations. They may make them uncomfortable ... in similar ways to what I described earlier about my experience listening to those voices that make me uncomfortable.

If we wish to be prophetic advocates for making the world a better place and encourage people to treat each other with greater kindness and compassion, we too need to be ready to receive critiques of our efforts and our visions.

Van Jones went to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania right before the election to do three interviews with Clinton and Trump supporters striving to stimulate civil engagement and conversation. Watching those interviews was not comfortable as I reacted inwardly to each speaker. Yet as I listened carefully, and Van probed, their conversation got deeper into each person's concerns, into their feelings and needs. I became aware of how I don't engage in these hard conversations ... enough – and should – because they make me uncomfortable.

I'm hearing something similar from many in liberal and progressive circles. They intensely dislike the experience of feeling uncomfortable when they read the latest tweet from our president elect. Watching FOX news and their talk shows drives them up the wall. Seeing white supremacists on television makes their blood boil.

My message today is this: stop resisting being uncomfortable.

Progressives already know they are going to be very uncomfortable in the first 100 days of the new administration as our values get challenged, tested and rejected. Rather than retreating into their cocooned happy place, they – and we – are going to need to stay engaged, speak up and speak out.

The energy to stay engaged, speak up and speak out will arise out of the flames of that discomfort. From that discomfort will come the words for our tongues to speak in response. Passionate, fire-y words guided by reason and truth are what we are called to write, blog, post, email, and tweet as well as speak. Our tongues of fire are fueled by witnessing cruelty, injustice, greed, hatred, and indifference to the vulnerable and the poor. It was the place from which our prophetic Unitarian and Universalist forbears spoke. It was the same place that Jesus found his righteous anger too.

Being willing to be uncomfortable will move us toward becoming effective supporters of the movements that prophets have started. And those of us who do have social privileges can then put them to good use leveraging our resistance rather than shielding ourselves from the world's problems.

It may even inspire a prophetic voice to come out of our own mouths.

Whether we win or lose today, whether we live to see what we want come to pass in our lifetimes, there is great meaning, value and purpose discovered when we **aren't** stopped from advocating for what we believe is right, good and true just because it feels uncomfortable.

May we be a prophetic congregation.

May we have the courage to speak up for our values
in the public square.

May we be a guiding light for the liberation of all people from
hate, greed, injustice and ignorance.