

"Reclaiming Jesus"

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, July 10, 2011

When I was about eleven, my mother and stepfather decided one Sunday that we were going to church as a family. They were struggling in their relationship; trying to make sense of my stepfather's post-traumatic stress syndrome that plagued him from his years in Vietnam. So it was rough. And so one Sunday we all put on our Sunday best and went to a church that a friend of my stepfather attended. It was a Pentecostal Holiness church not far from our home.

My mother and stepfather were Christians of the Pat Robertson tv-viewing sort. Not much into church. My church-going experience up to that point had been quite touristy. I had sung in my best friend's Presbyterian church. I had attended my cousin's Methodist church a few times because I was invited, and asked way too many questions. But my family was not really churchgoing so I did not have a church of my own. The Bible seemed a huge mystery to me; difficult to understand and even a bit scary. Jesus, however, was everywhere, growing up in Oklahoma City. A picture of the blue-eyed, light brown-haired version held a prominent position on the wall of my grandmother's dining room. I used to walk back and forth in front of the picture trying to see if those clear eyes would follow me.

As a child, my sensitivity to wonder and beauty was quite conscious. I had multiple experiences of the world being a magical place of which I was a part. Let me fill you in on one in particular that was fairly significant so that you can get the idea. When I was three or so, I had this four-posted doll bed. Each corner had a rectangular post with a sphere on the top. For weeks I would wake in the middle of the night, oddly no longer afraid of what was under the bed or in the closet, and get down on my hands and knees near that doll bed in the dark. Those posts seemed to come to life. They appeared to become little magical beings, a family actually, that disconnected themselves from the posts on the bed where they hid during the day and hopped down onto the floor. There was a mother and a father, a daughter, and a son. I would play with the children on the floor while the parents watched for hours until light began to creep through the windows of my room. And then, one night after a long night of playing, the mother told me that they would have to go away, but before they left, she was going to tell me many secrets about this world. She said that I should pay close attention but keep them to myself because the adults would never believe me. I remember she climbed up on my shoulder and told me all kinds of things, none of which I can remember a single detail about. But I can tell you that I felt amazement and joy and that getting these messages from her made me special

in some way. Then, I woke up my own mother, calling out to her seated on the floor near the doll bed, because when I tried to get up and go back to my own bed, I could not. My legs for some reason wouldn't work. It turns out that I had an ear infection, an infection so severe that the doctors were worried that it had affected my brain. I went to the hospital and for the most part turned out okay. After that the little people never came back.

What sense you make of my experience of the little people likely has more to do with you and your experience than with me and mine. I have been told at various points in my life that they were angels, gnomes, or spirit guides. As an adult I am pretty sure that my experience was connected to that ear infection, and likely, a very high fever. But the why is much less important to me than the impact of the experience and what I do with it, because it was very real. Throughout my spiritual journey of trying to determine where I belong, I have carried with me a sense of having a personal relationship with something much bigger than what is immediately evident. And, I have carried with me a sense that our experience is typically much bigger than any adult could ever explain or might ever believe.

Fast-forward nine years or so; I am now eleven and we are going on that family trip to the Pentecostal Holiness church. This was a congregation of about one hundred packed into a tiny building. There was a full band, which I had never seen in church before, but which felt more familiar to me since my mother and father were in a rock band that rehearsed in my living room, before they divorced. As I'm sure you can imagine, the service that morning was an emotional roller coaster. I remember the music, and the clapping, and the singing, and at some point in the service, people began to stand up and speak in tongues, with the minister translating from the microphone in front. It was explained that they were touched by the Holy Spirit. At the time this did not seem foreign to me at all. Why not? Little people had whispered in my ear and disappeared. The Bible was difficult to understand and mysterious.

In the church that Sunday, everything was explained through the lens of Jesus; "Someone in this room is feeling the spirit; someone wants to turn their lives over to a higher purpose; someone wants to be saved from this world..." If you were feeling the Spirit, feeling God, you were invited to come forward and take Jesus into your heart, and walk with the spirit. Now I don't remember how I got there. I do know that my mom and stepdad remained decidedly in their seats. And there I was at the front of this little church, on my knees, crying tears of joy. Here were adults who recognized there was a mysterious layer of the world like I had experienced; there were words for what I felt! And other people felt it too!

What is clear to me now is that if I were born in a different country, that same experience—my culturally-bound experience of the Holy Spirit, of Christian mysticism, my sense of a union with God that Sunday, the feeling of the presence of Jesus—would have been labeled something completely different. If I had been born somewhere else, I could have communed with others having experienced God's infinite light in Judaism, or complete detachment from the world in Buddhism, or liberation from the cycles of karma in Jainism, or deep intrinsic connection to the world in Taoism, or touched the core of my innate knowledge in Islam, or my innate blissful nature in Hinduism.

I did not know this at eleven. And my mother and stepfather did not have the same experience that Sunday. Instead of that being the beginning of my family's long-standing relationship with the Pentecostal Holiness church, we never went back. Instead I began a religious journey of my own, trying to find the right church for me. I began going to church with my friends. Because I went to a majority African-American fifth-year center and was in the choir, my journey included Shiloh Baptist Church in Oklahoma City. At the time I was one of very few Caucasians in attendance, which didn't bother me at all because I loved the music! And so I went there for quite awhile until the spirit moved me to join the church, which involved giving my life to Jesus again. So there I was at the front of the church once again on bended knee.

If you've never been down on your knees at the front of a church, it is a transformative experience. There I was, on my knees, and a deacon quickly whisked me away to an off-chancel private room to pray with me. He said, "Sister, I'm so glad that you have found Jesus—but you must find another church. This is not your church." I don't know if that was because I am white, or because my parents weren't there. But it didn't matter to me. I knew that my not being able to join that church was about people, not about God. Somehow I knew they had gotten it all wrong.

And so, because I loved that church, I sought out another Baptist church, this time with one of my Caucasian friends, on the far Northwest side of town. Let me just say upfront that the music was not as lively. But I was determined this was important. I wanted to get this right. I wanted a spiritual home. So I went to their Sunday school classes week after week, and memorized their answers, asked lots of questions, and then it was time to go to the front of the church again. Now, in this church, all the youth came forward and you were plunged in water, fully immersed with everyone at the front of the church. We had to wear these rubberized scrubs. I was incredibly moved; there is nothing like water immersion; it is incredibly powerful. I felt certain I had found my spiritual home. So next, it was time to have cake and punch—that is what they did to celebrate—and I went to change out of my scrubs. As I was dancing down the hall, the Youth Pastor stopped me and said, "How dare you

dance in the house of God!" Strike two. Somehow I knew that they had gotten it all wrong. I did not blame God, or Jesus. Why on earth would God not want me to celebrate? There was a whole church full of African-American Christians dancing and celebrating every Sunday! I knew it wasn't wrong.

At some point I tried the Methodists as well but reciting the Apostle's creed felt like lying. I believed God would not want me to say something that wasn't true for me. I also knew that my Buddhist father and Jewish and Vietnamese friends were loved by God, too. In the meantime I was starting high school, so I sank myself into academics and was learning about how we fought war after war about religion. It was in high school that I was introduced to philosophy, French Existentialism, specifically. I fell in love with the culture and the literature and the language; and I began to question and doubt the value of religion altogether. Maybe philosophy could answer my questions, or literature or science, if I just studied harder. The church couldn't seem to get it right, and so I tried on atheism.

After high school I went to Liege, Belgium as an exchange student, and was able to visually and viscerally experience where history and religion crossed paths. On a visit to Paris I went to Notre Dame Cathedral. The ceilings were arched and high, pointing to even higher peaks, so that as I walked in the cathedral, I felt very, very small. I noticed little rectangles in the floor, with names and dates, and I knew I was walking on the graves of saints. Just before I went down, I thought, "Who are we to decide who is a saint and who is a sinner?" Then I fainted. I have never fainted again in my life. But while I was out, I was on some crazy journey in my head and it felt like I was being whisked through history and shown all these religious wars, all these divisions in the world. When I woke up, I felt not just a bump on my head, but that God was disappointed, that God was sad that we were not getting it right. Here I was, in a huge cathedral, built on the backs of the poor with saints buried in the floor, fainting about saints and sinners, and God was just so disappointed by religion. So this was my confirmation of agnosticism. Okay; there was a God but people have messed up everything.

The Latin word for religion is *religare*, which means to be bound to, to make whole, to integrate.

Unitarian Minister Rev. Charles Forman wrote:

Religion is concerned with binding together the disparate parts of the human experience, with bringing wholeness to human life. It is concerned as well with providing paradigms by which humans learn to treat with care those moments or places or experiences that seem fraught with significance. Religion is dynamic; it is the power that recreates and transforms life; to be religious is to be aware of dependence on Something or Someone, on that Other we call God.

I was clear and still am, that there is something larger than me, something larger than human beings; that we did not in fact create this world, nor are we ultimately in charge, no matter how much our culture tries to persuade us to be all that we can be. What I love about Forman's definition of religion is that the focus is on integration, on wholeness, on balance; and so we must seek that which we are lacking to become whole.

It has been said of our Minister Emeritus, the Rev Dr. John Wolf, that if you went to his office and told him that you had been saved, this is what you would encounter. This is a quote from the forward of John's book, *The Gift of Doubt*, written by the Rev. Forrest Church:

If John is in the right mood, which he usually is, you are in for it. Perhaps he will tell you about the time that he himself was saved—all three of them, in fact. The lesson: how much happier he has been since falling from grace! Perhaps he will turn serious and quote the two great commandments of Jesus. The question: if Jesus were to come back today, would he have anything to do with the Christian churches? Probably not. It is just as well, John hastens to add, because the Christians within those churches certainly wouldn't have anything to do with Jesus. In any event, by the time Dr. Wolf has finished dissecting some manifest betrayal of Jesus by the very church that triumphed in his name, the chances are you will leave his office in a spin, your new-found beliefs challenged, your horizons broadened. But perhaps you can't imagine being saved. Well then, imagine this. After a dark night of the soul you discover that there is no God. So you go to John's office (John being the sort of person with whom one talks about such things) and you tell him that you have discovered that God is a myth, and that since there is no God, you are finished with religion. Do you know what happens next? That's right. The very same thing that happened before, inverted of course, but essentially identical in its effect. You walk in thinking that you have arrived at the end of your religious journey. Half an hour later you leave, knowing that you have only just begun.

I try to live up to that standard of integration in my ministry every day. There is no right way for everyone. But I can guarantee you that you will learn something about yourself and the universe if you open up to the possibility of being curious about that which you are certain is not for you. And In a culture that denies death, that will sell you every product under the sun to make you live longer, a culture that denies the spiritual nature of the flesh, I have been more and more drawn to understand a God who sought out what was missing for her, a God who sought the balance of his spiritual nature with the incarnation of the body, a God who wanted to relate to creation by understanding the limitations of being born and dying, a God who wanted to experience the tragedies and the miracle of the human experience that come with being born into this world: the birth, the growth, the beauty, the love, the confusion and the betrayal.

After coming to better understand the historical and the metaphorical Jesus in seminary, I have more recently had a visceral experience of Jesus. I touched the psychological truth of the Jesus story in

the midst of the Christian ritual right here at All Souls. It was a Good Friday service offered by people whom I trust here in this church. All of the Unitarian clergy came together to create it, all of my colleagues here in Tulsa took part. As we have preached from this pulpit, there is no Easter without Good Friday. And so we gathered. Marlin opened with an invocation of a darkness that falls in middle of the day, and I felt the loss of Marlin and Anitra's daughter, Sienna, like never before. Tragedy can happen to anyone. David Smith sang "Precious Lord" and I felt every note and every syllable: "We are tired, and weak, and worn..." Rev. Jack Bryant stepped up to pray and had just buried his son, a young, gay artist and visionary. The loss was palpable. New Dimensions Chorale sang, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" and put everyone in the room right there at the foot of the cross. Debra Garfinkel preached a wonderful homily from the perspective of Mary weeping at the feet of Jesus: "We will be powerless to save those we love." Rev. Gerald Davis spoke from his heart and I guided him up the stairs to assist him in extinguishing one of the last candles. Not enough sight to navigate the stairs and table. Our bodies will fail us.

And as I bowed my head to offer a prayer from the depth of my soul, I was overcome. Tears welled up in my eyes and I felt the power of the ritual press down on our little chapel and I was not alone. I was surrounded by these amazing people who had touched suffering, who were fallible and who were also aware of the power of the Christian story to inform and transform their experience. I felt the power of Christians throughout history and across time who had commemorated the death of Jesus — this betrayal, this tragedy, this loss, this death — for centuries. Every personal experience of death and tragedy I had ever witnessed rushed in. Because of my ministry, I have been at the bedside of the deaths of infants and children and teens, young adults, adults and aged men and women. That day I wept; I could weep with Mary, I could weep for Jesus. For the first time, the Christian liturgy did not feel manipulated or vapid or rote; it instead became a powerful tool for connection and for transformation. Not just in idea but in experience. There is no Easter without Good Friday.

Unitarian Christian Minister Earl Holt wrote,

We see incarnation not as a symbol of exclusiveness but of universality, not as a unique historical event but as a powerful metaphor for the essential truth that the divine is always coming to earth, flesh is continually suffused with spirit. The incarnation is continuous. The revelation is not sealed.

I need a theology that includes the body as well as the spirit, the mind as well as the heart. I need a theology that can bear the intensity of my joy and the depth of my suffering, a theology that strives to integrate the physical and the spiritual. And so I am seeking to understand my relationship to Jesus in a new way: culturally, socially, and spiritually. In the midst of a status-quo Christianity that wouldn't

claim me, which wouldn't recognize my call, which wouldn't recognize my most valuable relationship, there is a story of a Jesus that transcends all of this; a Jesus whose relentless love radically transformed religion by placing love for humankind above any religious law. A Jesus who spoke truth to power, who said there is no greater commandment than to "...love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength, and...love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:36-40)

Lebak in Aramaic is two words: heart and soul. I adopted that name in seminary to remind me every time I write it, of this quote, this principal. Now that I know who I am, now that I am more grounded in my own values and refuse to deny any of my personal experience, I will no longer allow other people to have a monopoly on the meaning of Jesus, on the meaning of incarnation. I will not let someone else impose their definition of redemption, salvation, or transcendence of God or religious authority or love. I am drawn to reclaim the story and the liturgy of Jesus as a way to relate to a God who seeks to understand humanity as much as we seek to understand God.

As Randy read earlier, Rev. Wallace W. Robbins says,

There is nothing unusual in a Unitarian saying that he follows as his master, as his leader, as his Lord, Jesus Christ. The point is we Unitarians do not have a creed: we have no confessional position which we are required to defend; we have a position of Christian liberty, of conscience to uphold. Our association is not based upon identity of belief, the requirement of a sworn agreement to a single formulation of verbal truth. Our association consists of Christian love, which requires forgiveness of one another, and, worse yet, forbearance of one another. "Love suffereth long and is kind." This is the basis of our association, not an identity of mental subscriptions. It is difficult to explain this non-creedal but forbearing society because of our name. Not all Quakers quake, so it is true that all Unitarians are not Unitarian. Our purpose is to [also] cherish those who are Trinitarian.

Might we all come together in this church, whether we relate to God or not, Jesus or not, Buddha or not, Mohammed or not, Yahweh or not. Whatever we call the infinite, may we, as Rev Wallace so beautifully stated, get the notion that not all men must agree with us.

Amen and Amen.