

Literalism

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Opening Words

We are here
with our whole lives in tow,
our worries and joys, our loves and losses,
our hopes and doubts, our pain and strength.
Amid spring snow, flowers and rain, we arrive
to weave a community that empowers love. So,

Mindful that we share a common world, but approach that world in different ways, we begin our celebration together by kindling our promise of mutual honesty, attentiveness, and deep courtesy. May we become more proficient at gratitude and awareness, that we might more deeply embody the kind of justice and peace which embraces everyone on earth.

Sequence (a Midrash on the Torah passages for Pesach)

And so Moses and his wife Zipporah and his sister Miriam and brother Aaron all walked into the King's Palace, and said in unison: "Let my people go!"

"Let your people go? To do what?" barked the King.

"To get away from the fighting, and name calling and righteous sarcasm about health care issues," replied Moses.

"To found financial and industrial and governance institutions based on generosity and cooperation, not personal gain and greed for the self-defined few," chimed in Miriam.

"To create educational systems that engage every kind of child, in every kind of family, and which see as their vision, the encouragement of the growth of the whole human person into a grounded maturity," answered Aaron.

"To offer a community where your firstborn and my firstborn might become friends, and where, when they grow up, they can marry whomever they wish, or not marry, as *they* choose," offered Zipporah.

The King frowned. Then crossed his arms. Then, without warning, he reached up and took off the Blue Crown, the one worn by every Warrior King for a thousand years, and said to them,

"Let me pack my bags. I'm going with you. Me and my whole family." And there was a sprinkling of laughter in the room; and then they all fell silent.

silence

Remembering that the Passover Story says that everyone left together, we think of our own togetherness, and we call to mind now all those who make this journey with us: those whom we love and those whom we find hard to love, those

whose memories we keep in our hearts, those whose final future we will never see. We name them aloud or simply thank them in the silence...

naming

They came out of bondage, says the legend, they came with all their differences and similarities, and they came out singing, singing, singing songs of all the nations, singing music with joy.

The First Reading *comes from the Gospel of Mark, which was written down around 71 CE, by an anonymous author we only name Mark.*

After they left Bethany, he felt hungry. He saw a fig tree in the distance, green with leaves, and he went up to see if he could find any figs on it. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, for it wasn't the season for figs. And so he spoke to the tree and said to it: "Henceforth, may no one ever eat fruit from you." His students heard what he said.

When they reached Jerusalem, he climbed into the temple, and began to drive out all the merchants, and he turned over the tables of the cashiers and the pigeon-dealer's seats, and he would not allow anyone to use the courtyard as a shortcut from one part of the city to the other. Then he began to teach: "It's put this way in our scriptures: 'My house is a house of prayer for all the nations.' But you have turned it into a refuge for racketeers." When evening came, he and his students left the city.

Next morning, as they were walking past, they notice that the fig tree had withered from the root.

The Second Reading *is a poem by Naomi Shihab Nye, written in 2002, and published by Harper Collins. It's called: My Father and the Fig Tree. The name Joha, in the poem, is the Palestinian trickster figure.*

For other fruits,
my father was indifferent. □
He'd point at the cherry trees and say, □
"See those? I wish they were figs." □
In the evening he sat by my bed □
weaving folktales like vivid little scarves. □
They always involved a fig tree. □
Even when it didn't fit, he'd stick it in. □
Once Joha¹ was walking down the road
and he saw a fig tree. □
Or, he tied his camel to a fig tree
and went to sleep. □ Or later,
when they caught and arrested him,
his pockets were full of figs. □ □
At age six I ate a dried fig and shrugged. □
"That's not what I'm talking about!" he said. □

"I'm talking about a fig straight from the earth
— gift of Allah! — on a branch so heavy
it touches the ground.□
I'm talking about picking the largest, fattest, □
sweetest fig in the world,
and putting it in my mouth."□
(Here he'd stop and close his eyes.)□□□
Years passed, we lived in many houses,
none had fig trees.□
We had lima beans, zucchini, parsley, beets. □
"Plant one!" my mother said,□
but my father never did.□
He tended garden half-heartedly,
forgot to water, □let the okra get too big.□
"What a dreamer he is.
Look how many things he starts and doesn't finish."□□
The last time he moved, I got a phone call.□
My father, in Arabic, chanting a song□
I'd never heard. "What's that?" □
He took me out back to the new yard.□
There, in the middle of Dallas, Texas,□
a tree with the largest, fattest, sweetest figs
in the world.□
"It's a fig tree song!" he said, □
plucking his fruits like ripe tokens, □
emblems, assurance□
of a world that was always his own.

Sermon

Not long before he died, my father was sitting in his wheelchair at the dining room table. It was, in fact, his last time at the table...from that day on, he couldn't get out of bed no matter how much help he had. My mother was sitting at the table that day, and I was there, and my sister was there. The supper was simple, the conversation, somewhat minimal for an Italian American family.

Without warning, my father sat up straight in his chair, hunched his shoulders and then waved his hands as if he was conducting a big band. Then suddenly, he burst out singing, "Up we go, into the wild blue yonder, climbing high, into the sun..." We all looked at him with open-mouthed bafflement. It took a few seconds for us to realize that this was a song we recognized. But then, since he had stopped singing, I realized he couldn't remember any more of the words past the first two lines; so I quickly looked up the words via my iPhone, and showed it to him with the letters as large as I could make them. He smiled, read them, and then finished singing the first verse.

Now I had supposed my father sang this song because he had served in the Army Air Force during the 1940s War. However, somehow he contracted *Yellow Fever*, a terrible illness, very rare in the States, which ended his flight training for good.

But I assure you, before he sang it that day at the supper table, none of us had ever heard him singing this song, or referencing it in any way before this time. He *had* talked a few days earlier about his sickness during the war, and his weeks of recovery by the Salton Sea in Southern California. Perhaps, I thought, that was what prompted it.

Then, after letting the surprising incident sink in for a few hours, I realized that I might have been being a bit literal, thinking it was only a concrete memory coming to life. I realized that the sudden song, while *based* on memory, might also be his way of reconciling himself with his own coming end. After all, he had also been saying things like this for the past year, “One day, not long from now, I’ll be way up there with my ma and pa, playing pinochle.” Up there.... “The wild blue yonder...”

Seeing past the literal meaning made the event all the more poignant and strangely touching.

Taking things literally can just be a way of stopping too soon. If I take literally the story of King David in the Bible, then read that archeologists have so far not been able to find much evidence for a vast empire ruled by a guy named David, then I lose the story because it’s not literal play-by-play reporting. If I think a story has to be literally true in order to be true at all, it’s my expectation which robs me of the power of the story. Like in the wonderful children’s story this morning, if I expect a blanket, and only a blanket, a little button...or just a story about a button...is not going to make me very happy. But if I allow myself to be more flexible and realistic in my expectations, and take the story of David for what it is, a poignant story about love and loss, courage and cowardice, hate and rage, beauty and sexist power and entitlement, disappointment and lust, self-doubt and mystical rapture and justice...I can be moved, inspired, or better, come to transformative new understandings about my own loves and losses, self-doubts and raptures. After all, as I say each year during the Passover Seder, “a story is true in the way a story is true.”

On the other side of the equation, if I read the story from the Gospel of Mark about the fig tree, and get upset with the prophet because of his pique against the fig tree, I am *also* allowing a rigid literalism to siphon off the power of this slice of ancient literature. Unfortunately, to read ancient scriptures literally, that is, uncritically, is what we all have been trained to do. Yep, I mean all of us. Whether we grew up in deeply conservative congregations, Christian or Jewish, or not. And I mean even if we grew up Unitarian Universalist. Somehow, this literalist bent has become almost universal. I’m not sure I know how this happened, but it did. And by reading scripture uncritically, I mean reading it without looking at language, context, history, or literary styles. Reading it on the surface. People as brilliant as Bertrand Russell certainly critiqued the scriptures, but he did so from a literal perspective only, and thus, his famous essay “Why I Am Not A Christian” leaves me cold and sad, even though, like him, I don’t call myself a Christian.

The fig tree image in Mark’s story *can* make no sense, in truth, unless you refuse the literal

reading. It's necessary to note *other* literary references, like, for example, the book of Jeremiah. Mark's Jesus clearly asks us to connect with Jeremiah's writings when he actually quotes them during the temple incident: "My house is a house of prayer for all the nations." Not only did the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah write that sentence, he also predicted the destruction of the Temple in *his* day, announcing it would collapse into a heap of ruin like the old Temple at Shiloh. But, more importantly, he also offered us the reason why temples fall. "When I wanted to gather them, says the Eternal, there were no figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered, for the heritage I left them has passed away from them."

Let me say that again: Their "heritage has passed away from them..."

What heritage? The heritage of justice-making at the heart of religion.

How did they lose their heritage? When you look at the historical context, you find out that the Temple in both Jeremiah's and Jesus' day was more than a religious center for carrying out the ritual demands of the Torah. It was the chief center of the ruling aristocracy as well. It was the IRS. It was the symbol of collaboration with Rome. It was the chief employer in the city, almost a monopoly, in fact. You suddenly get a sense of Mark's understanding of what Jesus did in the Temple by overturning the cashier tables and pigeon-seller seats. Please (it drives me wild when I hear such assertions!) he wasn't, as a clearly practicing Jew, decrying Jewish religious practice and ritual, any more than Jeremiah was decrying it. Or worse (and this just about sends me around the bend!) he wasn't foolishly saying that spirituality is somehow tainted by financial realities.

No, he was making a political, social, economic statement about an aristocratic system in the year 30 which collaborated with Roman oppression so as to gain privileges denied the poor and the sick, including affordable medical care and gainful employment. One reason, in fact, that Jesus got himself into trouble before he staged his little street theater in the Temple was that he offered acts of healing...i.e. healthcare... *for free*, to the poor who couldn't afford regular and ruinously expensive medical care.

So the story as Mark told it is this: if the purpose of the Temple, the official shelter for the aristocracy in cahoots with Rome, is to ignore the commands of the Torah-- "Do not defraud. Do not defer to the powerful. You shall not be deceived. Love your neighbor as you love yourself."—then why not tear the damn thing down? What good is it? If the fig tree, symbol of the Temple, bears no fruit, let it perish. For the people are indeed hungry...for justice, the sweetest fruit of all. They do not need a tree that produces nothing that satisfies...

You see how much more poignant things get when you avoid the literal reading of things, and go deeper?

But you know, that doesn't mean that I have no appreciation for the literal at all, or that being literal is always somehow wrong. No, not at all. It's a terrible way to approach literature, I think, biblical or otherwise...but frankly, I like a literal fig, not a metaphorical fig. As some of you know, I grew up with them in my back yard. They are my favorite fruit, along, I suppose, with

tangerines and oranges. Like Naomi Shihab Nye's Palestinian father, I want the biggest, fattest figs, fresh from the tree, not all dried up in a Newton. I want to feast on the red, seedy flesh, the black-purple skin, so earthy. I don't want a symbolic fig out of the book of Jeremiah, I want a real fig from a tree in my back yard.

I don't live in hot Dallas, like the poet's father does. I live in Columbus where snowfall can bury the crocuses. But I bought a fig tree anyway, last summer. A new kind of fig tree that, unlike Palestinian fig trees, or my grandfather's fig tree, sheds its leaves in the fall, and survives dormant in a pot indoors, and can then be planted outside in the summer, its beautiful mitten-shaped leaves unfurling fresh each year. There is my little fig tree up there. It's so small, you can barely see it if you're sitting in back, but I assure you, it's beautiful. It may take years before I grow a crop of figs, but I am willing to cultivate the thing until then.

"What a dreamer he is," say Nye's relatives, critical of her father. "Look how many things he starts and doesn't finish." □ □

For me, being a dreamer is not an insult. I'm a dreamer too. And just like I want literal figs, not symbolic figs, to hold in my hand, to drop in my hungry mouth, I want real justice that I can touch, and taste, not some mirage of shimmering utopian hope.

The health bill passed. As you know, some folks are mustering strong attacks against it. But nevertheless, I want literal, not metaphoric, health care for everyone in the country. I can't produce a list of folks who shouldn't get health care, can you? Can any of you give me a list of names of citizens, or even visitors, who should die on the streets, unattended and ignored just because of who they are?

And, I want literal civility. I don't want to hear sarcastic and, I personally believe, racialized metaphors like *Obamacare* instead of the simple word healthcare. I want literal windows without cracks in them...I don't want history's new *Kristalnacht*, symbolic stones crashing through a congressman's windows. I don't want to hear symbolic words like Minority Leader John Boehner's "Armageddon," which is a biblical word that refers *literally* to a ruined fort in the Galilee, but metaphorically to a catastrophic battle at the end of time. It is not the end of time. It is not the end of the world. I want healthcare literally and carefully shepherded by people who love their brothers and sisters, and consider it an injustice if they die for lack of treatment. And I want it now, not at the end of time.

When the US State Department gives DNA tests to Somali refugee families who immigrate to Columbus from that Somali refugee camp in Kenya with 350, 000 inhabitants, to determine if all of their children are genetically related to the parents, sending any adopted children back to the camp, tearing them from their new and loved families. I want them to stop it. Literally, not metaphorically. I want literal justice for immigrants to this country, not legislated heartlessness.

I want literal justice, like Jesus and Nye's father wanted literal figs from their trees. A fig tree that produces figs satisfies deep hunger. A fig tree that does not produce figs has no purpose, just as any policy that obstructs justice---that is, equal access to privilege and power--- for one and

all, has forgotten its purpose, like Jeremiah reminded us, and reminded us over 2700 years ago. Whether it's a policy of the government: "Don't ask, don't tell," or a policy of the State of Ohio "You'll marry who we tell you to marry and no one else..." I want a literal end to such policies. Not a symbolic end. Not street theater, as fun as that might be, a few overturned tables and all that. I dare to dream of a literal end to the policies that ridicule, obliterate or distort justice. I want the policies of injustice to *literally* wither just like that metaphorical fig tree withered to the root. I want them to dry up and blow away. And then I want a new tree to rise, unfurl its leaves, and bear figs, sweet and delicious and plenteous.

So, by all means, literalism has its place. Yes, it's not the best way to read literature, but I'm also sure that any policies of justice that do not promote literal justice: real, solid and factual justice amount to little.

The poet's father, she tells us, sang her a "fig song" in Arabic when he gazed upon his back yard fig tree. My father sang a song to me too, as he faced his own coming death. The songs were symbolic, powerful vehicles for expressing and carrying deep human emotion. They were not to be taken literally. But they were meant to be taken seriously. For, no matter what music we make, or songs we sing, justice, I say, is either literal, or it simply doesn't exist.

Offering Only the free gifts of the members and friends of this congregation keep it strong. There are no outside sources, no hidden resources, no denominational assets to draw on. To be an independent congregation, as all Unitarian Universalist congregations are, means to bear the responsibility for everything ourselves, for the privilege of freedom is not free. The opportunity to give gifts this way, instead of electronically, is now here. Let the offering be given and received.

Blessing of the Fig Tree

May you bear fruit.
May it be sweet.
May you grow tall.
May your fruit be plenteous.
May your life be long.
May you recover and thrive after winter.
May you feed the multitudes.
May you bring delight and wonder.
May I and all here gathered before you be thankful. Amen.