

God and Gaps

March 17, 2013

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Gathering, Greeting, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here,
as the days of the year tip toward spring,
to celebrate the very aliveness of life,
and yoke our longing to all that calls us
to deeper questions, deeper love, deeper care,
always keeping us open and unfinished. So,

Grounded in gratitude for the cosmos that is our home, claiming deepening wisdom as our authority, and daring to engage joy, burden, loss and insight in a deliberate community of many ways and ages, the flame summons us to *awaken*: to listen with our whole lives, to open, to serve.

Singing

Ingathering: *(A Jewish fable from the Hassidic rabbis)*

Once upon a time, a congregation became very concerned because their old rabbi had taken to disappearing from the synagogue after the beginning of the Sabbath, the holy day when they all came together every week. Some said, "Maybe he is trying to escape the duties of a rabbi...maybe he is becoming lazy." Others worried that he was actually committing some crime somewhere, doing something that no one, especially rabbis, should be doing. Some, knowing his reputation...for everyone seemed to love and respect him...denied all these worries and suspicions and insisted that, instead of running away from his work, he must have been taken up to the sky by a miracle, all the way to heaven itself. They thought that perhaps he was loved even by one of the holy teachers of old, like Jeremiah, or even Elijah himself, and that they brought him up to heaven to discuss holy questions together with them.

Still, the disagreements of the members of the congregation continued. So to settle the concerns among them, one Sabbath night they hired a spy to follow him and report where he was going. Sure enough, no sooner had the holy day candles been lit than the old rabbi left the synagogue, walked quietly down the road that led through the woods, and up a steep hill.

Finally, following quietly behind, the spy could see a small house in the distance. And sure enough, the rabbi went straight toward it. The spy came closer and closer, trying not to step on any branches and give himself away. A few more steps and the spy could see the rabbi in the open doorway. He was lit up orange by the soft light of a dying fire. The spy tiptoed around to the side of the cabin and pressed his face to the window. He was surprised by what he saw. There on a bed lay an old woman who was not Jewish at all. She seemed to be very sick, and there was no indication that she lived anything but alone.

First, the rabbi took a broom and swept the floor. Then the rabbi chopped new wood and put it into the fireplace. Next the rabbi drew clean water from the well, and brought several pails of the clear clean water into the woman's house. Finally, the rabbi made a pot of fresh soup...he had brought all the ingredients with him... and set it on the bed stand by her side. He then gently lifted up her head with his hand, and fed her the soup, a spoon at a time. When she was done, she smiled. "Thank you, rabbi," she said softly. "You are always so kind to me." "I'll see you tomorrow," said the rabbi to the old woman as he cleaned her soup bowl with some of the water he had brought from the well.

The spy sped back down the mountain and through the woods to tell everyone in the congregation what he had found out: "Well," one of the more suspicious members of the congregation said to the spy, "did our rabbi go up to the sky, all the way to heaven?"

The spy stopped for a moment to think. Then he said "O no, not at all. The rabbi did not go up to heaven. The rabbi went a lot higher than that."

Welcoming Steve Abbot (*canvass announcement by Beth Jewell*)

As Unitarian Universalists, we are bound together by a freely chosen covenant to affirm and promote Seven Principles. The Second Principle is "justice, equity and compassion in human relations." Our Justice Action Ministry carries out the organized social justice activity of this church. A designated portion of the church's budget provides the financial resources necessary to carry out this vital work in our community. Alice Faryna of the Justice Action Ministry will now offer insights into recent and upcoming social justice work.

JAM Alice Faryna (*after Nathan plays Sixteen Tons*)

In the mid 1960's I was in training as a resident in internal medicine in Iowa City. Technology was pretty primitive by today's standards, but even today, preliminary diagnoses are made by choosing the most obvious choice, based on known risk factors. When you hear hoof beats, it was said, look for horses not zebras. So one day, when a woman was admitted with severe abdominal pain we somewhat cavalierly said, "fat, forty, female and fecund...must be a gall bladder attack." After a couple of days when this diagnosis could not be confirmed (this was way before CT scans and MRIs), an abdominal surgical exploration had to be done. Well, they found a zebra. This relatively young woman had a total occlusion of the main artery to her small intestine which by now was becoming gangrenous. They closed the wound, and it was up to us to tell her that she had a short time to live and the only thing to offer her was pain relief from the inevitable peritonitis. She, who had been allowed only intravenous fluids for days, said, "Well can I have a dish of ice cream then?" A medically unsound choice, but the only compassionate thing we could do. Fast forward about 16 years to the late 1970s when my mother suffered from the same catastrophic condition. By this time, the diagnosis could be made with non-invasive technology, but effective treatment for an elderly woman with other health problems was not possible.

Fast forward again to 2009 when the Obama administration succeeded in passing legislation to address our costly and highly fragmented health care system. The 1000 page Affordable Care Act is an achievement which eluded Teddy Roosevelt, FDR, Lyndon Johnson, Harry Truman

and Bill Clinton because of the heavy resistance of private interest corporations and the American Medical Association. Even with partial implementation of the law, and advances in technology which now could save the Iowa patient's life, some 45,000 Americans die each year ONLY because they do not have access to the care they need.

While some good has been done by the Affordable Care Act, it can never provide universal coverage, nor in the long run can it be affordable, because dysfunctional features remain: allowing high profit margins for private insurance, failing to allow for pharmaceutical price negotiation, and creating an additional layer of bureaucracy of exchanges to help people find a private insurance plan. These are ungodly gaps.

The "One Payer" states remain undeterred. Several are on the path to take advantage of an option under the Affordable Care Act (ACA) to offer a statewide alternative plan. Vermont is positioned to do so in 2017; California, Oregon and Pennsylvania have hopes that they can convince state legislators to do the same. Ohio is not well positioned to be a leader at this time, because of a very conservative General Assembly and governor, but SPAN (the Single Payer Action Network) continues to work with leaders in the Senate and House to educate them about the benefits of Medicare for all. I invite you to join us in writing to legislators, or even coming with us on days when we make personal visits with them. Let us put an end to the notion that the most dangerous thing you can do for your health is to be an American.

Singing *first verse of 1012*

Communing

Today is March 17, St. Patrick's Day. It's also the day when Italy became a nation, back in the 19th century, the day when the men who perpetrated the My Lai massacre in Vietnam were charged; and the day apartheid ended in South Africa, back in 1992. It's also the day that the last great just Roman Emperor died, in the year 180 of the Common Era. I offer, as a gateway into the garden of silence we tend at the center of our service, these words from the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus:

You will find rest from your self-serving obsessions if you perform every act in your life as though it were your last.

Do not waste the rest of your life making assumptions about other people's lives. This will distract you from contributing to the common good. Study your own life, if you must study a life; study how you might make your life just and holy.

Life is brief; at the end of it, there is but a single worthwhile harvest I can think of: a holy disposition toward neighborly acts.

What is not good for the hive is not good for the bee.

Are you afraid of change? Have you ever discovered anything yet that takes place without it?

Best to keep silence over any good you do in this life. Let your actions be like grape vines, which quietly grow toward your neighbor, that in good season they might harvest a cluster of grapes.

Be like the cliff against which the waves continually break; this cliff stands firm, and tames the fury of the water around it in complete silence.

silence

On March 17 like every single other day of our lives, our own days are intertwined with others. We evoke this sacred reality now, by allowing ourselves to name...whispered or privately...the names of those whom we miss because they are far, whom we mourn because we loved them, with whom we struggle because we want to remember their humanity, and those whose love has sustained us to this very day.

naming

On March 17, like any day, music refreshes, heals, delights, uplifts, reminds, and holds our hearts in its hands. *anthems*

The First Reading *is from the scroll of Yerimiyahu, or Jeremiah, but modern critics are convinced that these particular words were written quite a number of decades after Jeremiah lived, and were simply inserted into his authentic words. Whoever the unnamed writer was, this remains a literate masterpiece of ancient skepticism.*

Don't take the other nations as your models.

Don't look at events in the sky above and imagine that they are omens or miracles, no matter how impressed others are by such things. The religious notions of the people who claim such things are nothing but curls of smoke.

Why? Because they chop down a tree, have a clever woodcarver shape the thing into the form of a "god." Then they cover it with hammered silver and gold, and fasten it to a rolling stand with nails.

Such a "god" is like a scarecrow in a cucumber patch—it can't talk! It can't move around on its own...it's dead wood that has to be pushed on a cart. Don't be impressed by such "gods." They are totally powerless, unable to do anything really...either to frighten you, or inspire you to do good things.

Look far and wide among the elite of the nations. The best they can come up with is nothing compared to you, o Eternal. Stupidly, they line their gods—but they remain only a lineup of decorated tree trunks, good for nothing but making smoke when burned.

Shiny with silver foil from Tarshish,
covered with gold from Uphaz,
draped with violet and purple fabrics—
no matter how fancy the sticks, they're still sticks.

But the Eternal is the real thing—

When the Eternal is angry, the earth shakes.

Yes, all nations, no matter what they worship or do not worship, quake.

Make no mistake, it is our god whose power crafted the earth, whose wisdom gave shape to the world, who stretched out the sky like a tent over us all. Our god thunders, and rain pours down. Our god flings the clouds overhead, and embellishes every storm with lightnings, while freeing all the great winds from their warehouse. I say: stick-god worshipers look mighty foolish, god-makers embarrass themselves by their handmade gods! I say: their gods are all fake—just a bunch of dead tree-trunks, driftwood deities, and tasteless jokes.

The Second Reading is from the book *Welcome to the Wisdom of the World* (2007) by Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun whose books are respected by both religious and non religious readers.

Being born is not about choice, true, but living well is. The choices we make as life goes on---not where, when, or how we were born---determine the quality of the life we live. It is what we do with what we have...that will make the difference, help us to achieve what is fully human, and therefore, breathtakingly holy.

Jewish spirituality is clear about the relationship between being good enough, and becoming something better.

(Rabbi) Moshe Leib put it this way: "If someone comes to you and asks for your help, you should not turn them off with pious words, saying, 'Have faith and take your troubles to God!' You shall act as if there were no God, as if there were only one person who could help this person...only yourself."

Preaching

OK. I admit it. Even when I was a ten-year-old boy and *very and sincerely* devout in my religious practices, I was skeptical. I was, after all, one of those brats who liked to make the nuns turn purple by asking the following questions: "If God is all powerful, can he make a stone so heavy he can't lift it?" Or, "If God is all powerful, can he make a stick with only one end?"

I didn't invent these questions...they were "going around" in those days. But I was also the one who would ask questions based on a more personal wrestling with the catechism I had been taught: "Well, if Jesus was God, then how could he be a human being as well? 'Cause I'm a human being, and I sometimes forget things; and if Jesus was a human being, he would probably forget things, right? But then, if he was God, he would never forget things...so how can he both forget things and not forget things? It just doesn't make any sense. If he was human, he could not have known he was God, because I know I am not, and that makes me human."

The nuns patiently gave me the theological answer to my question. This answer came out for the first time...in Greek... at the Council of Chalcedon back in 451 of our Era. But the answer made no sense to me, not because it was in Greek, but because it was rooted in *incredibly abstract Platonic philosophy*. And I suspect it was never *intended* to make sense, since it relied on the absolute authority of those bishops who came up with the answer.

Now, as I have explained before to this august body, I personally never had to deal with what some of my friends had to deal with when dealing with our childhood religions. I never lost my

childhood faith because some teacher taught me about evolution, since I was taught evolution in religion class by the nuns in the first place. I was taught that reported miracles, like the splitting of the Red Sea, Cecil B. DeMille style, were, at best, exaggerations of entirely natural phenomena. So my skepticism as a boy wasn't entirely dismissed by my teachers, but in some ways, was supported by the skepticism they themselves brought to the classroom.

But my friends raised in far more conservative religious congregations climbed to their skepticism and doubts up a much steeper and more precarious path. They were told that God was in charge of *everything*...every biblical miracle, to be sure which happened exactly as reported...but also the very storm cloud growing purple with rain over their heads, the shaking of the San Andreas fault, the whirl of a cyclone, the loss of a job, or the death of a young friend in a motorcycle accident. All under God's power.

Whatever gaps in their knowledge, about science, about history, about reason itself, were conveniently filled by God, almost as if God was some sort of spiritual caulking to fill in all the cracks in reality. But, as they studied more and more, and realized the gaps could be filled by scientific knowledge, or were just empty, and that we really don't know some things, their faith in their childhood religion collapsed with a ferocious upset I never knew quite as deeply.

But skepticism is not a new invention. To hear some fundamentalist divines talk, you would think that Charles Darwin himself invented the concept, and that before him, in the last century, or Mr. Dawkins, in the present century, everyone just had clear, unswerving beliefs in the doctrines of the various religions claiming ultimate truth for themselves.

But as the 2500-year-old passage now found in the Book of Yerimihayu/Jeremiah makes plain, skepticism has been around for thousands of years...indeed, from the very beginning. There are few writings from the ancient world as sassy and sarcastic and skeptical as this: *The religious notions of the people, who claim such things, are nothing but curls of smoke. Why? Because they chop down a tree, have a clever woodcarver shape the thing into the form of a "god." Then they cover it with hammered silver and gold, and fasten it to a rolling stand with nails.*

Such a "god" is like a scarecrow in a cucumber patch—it can't talk! It can't move around on its own...it's dead wood that has to be pushed on a cart.

Don't be impressed by such "gods." They are totally powerless, unable to do anything really...either to frighten you or inspire you to do good things. No matter how fancy the sticks, they're still sticks.

The famous skeptical lecturer of the 19th century, Robert Ingersoll himself, would be hard put to come up with a slap in the face to a particular theology as harsh...and as witty...as that.

Yet the same critic stops short of outright atheism, right? For the author continues: *But the Eternal is the real thing—When the Eternal is angry, the earth shakes. Yes, all nations, no matter what they worship or do not worship, quake.*

Make no mistake, it is our god whose power crafted the earth, whose wisdom gave shape to the world, who stretched out the sky like a tent over us all. Our god thunders, and rain pours down.

Our god flings the clouds overhead, and embellishes every storm with lightnings, while freeing all the great winds from their warehouse.

Colorful writing, certainly. "The warehouse of the winds." But, if the author of this passage came back to life today, and discovered that the earth quakes because of moving fault-lines, that weather patterns are predictable, and the sky is not a tent, even metaphorically, but a window on infinity itself, all the powers assigned to The Eternal (Moffat's great translation of the Hebrew YHWH), the "real thing" would collapse into rubble, and the resulting atheism would be fierce.

But all of this theological thinking is faulty to begin with, as the passage in Jeremiah points out with sarcastic clarity. If you make Ultimacy, or God, a thing, you are done for, right from the get-go. A "creator" is a limited thing. A "father" or even a "goddess" is a limited thing. A healer is a limited thing. A punisher is a limited thing. All of these may be called metaphors, yes, but, as the late and radical feminist theologian Mary Daly pointed out so well, folks can be mighty possessive and testy about their metaphors...just try changing the metaphor "father" to "mother" and see what happens. All metaphors used to describe God, it seems to me, in traditional theological language, are walking wobbly on the precipice of classic idolatry, of taking a mere thing (a word) for Ultimacy. If taking a piece of wood from a tree and covering it with gold is foolish, no god at all, laughable...so is taking some ink, writing it on paper made from that same tree, and scribbling words like "creator," "omnipotent" and "father," "rainmaker," and saying these words are the unquestioned images of Ultimacy. (Many modern theologians, like Sallie McFague, see them as playful and dispensable, not absolute. I can live with that very well. I am, after all, an appreciator of poetry.)

But the word "creator" for example, has been a substitute, a metaphor, for the word God for many millennia. God is the one who created something out of nothing, and is the true answer to the famous question, *Why is there something instead of nothing?* Modern cosmologists, however, are no longer asking the question "can something come out of nothing," because they are having a hard time demonstrating that anything called nothingness existed before the universe. The creation of the universe itself does not necessarily rely on the power of the omnipotent, pre-existing and personal God. And please, the work of cosmologists does not prove in itself that God is a foolish stopgap word, never to be uttered again...I really think it's swaggering and foolish to say such things...but it does suggest that this particular metaphor for Ultimacy, "creator," is no longer necessary.

But you ask, can there be any holy use for the word God at all?

I am thinking now of what the editor of Bereshith, or Genesis, said around 500 BCE: "human beings are made in the *tselem*, the image of God." תְּסֵלֶם *Tselem*. A word translated precisely elsewhere as one of those decked out tree trunks on carts carried around. Human beings, however, are not dead wood, the author is suggesting. We are alive! We are the images of Ultimacy, despite our broken and sometimes inauthentic lives. It's a radical and amazing statement Genesis makes.

But certainly, some "images" or metaphors for Ultimacy are no longer tenable. Fred Sanders, talking about Mary Daly, says this:

“The reconstruction of the doctrine of God is the whole ball game for Daly. Feminism should not be satisfied with token victories, but should cultivate the full cosmic and religious vision which the word “God” signals. The false gods who must be destroyed are the God of the Gaps (who explains inequalities and unjust social situations as well), the God of Otherworldly rewards (since women have been the main consumers of this product, they can take it off the market by living full lives now).”

Living full lives.

That's Daly's understanding of a potentially non-idolatrous use for that word. A godly life that better the world, not subtracts from it. Or as Joan Chittister put it: "It is what *we* do with what we have...that will make the difference, help us to achieve what is fully human, and therefore, breathtakingly holy."

Holy. Sanctified. Sainthood. I think especially today of what we really know about St. Patrick (once we have applied a holy and healthy skepticism to what has been handed down to us). There *was* such a man. He was not Irish, however, but from a small town in what we now call England, near the Scottish border. His actual name was Qatricius. As a teenager, he suffered indignities... he was kidnapped and sold into slavery to a wealthy clan family in what we now call Ireland. After 6 years, he escaped. He trained in France to be a cleric, then was sent back to Ireland. There, because he was a foreign immigrant, he was beaten, kicked, and treated roughly by the powerful clans there. Because he was outside the closed family system which dominated the land, he was accused of all sorts of crimes, but was eventually able to prove that these were false charges. We really don't know any more about him. Not a thing. We don't even know if he was ever a bishop. He was never officially canonized by any Church that celebrates his day. And there never were any snakes in Ireland since the ice age moved north, so there were no miracles. But he was seen as an honorable man despite all of his troubles, because, perhaps, he was. Again, Chittister: "It is what we do with what we have...that will make the difference, help us to achieve what is fully human, and therefore, breathtakingly holy." And she adds, movingly: “Rabbi Moshe Leib put it this way: 'If someone comes to you and asks for your help, you should not turn them off with pious words, saying 'Have faith and take your troubles to God!' You shall act *as if there were no God*, as if there were only one person who could help this person...only yourself.’”

Apply now what I have said this morning to what Alice Faryna told us earlier. She was talking about health care for every person in the United States of America.

And she suggested, not that we wait for the God of the Gaps to come down and heal us, or for some huckster tent evangelist in a white suit to touch us and make us fall to the floor, willy nilly. No, in this world where the health care systems of thirty-four top industrialized nations are far more just, and economically less idolatrous than ours...profit too can be a false god...she said, "Let *us* put an end to the notion that the most dangerous thing you can do for your health is to be an American. Let *us*..."

Exactly. Like the rabbi in the children's story, earlier, bringing a message of health to the old gentile woman who had no family to care for her. The one his supporters thought might be so holy that he could ascend to heaven, and talk with Jeremiah. As I said at the beginning, I have been a skeptic since I was a child about things like that. But I do like what the spy in the story

said when asked whether he saw the rabbi ascend to heaven. "Oh, no," he said, "he went to a much higher place than that!"

Offering

Ceremony of Installation for Pastoral Team 2013

Eric

In the life of a progressive religious congregation, we try to put people before beliefs, and persons before ceremonies. Being present to each other in both joy *and* sorrow, rejoicing *and* suffering is a mark of our religious practice.

The called ministers of this church, Mark and I, as well as the local minister emerita, Carol Brody, our affiliate ministers, Suzan McCrystal and Kathleen Clark Fowler and our Commissioned Chaplain, Dick Dawson, embrace among their ministries the pastoral or caring services. In this we are supported and helped by the Caring Committee and the Neighborhood Network, which help people in time of trouble with very tangible food, and rides to and from medical appointments among many other things.

Mark

To these ministries, we have added the Pastoral Team. The first team was installed *ten years ago*. Today, we hereby install the new members of our team, who have received training. Some members of the former teams will continue to serve in their present manner. The new names in the Pastoral Team are in your Orders of Celebration. Know that each of them understands confidentiality, promising to keep the sacred stories of every human life safe. They have been educated in these practices by Dick and Eric, as well as Joe Pierce and Karen McGuire; and with those four, I hereby acknowledge these new members of the Team as persons of character, compassion and commitment, worthy of trust.

Dick

Therefore, with Eric and Mark and the other ministers of this church, and on behalf of the members of this congregation and its leaders, I hereby install you into the Pastoral Team of First Unitarian Universalist Church. Working with the ministers and the Caring Committee and Neighborhood Network to live out our values of compassion and service one-on-one, I commend you to the congregation as servants of the heart, as companions of the spirit who welcome the whole person into the embrace of our community.