

The Bible Doesn't SAY Anything

February 23, 2014

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Reflections before the Celebration begins

"The Rabbis give the unvoiced an opportunity to enter the mythos and thus change it. They created a system of ongoing revelation through creative interpretation." *Rabbi Jane Litman 2009 in Torah Queeries*

"'It is getting dim now,' said Ananda. 'Well, then, be your own lights,' said the Tatagatha (Buddha)." *Dikha Nikaya Sutta Parinibbana c. 29 BCE*

Preparation: <i>Affirming Loving Community</i>

Gathering
Welcoming
Centering
Kindling

Aria from Goldberg Variations Nathan Hamm, piano
the grail which signs our living tradition

9:15 Marina McCreary, 11:00 Misha Colegrove

Opening *please rise in body or spirit* Debbie Shaw

We are here,
after a few days of welcome warmth,
to go past the shallows, and face the deeps,
to kindle our own lights with humility
since we are, after all, made of stardust,
and to bless the grace that we exist at all.

And so, bearing witness, both to our world as it is, and as Love can imagine it, we would claim that vision of a just world in our own lives. And because of a growing sense of kinship with all beings, inviting our compassion, we begin in this celebration to engage our mission with our whole lives: body, mind, and heart.

Praising #363 Alleluia, Sang Stars

Ingathering *What is Talmud?* from *While Standing on One Foot: Puzzle Stories and Wisdom Tales from the Jewish Tradition* by Nina Jaffe and Steve Zeitlin

Debbie invites children up for a story and gives introduction - most religions have special holy books, like the Bible, the Koran, the Hebrew Scriptures and books called commentaries that discuss people's opinions about these holy books. This story is about the Talmud, commentaries by Jewish Rabbis, or teachers, that are also considered holy. What is Talmud?

Debbie: One day, Rabbi Mark was studying in his office. There were many shelves filled with

leather bound books all around him. As he thought about the meaning of the words he was reading, there was a knock at his door.

Mark: Come in, Devorah! What can I do for you?

Debbie: Hello Rabbi Mark. I want to talk about our religion. I know our prayers and holidays, and read our holy books. Can you teach me how to study the Talmud?

Mark: The Talmud is very, very difficult, Devorah.

Debbie: Please, Rabbi, let me try.

Mark: Very well, Devorah. I will give you a lesson. Now listen carefully. Two men working on a rooftop fell down the chimney. When they landed on the floor, one had a clean face, and one had a dirty face. Which man went to wash his face?

Debbie: Hmmm. That seems easy, the dirty one of course, everyone washes his face when it's dirty. But wait. I know - the one with the clean face went to wash it!

Mark: How do you know that is the answer, Devorah?

Debbie: Because the man with the clean face looked at the dirty face of his friend and thought that his own must be dirty too and went to wash it. But the man with the dirty face looked at the clean face of his friend, thought his own was clean too, and didn't go to wash it!

Mark: That is good thinking, Devorah. But to study Talmud, you must think even a little bit harder than that. You have to question even your questions.

Debbie: Why?

Mark: Because, think about it...if two men fall down a chimney, how is it possible that only one of them would have a dirty face? Oh, don't feel bad, Devorah, you did very well indeed. As I said, the Talmud is very difficult. It is not enough to read it and memorize it. You must also think. Always look for the question behind the question. That is how we study Talmud.

Debbie: Thanks. I know to question what I read, especially if I see it on the internet or Facebook and I hope all of you do too. It's good to remember to question everything we read, even in holy books. Now it's time for you to go and ask questions in your classes!

activities, while Nathan plays Allemande from Partita in B-flat

Greeting news of the congregation
 special presentations

Devotion: Welcoming Memory and Hope
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Affirming **#297 The Star of Truth** (*verses 1-3 with tropes*)

melody is played once, then:

First Trope: *the star of truth...a star that never stops twinkling, that is never merely a single point, a light that seems tiny, but is in fact quite large, a light that seems cold, but is in fact very hot.*

First Verse

Second Trope: *the certainty for which we crave: certainty, a form of death, of completion, of closure, of constriction and claustrophobia; or a form of comfort, denial, separation, superiority.*

Second Verse

Third Trope: *Safe harbors and trackless ocean; meaning the balance beam between necessary comfort and necessary risk, the paradox of safe shelter and open adventure, the conundrum of answer and question, always ending with question.*

Third Verse

Communing *the Sequence for the Day*

I listen to my heart, and hear a song of sadness: hotels in Ukraine's capital Kiev are now morgues, protests and counter-protests snarl Venezuela, and in sultry Bangkok, the colorful streets are no longer filled with tourists but angry citizens.

I listen to my heart, and hear a song of power: athletes streaming down slopes, entwining on the ice, standing with ribbons of gold, silver and bronze, even the disappointed amazed to have done what they have done in Sochi.

I listen to my heart, and know that the romance of love comes and goes, rises and falls; that pains arrive, and sometimes even depart; that the rhythms of joy, yearning, worry and sorrow, often syncopated, link us to each other as much as our breathing does, and even as much as this silence does.

The Great Silence

I listen to my heart, singing the anthems of life and love and loss and longing. I come to this place filled, not emptied, filled with the faces of those I love, or who comfort me, or whom I miss, or mourn. Linking these faces to their names, I say them, to set them free in this place,

whispered aloud, or released quietly into the sanctuary of the embracing heart.

The Naming:

I listen to my heart, the heart that overflows with the feelings and images which music, words and silence can only begin to prompt, but which send their messengers deep within us.

The Music 9:15 *Summertime and It Ain't Necessarily So* from *Porgy and Bess* by George Gershwin, David Krohn, flute

11:00 *How Lovely Are the Messengers* by Felix Mendelssohn
Chalice Choir, Tony McDonald, guest conductor

Presentation: <i>Opening to the World</i>
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Reading The first reading comes from Rabbi Jill Hammer in her essay *Listening to Heart Wisdom in the book Torah Queeries, a gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans commentary on the daily Torah portions read during services in a synagogue throughout the year 2009. The word Tabernacle is the ordinary English word for the sort of portable tent-like shrine that preceded the building of an actual architectural temple.*

The Torah tells us that the Tabernacle cannot be built without the wisdom of the heart. The yarn cannot be spun, the jewels cannot be set, the sockets cannot be fit together without the inner knowing of individual people. The beauty of the Tabernacle comes from the beauty of the generous-spirited hearts that design and build it. So, too, we can only build sacred community when the wisdom of the individual heart has a recognized place alongside the sacred text.

The Talmud makes this very point in a midrash about the chief artist of the Tabernacle. The Bible describes this artist, Betzalel, as “endowed with a Divine spirit of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge.”

In this midrash, Betzalel intuitively feels that something is wrong, and asks for clarification. Should he not build the structure before the furniture and not the other way around? Through Betzalel's inner wisdom, he has intuited what God wants, and the midrash implies that God agrees with Betzalel rather than Moses. Moses, who is supposed to be a recorder of God's voice and a channel for God's law, is less accurate than Betzalel, who is responding to his own inner sense of right and wrong. This fact seems to imply that the understanding of the heart can be just as revelatory, or more so, than obedience to text.

Knowing one's inner nature, yet being told that one should ignore this inner nature in favor of an imposed heterosexual identity, has caused many queer people to give up on religion. So, too, women have often fled religious institutions that persist in dictating what the roles of women will be, rather than paying attention to the needs and gifts of individuals. Others, too, feel shut out when they speak their truth. Perhaps if we speak wisely and live wisely, these others will hear the echo of the Divine in our words and deeds.

The second reading is a parable taken from the Gospel of Matthew c. 90 CE. The early church communities took something that went back to the earliest strand of Jesus stories, and totally changed it to fit later theology, which had nothing to do with the Jesus movement at all. This is my reconstructed version of the parable, based on the latest scholarly criticism which makes sense to me.

If God ruled the world instead of Caesar, this is what it would look like. Imagine, if you will, a wedding. The groom and bride have not yet arrived, but the bridesmaids, ten young women, have all gathered for the nighttime ceremony. They are supposed to welcome the couple with lit oil lamps as they enter the courtyard where the guests have gathered. Well, as often happens, the groom and bride are both delayed. All of the bridesmaids have their lamps lit, waiting patiently, but five of them were so foolish as to not bring any oil of their own for themselves, and their wicks started to sputter because of the delay. But the other five bridesmaids were wise, and brought oil with them.

"Lend us some of your oil to keep our lamps lit. We don't have any of our own." The five wise bridesmaids, who had thoughtfully arrived with oil of their own, said to the others, "If we give you our oil, none of us will have enough, and there will not be *any* lights to welcome the couple to the ceremony. You need to get some oil of your own."

So the five foolish bridesmaids went off to find their own oil. But while they were gone, the couple finally arrived, and the five bridesmaids formed a row of lights to welcome them. They went into the courtyard and closed the door behind them, and the wedding ceremonials went on without the five foolish bridesmaids who had no oil of their own to kindle their lights.

Interlude: *Durch Adams Fall*

Preaching The Bible Doesn't SAY Anything

One of the things that has fallen by the wayside in this modern world of the internet, tweets, and multi-tasking is the knock on the door from a Jehovah's Witness. They just don't seem to come around much anymore.

I still get phone calls now and then, and once or twice I have received handwritten letters which were clearly inviting me to a conversation about issues of interest to a Jehovah's Witness. I even preached a sermon here once about how I responded to one of those phone calls. I find copies of the Watchtower strewn around the Main Library. But no one every knocks at my door.

But when I lived on Ruby Street, in Oakland California, the knocking was frequent. And I always answered the door. Usually I just told them I was a minister in another religious organization, and they politely left.

But one warm August morning, two men came to the door and knocked. I looked through the blinds to see who it was, and recognized the familiar Watchtower magazine in their hands, as well as a Bible. I was not backlogged with work, I was caught up with my gardening and lawn, and my partner at the time was in Sydney, Australia doing one of his gigs. I was alone, and had the time. So I invited them in to have a conversation, mostly to see what they might say. I had

made assumptions about what Jehovah's Witnesses might say, but assumptions have never been evidence of anything, as far as I can tell.

And, after all, if they wanted to talk about the Bible, I could enjoy that...I know it very well, have translated passages from the original languages, and taught courses on the gospels in my seminary.

The two men looked sort of surprised that I let them in, I think. They were big men, taller than me by far, and very smartly dressed for such a warm day. I offered them some ice water, and they accepted. So we sat down, and they began. They asked me questions about how I saw the world and its future, and then quoted scripture passages in response to what I said. I often responded by quoting other passages, passages that suggested different answers to their questions. Sometimes I even quoted passages they had never heard, which seemed to surprise them. But they certainly had remarkable memories, especially for chapter and verse numbers. And they listened to me very attentively when I spoke. At no time did I experience anything but real engagement, even when I brought up testy ideas, like the Jehovah's Witness interpretation of the word "blood" in the scriptures.

Mind you, this wasn't some game that I was trying to win. I hope you don't think that. That whole notion of "I'm right and you are a complete idiot" is a fool's game if there ever was one, no matter who plays it, either a religious or an anti-religious person. I was consistently fascinated by how they interpreted some passages... and they were fascinated by how I interpreted others.

But in the end, when I explained to them that, for me, the Bible was not the source of my authority, they politely got up, said good bye, and left. If I was not willing to admit that at least, then there was no more reason to talk. They remarked that they were surprised that I knew the scriptures well, and knew Hebrew and Greek roots (as indeed did they), but for them, this knowledge could ONLY make sense if I accepted the authority of the Bible to begin with.

My attitude toward the Bible came up when one of them began: "The Bible says here in Isaiah..." I countered with "The Bible doesn't *say* anything, it is a book, inert as a rock: you read it and interpret what you read; you say things, the Bible does not. It seems to me you are quoting one book, in a whole collection of books, written long ago, that are not really connected at all, except by your own belief, which is one I do not share. I know the Bible very well, but for me it simply is not the 'word of God.'" I thought I had been saying that the whole time, but when they heard those plain words, they politely got up, thanked me for my time, and left.

This phrase, "The Bible says..." is certainly a common phrase in the public conversation here in the States. Whether it's in the courtrooms, at school board meetings, or in our very schools themselves, "the Bible says..." is a commonly heard mantra. It's said as an appeal to a final, and higher, authority.

To be fair, it's not used the same way by everyone who says it, however. For example, the famous Televangelist, Pat Robertson, says it frequently indeed, but he recently stopped saying it around the notion of evolution, which he now accepts as something that really happened (although as a process prompted by God as he understands God). His more conservative critics

have been throwing "But the Bible says..." *back* at him like crazy ever since. He is downright harassed these days.

So this morning, I want to unpack the more challenging meaning of what I said to the Jehovah's Witnesses who came to talk with me. For if the books in the Bible, both the Hebrew and Greek canons, are *not* the word of God, they are most certainly the work of human beings, from long ago. And human beings right now read or listen to these stories.

And my question this morning is: who are these modern human beings?

If the words in the Bible are *not* some final authority, if it's a human creation entirely, who on earth can claim they listen to these stories exactly as I do? Or you do? We're all different from each other, right?

I mean, who am I, in the context of the all the other human beings on earth? After all, I have several identities which I share with some people, but do not share with many others. I have so many identities that I could go on for days, in fact. Among these identities are: I live a relatively stable life, with a roof over my head, and food on my plate, and car keys in my pocket. My mother and father both worked, I had the privilege of a university education, access to health care in this nation where so many are just tossed to the curb, and I have savings enough that will enable me to retire. Many others will work till they are 90. If they have work, that is.

I live with more than my share of security.

When I read the story of Jesus multiplying a few loaves of barley to feed a vast crowd of hungry peasants, I easily say, "Oh, this is just a literary parable." Or, more caustically, "Only superstitious people believe in miracles." (And I have noticed that the word "superstitious" is used as a synonym for "stupid" quite often.)

By doing such things, I am effectively making my life the *normative* human life. I am separating myself out from those who have not had any bread, barley or otherwise, for days, and, who might see in this story a promise that feeding hungry people is actually possible. Whereas I, as a secure well-fed person, can approach such a text with a "Such things can't happen" lens, a hungry person might not get caught up in the binary niceties of yes or no, but find a surge of hope that keeps them open to possibilities.

Another identity: I am a male human being. So were the translators of all the classic translations of the Hebrew and Greek writings. And for a thousand years, male human beings have always assumed that their maleness was the *essential template* of what it means to be human, going so far as to say that the sperm of a man is the seed of the whole human, regardless of gender, the woman's womb simply being the dirt in which it's planted to grow.

When literate women started to read the ancient texts, as the Beguine communities did in Medieval Europe, or university-educated scholars have been doing for the last six decades, women found passages that men simply could not see or hear. These women freely acknowledged that these books mostly rose out of male dominated cultures, but amidst the pages

they found clear evidence of other voices, voices that have been suppressed, ignored, or burlesqued out of existence. And they began to listen to these voices, empowered by their wisdom.

Take the story of the bridesmaids, for example. Oh, if you look into most any Bible, it will not say "bridesmaids," but "virgins." Παρθένος (*Parthenos*), the Greek word, does indeed mean virgin, but when used in the context of a wedding, it has the modern meaning of bridesmaid. The word *virgin* inappropriately sexualizes the whole thing in translation. When the early Christian communities began to tell the stories of the Jesus movement, long before they were actually written down, they did so as theology was already being developed in various social locations. Some of the early Christians came to preach that Jesus was going to come back within a generation. When that didn't happen, they tried to wrestle with why, and so they began to distort some of the teachings that came down to them to help them deal with their disappointment. The story of the bridesmaids was one of them. But I think the original story sounded more like what you listened to this morning.

And so the women reading this passage first noted that bridesmaids are, well, women. And they noted that the bridesmaids were supposed to bring lamps to ceremonially light the way to the ceremony. Sounds lovely. But some of the bridesmaids did not bring enough oil to keep their lamps burning. They were not wise, but foolish. But the wise bridesmaids brought their own oil for their lamps. They did not need to borrow oil from others to make a light. Women listening to this story recognized that, like men, they could be either foolish or wise. And they heard the story exhorting them to be wise – that is, to bring their own spiritual resources to the living of their lives, not to borrow resources from others, quoting other authorities, even biblical authorities, but instead, being their own authorities. The story reminded them, in the midst of this patriarchal culture, that their humanity was in their own native wisdom – not in their looks, their wealth, or their capacity to bear children. Wisdom. Sort of like what Buddha said as he was dying, "Be your own lights."

Sexual minorities started reading the scripture, and listened, past traditional or surface heterosexual interpretations, to find a whole wealth of material that made sense to their own lives and experience. Scholarly interpretations too – such as to point out that the biblical character Nehemiah was a eunuch, which meant something close to our word "transgender," or that when David and Jonathan kissed deeply and made a pact for life, the Hebrew word for pact, "B'rit," is the same word used in the Jewish wedding ceremony. Heterosexual people had not noticed that before. The essay by our lesbian rabbi Jill Hammer offers us this concluding observation of a little read Torah passage involving the construction of the Tabernacle, or Holy Shrine. Using the kinds of deep questioning demonstrated in our story earlier this morning asking us to think and think again (what my own rabbi, Jane Litman, back in San Francisco, calls "creative interpretation"), she affirms *"understanding of the heart can be just as revelatory, or more so, than obedience to text. Knowing one's inner nature, yet being told that one should ignore this inner nature in favor of an imposed heterosexual identity, has caused many queer people to give up on religion. So, too, women have often fled religious institutions that persist in dictating what the roles of women will be, rather than paying attention to the needs and gifts of individuals. Others, too, feel shut out when they speak their truth. Perhaps if we speak wisely and live wisely, they will hear the echo of the Divine in our words and deeds."* The Divine – yes, a

quality deeper than our various identities, deeper than our genders, deeper than our local experiences, deeper than our security and privilege, deeper than our insecurities too, deeper than our sense of loss or our sense of entitlement, deeper than any unconscious assumption that our lives are the models for other human lives, without us having bothered to listen to what they have to say in the first place.

Differently abled people listen to western scriptures stories differently too. Imagine a man who cannot see reading a passage from the gospel of Mark in braille where Jesus heals a blind man with a bit of spit. He might read that passage a lot differently than I would. African American scholars like Obery Hendricks find political readings few Euro-American can see; Amy Jill Levine, a Jewish scholar, listens to the gospel stories with a viewpoint few Christian scholars can grasp as well. There are whole schools in Asia looking at these ancient texts from perspectives that continually surprise Westerners. Perhaps some may imagine that atheists just toss the book and never read it – totally untrue. Jose Miranda, an atheist Marxist, interpreted the Gospel of John as an atheistic document, because John says *God is love, God is truth*, not God is a infinite Person who intervenes. Marxists like Fernando Belo, in his book, *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark*, saw economic principles in that text that no one on Wall Street could possibly see, yet what he saw remains compelling.

Illiterate peasants in Central America heard stories from the scriptures, and found in them things North Americans in the suburbs never could understand, see or hear. Why? Because the books of the scriptures are human books. And each human being will listen differently to the biblical texts based on his or her own multiple identities. Or to any text for that matter. Or to any conversation, or to any proclamation. Or even to any sermon.

So I end by saying, when I listen to others, best to listen to myself as well, first, I think. Listen to my location and life story and assumptions. Pay attention to what my identities are. Best to remember that I am not the basic human model, but just one among many. And that when anyone knocks at my door, and wants to talk with me about scripture, life, or loss or love, it's always better for me if I know what my various identities are, what my lenses are, and how I might actually listen, listen, listen – not just to my heart's song, but to the songs of other hearts I've never bothered to listen to before.

Integration: *Recommitting to Our Mission*

Offering *(extempore, Debbie)*
Jesus Christus, unser Heiland

Returning	Lux Aeterna
	Lux aeterna, light eternal, light in the twinkle of Alpha Centauri or light stretching along the belt of Orion, or light on the brow of a newborn baby in Uganda, or light in a firefly in a park in late summer Buenas Aires, or light in the mouth of the one who sings, or light shining in an ancient text that is only visible

when we can listen to our own lives,
and listen to the original song which
preceded the print on the page; lux
aeterna: light in the lamp,
and light in the oil, and in the wick,
and light under the lamp, even in
its shadow. You know, lux aeterna,
eternal light.

Singing

#118 This Little Light of Mine

Blessing