

Ancient Resistance

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel
At The North Parish of North Andover, Unitarian Universalist
April 9, 2017 Passover and Palm Sunday*

This past week in England, advertising for the annual national egg hunt began. But much to the chagrin of the Church of England and Prime Minister Teresa May, it was called an “egg hunt”, not an “Easter egg hunt.”

In a statement sent to the Washington Post, Church officials said
“*This marketing campaign ... highlights the folly in airbrushing faith from Easter.*”

Now, I don’t know about you,
but I always thought that the faith part of Easter *for Christians*
was the part that happens in *church* and is about *Jesus*,
not the part that happens *outside* of church and is all about hunting for *eggs*.

To me, hunting for eggs has always felt part of the spring time, pagan,
earth-based, panentheist Unitarian Universalist side of things.
As member Helen Cymbala tells me, once upon a time,
egg hunts were about gathering wild birds’ eggs, to eat, in spring.
But the *Christian* part of Easter isn’t all about spring and egg hunts, is it?
Isn’t it about a *human* and divine story, about rebirth, renewal, resurrection, resistance
and the ways in which love triumphs over death?
Of course, I’m a Unitarian Universalist, so I could easily be wrong.

Of course, we have our own struggles with symbolism and meaning at this time of year.
This week, a UU colleague wrote to say that the palms fronds
she ordered for Palm Sunday had arrived—
and they were four feet long— a bit longer than she had expected.
She sent a note out to our small group of UU ministers, looking for advice.

A variety of answers came back.

One colleague pointed out that it is best to give out palm fronds at the end of the service because they are sharp on the ends and can be used by the kids as swords.

One suggested that there was no way they should be 4 feet long and there would be nothing sacrilegious about cutting them down to two and a half feet— and one could burn the extra, add a little olive oil to the ashes and be all set for next Ash Wednesday.

Someone else thought that 4 foot long fronds would be exuberant and celebratory.

I suggested just lining the floor of the middle aisle of the sanctuary with them, and talking to the kids about how palm fronds in the road would not only have shown that the people thought Jesus was special, but if it was mud season in Jerusalem they would also have helped his colt or donkey keep its hooves from sinking in mud.

The problem with this approach is that I'm not all that sure there ever *was* a mud season in Jerusalem, and suspect it was so dry that the donkeys had an easy time of it, branches or not. As I noted earlier, I am a Unitarian Universalist, so I tend to encourage the use of our imagination, and I may have it all wrong.

Today and tomorrow, people all over the world are celebrating Passover and Palm Sunday, two major holy days in the Jewish and Christian faiths. Both of these holidays are about stories so big that they simply can't be told or contained in one hour or one day. They are about stories so incomplete that we must use our imagination to see what they hold *for us*. While we may not take them as literally true, they speak to deeper truths of human experience and have many layers of meaning.

These days, I keep thinking about the ways in which both holidays are about folks who resisted the dehumanizing, death-dealing power of Empires. They are both about people facing intolerable conditions, and their desire to be free, body and soul. These days, it would be folly to airbrush *that* away.

Who among us does not desire to be free, in body and soul?
Who among us does not want to defy the deadening, life-sapping forces in our personal or collective lives?
Who among us is unaware of those who face intolerable conditions, and want all people- all beings- to be free, body and soul?

We, too, live in a time shaped by dehumanizing, death-dealing military powers. Worldwide, refugees are crossing borders by the millions. 85% of them are taken in by developing countries that have few resources, and stay on average for 17 years. Worldwide women and various ethnic and religious minority groups are victimized and oppressed, and children have been dying in the arms of their parents- in Syria, in South Sudan. We witness, sometimes daily, evidence of inhumane, intolerable conditions for the thriving of life, for human beings and worst of all, for their *children*.

So these wisdom stories about resistance might lead us to ask, “How might we resist dehumanizing forces, the forces that go against life and create a culture of death?
And since those forces are strong, how might we build resilience for the long haul?”

A quick look at history reveals that these questions are part of the human condition. Eon after eon, there is evidence of the human greed for land, wealth and power over others. We see human willingness to use violence- and the threat of violence-

to control uppity individuals and entire populations.

But Empire after Empire, war after war, we also see people rising up in the face of intolerable conditions because they long to be free, because they love their children, because they feel called by God, because they know injustice when they see it- and find a way to stand up to it, together.

Take the Passover story: it's about folks who lived under unbearable conditions in the Egyptian Empire, through centuries of slavery. As it did in this country, slavery meant the constant threat of violence, of early death, of unrelenting work with no Sabbath, of the division of families and of people from the fruits of their labor. No wonder the story of Exodus was such a powerful story for the African American slaves of this nation. It also offers a blueprint for refugees. It is a refugee story.

Exodus tells the story of a leader, Moses, who was bi-cultural—born a Hebrew, raised as an Egyptian in the palace of the elite, but never forgetting his roots. As the story goes, he has had it, one day, when he sees an Egyptian soldier striking a slave, and lashes out in return, killing the soldier. He has to flee into the surrounding wilderness, where over time he encounters Yahweh- God- and becomes a leader of the Israelite people.

He regains access to the Pharaoh and petitions him on behalf of his people, at first just to go into the wilderness for a three day festival. Fearful of losing his labor force, Pharaoh refuses. Only when Yahweh- or God- intervenes on Moses' behalf and sends 10 plagues to Egypt in short order, does Pharaoh relent.

This morning's reading says what happens. When the first-born children all die, a great cry goes up in Egypt.

In the middle of the night, and Pharaoh gets up, along with his courtiers.
He summons Moses and his brother Aaron and tells them to leave.

The Israelites don't wait for him to change his mind.

Like those who hear a pause in the fighting, a window of ceasefire,
they know they can't delay, even though they have prepared no provisions.
They grab their unleavened bread and they go, carrying what they can on their backs.
They become refugees.

They are like the Cherokee nation on the Trail of Tears,
African-American slaves on the Underground Railroad,
Central Americans fleeing warring gangs and corrupt security forces,
the refugees being re-settled in Lawrence and Lowell,
the 11 million Syrian refugees fleeing unending civil war,
the 20 million refugees in countries other than their own,
the 45 million people displaced within their own country.
They are like any of our ancestors who were refugees.

Like them, the Israelites are cast out into the wilderness,
chased out into the desert without provisions or a country,
with hunger and thirst and wandering in front of them,
but unlivable conditions and death behind them.

It's not an easy journey, but they don't all die.
Over 40 years, they are tested as a community,
and they come up with the ethical commandments their community needs in order to thrive.
They have children, and some of them make it to a new land.

And ever since, their descendants are reminded at the Seder table
to see things as if they, themselves, came up out of Egypt, from slavery to freedom.
Ever since, they are reminded of the words repeated *over and over* through the books of
Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy:
You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, but befriend them, love them,
for we were once strangers in the land of Egypt.

This is a lesson to all of us who are descendants of refugees, even of immigrants of any kind: to have compassion for those who must leave in the middle of the night with nothing, if they want to leave death behind. You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, you shall not entrap or arrest them; you shall not tear apart their families or separate mothers and fathers from their children. For you were once a stranger. Think and act as if you, yourself, were once a refugee.

In contrast to Passover, the Palm Sunday story offers a blueprint not for refugees but for those who cannot or will not flee, those who have nowhere else to go-- those who cannot seem to escape the intolerable conditions around them, but can only resist "in place".

In Jesus' case, it was the Roman Empire that made life miserable, the Roman Empire that killed Jewish leaders, Jewish mothers, anyone who stepped out of line. Roman occupation meant the constant threat of violence, of early death, of having to choose between life or abandoning one's religion, It meant 2nd class citizenship and high taxes, separating people from the fruits of their labor.

No wonder the story of Jesus has been such a powerful story of liberation for the oppressed.

It offers a blueprint for those living in an unjust society. It is a resistance story.

Palm Sunday is the part of the story about Jesus entry into Jerusalem, a city where- especially during the High Holy Days there were plenty of Roman soldiers around to help deter insurrection, soldiers waiting to arrest him or any other troublemaker who captures their attention. But as the story goes, he doesn't enter quietly. Instead, he makes a ruckus.

The story is similar in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

He tells his disciples to fetch him a colt, and then he rides it into town.
This is no normal kingly entrance- there is no gold or finery.
But the crowds are as enthusiastic as if he was the Emperor himself.
They create a spectacle- with their cloaks and their leafy branches
and their shouts of "Hosanna!" and the words from a psalm of thanksgiving
for victory over Israel's enemies, Psalm 118.

They seem to be thumbing their noses at the Romans, quite boldly indeed.
It's like a rally complete with signs and shouted slogans,
a march through the streets in defiance of state and military power.
As my colleague the Rev. Shayna Appel says, it was a messianic demonstration,
gorilla theater at the gates of Jerusalem.
It almost seems like Jesus was daring the authorities to come get him.

Well, it works. It seems the news spreads like wildfire.
We read in the gospel of Matthew that *"When he entered Jerusalem,
the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?"
The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."*

Jesus, it seems, is good at spectacle. Or perhaps he is just on a mission.
Soon after his entry to the city, he goes to the Temple,
only to find all sorts of folks buying and selling sacrificial animals,
exchanging Gentile for Jewish money.
He has had it. He says, *"It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,
but you are making it a den of robbers!'"*
Then he turns over all the tables of the money changers and the sellers of doves.

He creates a huge disruption.
And then he begins to teach, attracting more crowds, more attention- and enemies,
within the Temple and without.

Alas, it is true, when you challenge or provoke an Empire,
the Empire's fist will come smashing down.

The Israelites may have managed to escape Egypt
but Jesus did not escape the Empire's violence.

His disciples and followers escaped, but their teacher was not so lucky.

Palm Sunday is the beginning of the last week of his life,
and so this week Christians will meditate on the story of Jesus' last supper,
his arrest, trial, and brutal death at the hands of the Empire by crucifixion,
like so many thousands of others before him.

They will meditate on all this before finally arriving at the Resurrection, next Sunday.

But one lesson of Palm Sunday, it seems to me,
is for anyone who knows that inhumane treatment must not be tolerated.
It is a lesson for anyone who might be tempted
to create a spectacle, to create a ruckus,
to send the message that the seemingly powerless are full of powerful Spirit.
This has been done before-- by people we call "disciples" and followers of Jesus.

They thumbed their noses at those who dehumanized them
and threatened them with death.

They blew their own cover.

They made their presence known.

They celebrated a triumph in the face of death.

They resisted death with love.

And so may we, in the weeks ahead.

May we resist that which must be resisted.

May we befriend those who have traveled far.

May we be emboldened to create a spectacle, a ruckus.

And may we deeply love.

Amen.

Opening words, inspired by and adapted from words by the Rev. Daniel Kanter:

Today we begin anew the walk towards a Promised land,
a walk through the wilderness
to leave behind all that enslaves and binds us, in pursuit of liberation for all people.

Today we begin the walk to Jerusalem, a holy week ahead,
and the demand that we face the darkness, the broken path, the abuse of power.

Today we walk toward the dayspring breaking through,
the Easter day of joy, of life renewed and reborn.

So let us prepare the way, joining together to welcome the day,
to see what holiness resides within and about us,
to make straight the path for the work of love, of life, of God.

Exodus, 12:29 - 34, 37 – 39

In the middle of the night, the Lord struck down all the first-born
in the land of Egypt, from the first-born of Pharaoh who sat on the throne
to the first-born of the captive who was in the dungeon,
and all the first-born of the cattle.

And Pharaoh arose in the night, with all his courtiers and all the Egyptians-
because there was a loud cry in Egypt;
for there was no house where there was not someone dead.

He summoned Moses and Aaron in the night and said,

“Up, depart from among my people, you and the Israelites with you!
Go, worship the Lord as you said! Take also your flocks and your herds,
as you said, and begone! And may you bring a blessing upon me also!”

The Egyptians urged the people on, impatient to have them leave the country,
for they said, “We shall all be dead.”

So the people took their dough before it was leavened,
their kneading bowls wrapped in their cloaks upon their shoulders.

The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth,
about six hundred thousand men on foot, aside from children.
Moreover, a mixed multitude went up with them,
and very much livestock, both flocks and herds.
And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had taken out of Egypt,
for it was not leavened, since they had been driven out of Egypt and could not delay; nor had
they prepared any provisions for themselves.

Gospel of Mark, Chapter 11, verses 1 through 11.

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany,
near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them,
“Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it,
you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it.
If anyone says to you, “Why are you doing this?”, just say this-
“The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.”

They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street.
As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them,
“What are you doing, untying the colt?”
They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it.

Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it.
Many people spread their cloaks on the road,
and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields.
Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,
“Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple;
and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late,
he went out to Bethany with the twelve.