

## Our Names as Blessings

*A sermon by the Rev. Lee Bluemel,  
preached at the North Parish of North Andover, MA, Unitarian Universalist  
September 24, 2017*

These days I find myself, much like the Biblical prophet Jonah,  
wanting a *vengeful* God.

I'm not proud of it, but I fantasize that there would be some satisfaction  
in marching through the streets yelling

***"YAHWEH IS NOT PLEASED WITH WHAT IS GOING ON!"***

I'd like a Jewish colleague by my side, blowing the shofar-  
the loud ram's horn intended to wake people up-  
and a Muslim colleague willing to stop the entire march  
with a call to prayer, all of us getting down on our knees right in the street.  
And why not- people from every faith, each in their own way,  
giving the same basic message: *Yahweh is not pleased!*

I'm secretly in the mood to bring back the God of rewards and punishments  
*just* for a season, the God who smites enemies  
and threatens of ruin upon nations who forget their human decency,  
on those that do not care for the widows and orphans and the most vulnerable.  
How about bringing back the God who delivers judgment on nations  
who reject or mistreat those who seek refuge  
after fleeing or being forced from their homeland?!

This is the kind of God who turns whole cities into salt  
when they're not hospitable to strangers,  
the God who constantly reminds us to think of ourselves  
as strangers in a strange land- as our ancestors, no doubt, once were.

These days, I'm for bringing back the God who spoke directly to the prophets and then chased them all around the world until they agreed to use their powers of persuasion to shake the world out of its moral complacency and ethical vacuity. It's the God who regularly took a moral inventory of us humans- not just on the individual level, but as collectives, as societies, as nations. This is the kind of deity who read the riot act to God's own *chosen people* when their ethics got loose and squishy.

That God had power and fury enough to motivate *entire cities* of people to rend their clothing and put on sackcloth and ashes and go into the streets to publicly atone for their misguided ways. This God didn't care what religion you claimed, but let you know- in no uncertain terms- that your life depends on how you act. That God was able to get folks' attention when they had become their own worst enemy! That God sent prophets to the people, and if they didn't listen, well, God would just send a *really big flood* or two!

*Hmmmm...* Well, maybe I don't long for *quite* that kind of God.

The *trouble* with that kind of God, of course, is that *everyone* gets caught up in the flood, not just those in power who have brought down God's wrath. As it turns out, we are all interconnected. So when there's a flood, too many people and living things that suffer, while those in power who have set destructive policies often have a second home to retreat to.

Another problem with this vengeful God is that humans are ultimately off the hook.

God does all the heavy lifting to re-balance the scales of justice.

If the people and the prophets can't turn things around, well, blam!

God obliterates a city or sends a plague or an invading army.

Talk about starting with a clean slate!

There's nothing like obliteration to require starting over, at the very beginning.

But at least afterwards, the few who survive know who was right and who was wrong.

Right?

A third problem with a vengeful God is that she or he can be used as a weapon...

a weapon to say some people are on God's side and others are not, some deserve to die and some do not, some are worthy and others are not, some deserve eternal life and others do not.

That kind of God tends to be created in the image of its followers, with the danger of turning religious communities into egotistical enclaves.

And that God is a rotten model for justice on a human scale.

Truth be told, some of us are here in *this* congregation because we encountered just that kind of patriarchal, punishing, judgmental, vengeful, or violent God as young people and knew instinctively- or even gradually- that it wasn't right.

As Unitarian Universalists, we have among us a variety of ways of naming and understanding the larger reality to which we belong.

I'm talking about that really, *really vast* larger reality in which we live and move and have our being!

Some of us call it Universe. Some call it earth, evolution or Gaia.

Some of us call it God. Some-- spirit of Life, spirit of Love.

Some of us might prefer "higher power", or Source, or Ultimate Mystery. Some call on goddesses and others on Jesus when we need strength, and still others, on the breath and the present moment.

Some refer to that Greater Reality as Creativity or Creative process; others might see it as both a creative and destructive energy. Some might struggle with a name but use visual images of an unfolding, emerging energy always on the cusp of something new. Many would see ourselves not as *separate* from this larger reality, but as tiny but precious participants in its unfolding.

As the Celtic poet and priest John O'Donahue writes,  
*"...we are... participants at the heart of creation.  
Each of us brings alive something in the world that no one else can.  
When your life awakens (to this)... you endeavor to live a life that is generous  
and worthy of the blessing and invitation that is always calling you."*

Now, ideas like these can help us lead lives infused with awe, humility and a sense of belonging. But they aren't all that handy when what you really, secretly want is a deity who will smite your enemies for you.

That's the kind of God of the hapless and reluctant Prophet, Jonah, from the Hebrew Bible. Jonah is the prophet of the hour, as his story is told every Yom Kippur, the Jewish High Holy day when Jews atone for their sins against God. By Yom Kippur, they're supposed to have already taken care of their sins against each other.

In the story of Jonah, the prophet doesn't come out as a shining exemplar of humanity. In fact, he tries desperately to abdicate his moral responsibility. God tells him to go prophesy to Nineveh, a city that needs to hear a voice of protest in the public square. This is because Jonah seems to have a gift—a gift of persuasion,

a gift of convincing folks that they need to change their ways.

God sending Jonah to Nineveh is like sending him to Charlottesville, Virginia right into the midst of a KKK and White Supremacist rally, with the instruction to change white supremacist minds. Jonah is SO OUTRAGED at those KKK and White Supremacist folks that he would prefer God to just smite them!

As a Jew, these are the people who slaughtered his ancestors, and there are folks likely to perpetuate hate against his descendants. There are probably statues in Nineveh, erected to honor those who led the charge to enslave the Jewish people. There are probably laws in Nineveh that perpetuate inequalities. People of certain religious or ethnic heritages probably get detained by the Ninevite palace guards more than others.

God has conducted a moral inventory of this city, and has put it on God's very own Destruction List. But that's a big move, so God calls upon Jonah to send him to talk to the Ninevites in a last ditch attempt to save them.

Well, Jonah does the equivalent of plugging his ears when God tells him his task—*“La, la, la, la... I can't hear you, God!”* He tries to avoid his moral responsibility. He hides his gift- *literally*. He *hides* in the hold of a ship, and says he is willing to even die- his gift of prophecy dying with him.

Jonah would rather that God send someone else, *anyone else*. Maybe a committee or a task force could take on the Nineveh project! Jonah doesn't say “Send me!” like a good prophet should; he says “Leave me alone. Send someone else. I really don't want to deal.”

Well, we know that Jonah does end up going and saving the city, but meanwhile hands God another big project: working on Jonah's own heart. God keeps trying to help Jonah lay down his burden of resentment and anger. Jonah is stubborn, but God doesn't give up. I daresay that God *loves* Jonah.

But that's not all. God not only seems to *love* Jonah, but this God- this *All-Powerful* God- *relies* on him. God relies on this very imperfect human being... on *Jonah*, with all his avoidance techniques, with all his resistance, with all his anger and depression and suicidal ideation. God relies on *Jonah*, and on Jonah's desire to live, and his beautiful gift.

God needs Jonah to go to the city: to use his voice, to raise a moral alarm, to stand between the Ninevites and their obliteration. Reluctantly, Jonah goes. And he helps to shape history.

We not only depend on that which is greater than us- but it depends on us. There is no God out there who will smite our enemies, so it looks like we'll just have to go to Nineveh and talk to them, like Jonah did. "What kind of world do we want to live in?" is a question that we answer with how we live.

We are *participants in the heart of creation*— in the unfolding of love, the process of Creativity, the life of the earth, the movement of the divine. In process theology terms, we are co-creators with the spirit of life, of love, of God. Or as the Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh says, "I entrust myself to the earth. The earth entrusts herself to me." The trust goes both ways.

Now this might feel like a heavy burden if, like Jonah, we carried this alone. Fortunately, none of us is a lone prophet like Jonah, sent to face our enemies with a nearly impossible task. We are not alone, but are in covenant with each other and an association of congregations. We are connected to a wider interfaith community and secular organizations that are all sounding an alarm in the public square.

We are connected to the community of all beings, with all of life. We create congregations in part so we can speak in a collective voice on behalf of the voiceless or the silenced ones in the community of all beings. To remain silent about the state of things would be to abdicate our moral responsibility, to hide in the proverbial hold of our safe ship.

In the Jewish tradition, this is the time for taking moral inventories- not just ourselves personally, but as a collective, as a society. It is said that by the end of Yom Kippur, if Jews have properly atoned for their sins against God their names will be written as blessings in the Book of Life.

This is a project not just for individuals, but for Jewish congregations as a whole. According to Rabbi Tellushkin in the book *Jewish Literacy*, “Jewish tradition teaches that each Jew bears a certain measure of responsibility for the sins committed by other Jews.” So it is not just as individuals, but as a congregation *and a people* that Jews try to “get right with God” before the end of Yom Kippur.

As you might remember from last week, taking moral inventory is just the first step in that process. The next step is sitting with and feeling the remorse, or the pain. The next: undoing the damage, making amends or restitution.

The next: resolving to refrain from the same behavior and starting to live life differently.

So when and how might we Unitarian Universalists apply such steps to our own collective life?

Here's just one example of our own, taken from reading our national UU magazine, called *The World*.

In this month's edition, the Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed detailed some of the history of our denomination's "sins" against our own people—the many times in the past that Unitarian Universalist institutions turned their backs on their fellow African-American UU ministers and congregations, offering them little to no support .

Now, we could read an article like that and say, "How about that history," and then retreat to the hold of our proverbial ship.

Or we could ask ourselves some questions:

*Is there unfinished business at our UU welcome table that needs attending to?*

*How deep is our understanding of the history of how white control has played out in our own institutions?*

*Are we attached, still, to an illusion of our innocence?*

*How easily do we de-center ourselves to make room for other voices?*

*Are we already done with all the spiritual and institutional work around issues of transgender, class and ethnic identities?*

*How often do we engage with people quite different than ourselves?*

*Are there relationships or coalitions where we need to engage, or re-engage?*

*As the recipients of a tradition that once proclaimed "the progress of humankind, upward and onward forever!", have we believed in a false narrative of inevitable progress, and acted accordingly? What other false narratives have we created or believed?*

I invite you to ponder these things with me, this year.



As a people of faith, a Unitarian Universalist congregation,  
we are participants in the heart of Creation, the process of creativity,  
the spirit of life, the movement of God.  
And as participants with a moral voice,  
our congregation has a role to play in the public square.  
We also have work to do right here, with one another and the legacy we carry.  
Thankfully, we are not alone.

Each year, each day, we get to start over,  
to try our best to get things a bit more right,  
to inscribe our names as blessings in the Book of Life.  
Like Jonah, we are not perfect;  
we're not even shining exemplars of humanity (at least, speaking for myself!)  
But neither was Jonah. And I daresay his name is written there, in the Book of Life,  
in the book that says "You were a blessing".

*You were a blessing.*

*You were a blessing.*

Blessed be, and amen.