

Who's Afraid of the Baby Jesus?
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There is a hill, or a rock, along the west side of the Dead Sea called Masada, on whose crest sits the remnant of an ancient hilltop garrison. Originally built up by King Herod, not long after the birth of Jesus, it was surrounded by a high stone wall and has long views in every direction. At the outbreak of the Jewish War, Masada was captured by a band of Zealots. After Jerusalem fell, once again, to the Romans in 70 C.E., Masada remained for three years the only point of Jewish resistance.

The Roman governor Flavius Silva decided to suppress this outpost and marched against Masada with a total of ten to fifteen thousand troops, who established eight camps at the base of the Masada rock and surrounded it, leaving no escape for the rebels. Using Jewish slaves and prisoners as labour, they built a ramp to the top. With a battering ram, they began their assault on the stone wall protecting the garrison.

During the night, listening to the pounding assault, the those on the inside decided to kill themselves rather than fall into the hands of Romans. Ten people chosen by a lot killed everyone else and then committed suicide. In the morning Romans entered a silent fortress and found only dead bodies. Two women and five children survived the mass suicide by hiding in a cave; their story of the last hours at Masada was recorded by the historian Josephus. I had the great privilege of visiting Masada about five years ago. Its potent and painful history still reverberates in the rocks.

Religious persecution such as this is a familiar story. Even if we look only at Jewish and Christian history...the Israelites killed the Canaanites, the Assyrians

killed the Israelites, the Crusaders killed the non-Christians, the Jesuits killed the Socinians, the Calvinists killed the anti-trinitarians, the Nazis killed the Jews... the list is seemingly endless.

On that same trip to Israel, we met with the woman who founded Women in Black. She is a Jew living in Jerusalem, working for peace, encouraging women to dress in black and stand silently on street corners, as a reminder of all of the horrors of war, of military oppression, and of the wall which is killing the soul of Palestine. She was asked why Israel, now so powerful and politically well-positioned, insists on keeping its thumb on little powerless Palestine. I will always remember her response. She said, "No amount of military power, no amount of ammunition, will ever convince Israel that she is no longer the victim, no longer being oppressed."

I tell you these stories because I wonder if, based on our history, the fear of religious persecution is indelibly marked upon us. Today we live in a society that espouses freedom of religion. This is not a recent change... religious freedom has been understood, if not legislated, since the 18th century in Canada. And yet, still, we experience oppression. Your parents may have forced religious compliance upon you. You may have felt like a misfit among school peers who easily practiced Christianity. And some here may well have fallen victim to more blatant religious persecution. What will it take for us to fully live into our religious freedom?

We have each chosen to be a part of a religious tradition that strives to be inclusive of difference. No doubt, many of us have come to this faith because we wanted a place where OUR beliefs would be included and honoured. We have to remember, though, that being part of this community, this place that embraces us, requires us in turn to be accepting of each person's religious path. At this time of year, when Christmas dominates every corner of life, I have to wonder if

we are willing to be tolerant of Christians, our closest neighbours and our most direct ancestors.

There is no question but that Christianity, or its adherents, has caused harm. Some of us have been told that our beliefs will send us to hell. Our perspectives and our beautifully creative and loving ways of being in the world have often been squelched and silenced. Personally speaking, healing from such hurt has been a long process. Healing from any hurt is a long process, as this congregation well knows. Although I'm not a psychologist, I think it's safe to say that when we are hurting, we are vulnerable and reactive, and in such a state, even without any active input, the perceived aggressor still has its hooks deep within us and we are not free. As long as we spend our energy reacting and blaming, we are not free.

Who's Afraid of the Baby Jesus, may seem an irreverent title to some, and you may wonder where it came from. When initial planning began for a Christmas pageant several years ago at a UU congregation far away, I overheard a wondering about why we were doing such a Jesus-centered production. It was not the content of the comment that got my attention, but its tone...I thought I heard actual fear in this voice. Perhaps I was projecting, because I am sometimes afraid of Jesus too. But afraid of the Christmas story? Why do we respond to this story with such disdain? What exactly are we afraid of?

I hopefully envision a time when hearing a message of Christian salvation would be no less safe and just as interesting as a message about Hindu reincarnation. Ultimately, they are no different. They are both beliefs to which I don't prescribe, but from which I can learn. Our faith should provide a place where we are challenged to discover the wisdom in all traditions, even those that have harmed us. At the same time, this must be a safe place, not a place where wounds are re-opened. But do we not believe, that as ethical, thinking, capable

humans, we have some control over whether or not we respond out of our fear? Can we not choose healthier responses than showing disrespect or launching attacks?

Here's what I wonder. Whatever your religious belief and perspective, has your history of being hurt and silenced and unseen led you to a place where no amount of ammunition and wall-building is enough to comfort you? How can we exist in such a space and still be true to our covenants to honour one another? Rob Brezsny, in his book *Pronoia is the Antidote for Paranoia* says that when we're obsessed with how people have done us wrong, we have little ambition to change ourselves. Blame fests and disrespect simply take too much energy, sapping us of the energy we need to be true to our commitments to be the best human beings we can be.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, an Edward Albee play, is an intense and warped domestic comedy containing a searing analysis of the ways any of us might lead our lives. Of the four main characters, one is locked in models of the past, one escapes into a make-believe world, one is an amoral social climber, and one is an eternal child, fearful of the future. This play creates a picture of a heartbreaking inability to create the life that each longs for. Virginia Woolf, the British feminist writer who so deeply examined the psychological and emotional motives of her characters, and who ultimately went insane and killed herself, becomes in this play the symbol of that of which the characters are most afraid, of losing the will to live.

The will to live can liberate us. The will to live, the will not to succumb to fear, the will to live ever more abundantly, is a holy desire. However misguided our longings may appear, however distorted our responses to those desires, therapist James Hillman insists that psychology regards all symptoms to be expressing the right thing in the wrong way. He says that we should follow the lead of our

symptoms to find the myth in the mess, a mess that is an expression of soul. In other words, we should not discount our fear, but rather honour it, and follow its lead to uncover the deep longing it masks. What is it that we crave and are not getting?

Literary critics make a connection between *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and Jung's work *The Undiscovered Self*. Now, I don't suppose you thought, that in coming to a service entitled "Who's Afraid of the Baby Jesus?" that we'd be moving into Jung-territory, but here we go. In *The Undiscovered Self*, Jung identifies mass society as that place in which symbolism is lost because of the perpetuation of easy creeds. He then highlights the importance of individual responsibility and freedom, and argues that individuals must find ways to resist joining the mass. This is accomplished, says Jung, through the exploration of the unconscious that leads to self-knowledge. Now, for Jung, it is religious experience, an inner transcendence, that provides us with the ground that prevents us from being swept up in mass society. Jung contends that by following our spiritual impulses to more consciousness of who we are, by discovering our true Selves, we can relate to one another, not through the creeds or dogmas, but as enlightened, known human beings, one to another.

Perhaps we have experienced Christmas and much of its trappings as part of that blind, easy, creed-affirming mass culture that destroys symbolism by reducing it to the concrete, leaving little room for a deep and personal self-searching. Perhaps it feels like there is no space for us and all of who we are. But, in a quest to take back that which has been stolen, I would challenge us to re-claim symbolism, because without great archetypal symbols, we are left in a void of, or at best a dearth of, meaning. Henry Nelson Weiman, a great Unitarian process theologian said that "true progress has a conservative as well as a radical dimension. Progress retains what is of value, even as it rejects what has been proven unworthy." There is value in the story of Baby Jesus. It's a simple story,

rife with symbolism, and whether we are Christian or not, whether we believe it really happened or not, it deserves to be heard.

The divine is incarnated here in this life, on this earth, in the humblest of places. There is holiness in the birth of each child.

That we need not be afraid; for there exists good news of great joy for all the people.

And, as Linda Thomson wrote in her last CUC notes, there will have been magic simply because we have hoped.

We do not need to adopt the Christmas story as the meta-narrative for our lives, in order to learn from it, or in order to hear its promise of something for which we long.

I have learned a lesson from two great feminists...Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether. Each of them comes out of the Catholic tradition. Each of them offers a scathing critique of patriarchy. Each of them works to create a more just world. Yet Daly believes that Christianity is not redeemable while Ruether believes that there is hope for Christianity. Like them, you have the right to decide if the story of Christmas is redeemable for you. My intention today is not to convince you that you need to embrace Christianity, or enjoy Christmas, or to insist that you should like hearing Carols blasted through every store aisle for months before this holiday. What I do intend to express, is that our fear, and along with our fear, our disgust and our righteous detachment, do not serve us well. To live in fear is to commit a kind of suicide that separates us from life-giving possibilities. Yes, of course...part of our work is to critique that which is harmful and to call for justice to roll down like waters. It's just that, as always, our work must begin with ourselves.

Children's stories and rhymes often teach us how to navigate a potentially hurtful and scary world. The title of today's message, *Who's Afraid of the Baby Jesus*, is reminiscent of the story of the *Three Little Pigs* who repeatedly and courageously asked, "Who's afraid of the big bad wolf?" In their story, as it turns out, there was reason for two of the pigs to be afraid, because their houses weren't strong enough to withstand the wolf's mighty blows. But remember, those little pigs were not so intent on stopping the wolf as they were on constructing their own houses. I would say that the metaphor breaks down because the strongest house is purported to be the one made of brick, while our strongest interpersonal boundaries are not brick walls, but rather are permeable and flexible. We must believe that love is stronger than hate, that kindness is more powerful than aggression, that understanding trumps distrust any day. Our focus should not be on those wolves, but on growing and fortifying our own sense of our worth, our dignity, our right to believe as we do. We need to come down, out of our hiding, and lovingly welcome the presence of difference, even when that difference represents something that has hurt us.

Earlier, I read a part of Adrienne Rich's poem, *Transcendental Etude*. At the beginning of that poem, a part I did not read, Rich writes this...

No one ever told us we had to study our lives,
make of our lives a study, as if learning natural history
or music, that we should begin
with the simple exercises first
and slowly go on trying
the hard ones, practicing till strength
and accuracy became one with the daring
to leap into transcendence...

--And in fact we can't live like that: we take on
everything at once before we've even begun

to read or mark time, we're forced to begin
in the midst of the hardest movement,
the one already sounding as we are born....

We cut the wires, and find ourselves in free-fall...

This is one of those hardest moments...facing our fears, taking responsibility for ourselves, learning to love. In this place, with our respect for our differences, with our embrace of the possibilities that love offers - here we find a tether cord that helps us with the difficult task of studying our lives. And, here, we find the place where we can cut that wire, and find ourselves in free-fall, and find ourselves, once again, caught by a web of interdependency and mutuality. It is in these moments, during these times of fear and these times of being reassured by each other, that we know once again that will to live and to live ever more abundantly.

May it always be so.

Amen.