

Job Was a Unitarian Universalist

Rev. Joshua Snyder

It is an honor to be able to worship with you here at First Unitarian Church one last time. As some of you may know, I have been called to be the Senior Minister at the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware beginning this fall. So I am in the process of saying good bye to everyone who has made my ministry in Omaha so special. That includes you good folks here at First Unitarian Church of Omaha. I have thoroughly enjoyed getting to know many of you, and working with you over the past eight years. Thank you all so very much. But let us turn to the topic for today.

There are many differences between Unitarian Universalism and other religions, particularly here in the West. One of the most noticeable differences is that Unitarian Universalism is a very eclectic religion. That is to say that there is no one set of beliefs or creed that has persisted throughout the history of our liberal religious tradition. If there could be anything that one could point to as a creed it might be the commitment to arguing with each other about what it is that we believe. Unitarianism began with an argument. The liberal Calvinists in New England disagreed with the more orthodox Calvinists in New England, many of whom were in the very same congregation together, and there was ultimately a split. This was known as the Unitarian Controversy, and it marks the first official beginning of Unitarianism in America as an independent denomination. And it all started with an argument.

But of course that was not the end of it. The next generation, the Transcendentalists, started another argument with their fathers and mothers who has been at the front lines of the Unitarian

Controversy. This time the argument was called the Transcendentalist Controversy. While the Unitarians were brilliant religious thinkers, they lacked creativity for naming the historical moments of their tradition. Later there would be a Humanist Controversy – guess who that was with. I could go on, documenting all of the arguments the Unitarians, and even to some degree the Universalists, have had throughout the years. In the process I would have told a good amount of our history.

The result of all this arguing is that one key principle emerged within Unitarian Universalism: no one has to leave simply because they disagree with someone else's theology. This commitment to hang together despite our differences is, I believe, a unique characteristic of Unitarian Universalism. It is what we mean when we talk about the church as a covenanted religious community. It is a covenant because we all agree to be in this special kind of relationship together.

Thus there are a number of individuals and groups within Unitarian Universalism as a whole, and often within a single congregation, who believe a lot of different things. We are theologically eclectic. All these layers of arguing have accumulated throughout our history, and being in a covenanted relationship together, we still have Unitarian Christians, Humanists, Transcendentalists, Pagans, and others. Each one of these groups has its own identity, to some degree, and perhaps even their own list of saints and sacred scripture. Therefore Unitarian Universalism itself has a number of different books and sacred text that one could conceivably call scripture. So another unique characteristic of Unitarian Universalism is what some have called the “loose-leaf” Bible; a Bible that includes important texts not only from the world religions, but also from so called “secular” sources.

But perhaps more important than what our sacred scripture happens to be, is how we read it. Interpretation of sacred text is a very important exercise for every religious tradition, and it can be particularly tricky for religious liberals committed to the use of reason in spiritual matters. While

we should not abandon our critical minds and the ability to judge the moral and spiritual weight of a particular book or text, we should be on the look out for our own inherent prejudices toward some traditions over others. One of my favorite examples of this is the renowned theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr had some very interesting ideas, but at least in this area of world religions he got a bit out there. In one of his books he goes through, in rather learned detail, the theological assertions of various world religions; Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism and so forth. At the end of each of his analysis of these religions he comes to the conclusion that all of these religions are in some way flawed because they suffer from various irrational theological assertions. Finally he turns his critical attention toward Christian theology which he concludes is superior to all of these religions because it transcends reason. Christianity, presumably Protestant Christianity, is “super-rational”. My seminary colleagues and I used to say, “If you don’t make sense it’s because you are irrational. If I don’t make sense it’s because I’m super-rational!”

While it is important to move away from this pitfall of judging others’ religions too hastily, we must return to the way in which Unitarian Universalists read their sacred scripture regardless of what it happens to be. There are at least three different ways one can read scripture. The first is the literal reading. Basically this is the notion that Jesus and other characters in the Bible did what the Bible says they did. Same could be said about the Koran and Muhammad, or the Sutras and the Buddha. The text is taken at face value and no further data is brought into consideration other than that specific narrative. This leads to believing a lot of seemingly fantastic things sometimes: Jesus rose from the dead, Muhammad ascended into heaven, Krishna transformed himself into a fish, and the Buddha can calm raging elephants just with his spiritual aura – sort of like the Fonze on *Happy Days*.

The other way to look at scripture is the scholarly approach, or what I like to call the History Channel approach. Every time you get near Easter or Christmas or Passover, the History Channel

trots out various Biblical scholars and interviews them. They tell us what “really” happened in the Bible given what we know about the social, cultural, and even the literary and linguistic context of the time the Bible was written. This is the way I was taught to read the Bible when I was in theological school. I have even seen some of my old Bible professors on the History Channel being interviewed. This approach has a long history with the Unitarians – some of whom were the first Biblical scholars in America. This is an approach that strongly questions the surface of the biblical text. The Jesus Seminar went so far as to rate how accurately they thought some of the words of Jesus were in the New Testament. This is sort of the Dick Clark’s American Bandstand approach to Biblical scholarship. “I like Matthew chapter five. It has a good beat and I could dance to it.” The scholarly approach believes that the Gospel of Matthew tells you more about the author of the Gospel of Matthew than it reveals anything about Jesus. You know when the author of Matthew lived, shortly after 70 AD, because he mentions the fall of the second temple, and that he was a Jewish convert to Christianity as opposed to a Greek convert like Luke. It is in Matthew that Jesus says that he came to fulfill the law not to change it – an idea very different than that of Paul. While that may be an interesting fact, it is just that; a fact, a *non sequitur*.

This brings us to the third way one can read the Bible; as a source book of spiritual inspiration. This has gained in popularity among some conservative Christians such as my personal favorite, and hair hero, Joel Osteen. This is an approach to the Bible that sees it as a spiritual handbook for everyone right now, right here. The stories of the Bible teach us a lesson that we need to apply to our lives. Notice that it does not particularly matter if the stories themselves are historically true – just that they are useful. It is a pragmatic approach to reading the Bible for spiritual purposes.

Of course liberals can and do read the Bible the same way, but draw different lessons from it. Latin American Catholics have seen in the Bible many examples of God being on the side of the

poor and oppressed. That Jesus overturns the moneylenders' tables in the temple and fights against corruption, discrimination, disease, and poverty. Jesus' radical prophetic ministry, along with his strong moral teachings, lead to a revolutionary reading of the Bible.

This is the approach I find myself being drawn to again and again. And it is not just the Bible. I think we need to be careful in treating all scripture with the same respect, and the same critical eye, that we reserve for the Bible. Unlike Niebuhr, we cannot turn a blind and ignorant eye to our prejudices. Why do UUs always read the traditional Tao Te Ching, for example? What about the Ma-Wang-Tui texts that predate the traditional version, and may very well be a more authentic version of the Lao Tzu text? If we are going to take a History Channel approach to one, we need to be ready to do it to everyone. Personally I don't mind doing that. It can be a useful and helpful exercise. But it can also be a very spiritually deadening exercise. I remember when we all finished our Bible requirements at Meadville Lombard, we found that we were very well prepared to read journals on Biblical studies, but had now way of actually using any of those stories in a sermon. What did they mean? What spiritual significance did they have for us or anyone else? It is with this frame of interpretation in mind, that I want to return to our reading for today from the book of Job [Job 23:1-17].

There are of course lots of spiritual lessons one can derive from any story in the Bible, but Job is particularly fruitful. Perhaps the ultimate interpretation of Job is Harold Kushner's popular book, When Bad Things Happen to Good People. It is one of my all time favorites. For most of the Old Testament there is a sort of straight forward, almost karmic approach to good and evil. Follow God's rules laid out in the first five books, and you will be rewarded with a happy and prosperous life. Proverbs in particular lays this out. But Job is trying to raise a counterpoint to this. That formula doesn't always work. Bad things happen to good people. Kushner has said that many people have suggested that he write a sequel called, When Good Things Happen to Bad People.

Ah, but I have digressed into the scholarly approach. Let us return to the symbolic/spiritual approach to reading the book of Job.

I see the book of Job as a story of existential abandonment. God makes a sort of gentlemen's wager with Satan that Job is only praising God and following the commandments because he has been so blessed. Reverse the trend, make bad things happen to him, and Job will lose his faith. And so in a surprisingly callous move, God agrees. Job loses everything; all his money, all of his livestock, all of his children, everything that he loved in the world was stripped away from him. His response is to tear his clothes, "Naked I came into the world and naked I shall leave it." What a great moment of existential reflection! In our reading today Job is getting ready to give God what for. Tell off the old man with the beard about how unjust the whole affair really is. Job is abandoned.

This, my friends, is an important thing to pay attention to because this experience of abandonment by the God of the Bible is an experience that is all too common today. Many people come to Unitarian Universalist churches because they too feel that something is missing. That old time religion of their childhood was either too oppressive for adulthood, or just wasn't there to begin with. Add on to that a little bit of the slings and arrows that outrageous fortune can throw your way, and pretty soon most of us would start to understand Job's sackcloth and ashes. We would probably be running to its modern day equivalent – a pint of Ben and Jerrys and reruns of MASH while we hide from the world in the safety of our pajamas. Maybe that's just me.

Imagine being Job, and everything you love in the world has been stripped from you; your loved ones, your possessions, even your health. Why would you get out of bed? What would propel you to live one more day in such a state? What do you imagine would be the reason for putting one foot in front of the other and continuing on with your day? Whatever answer you have, whatever reason you put forth in your own mind to those questions: that is your religion. You see

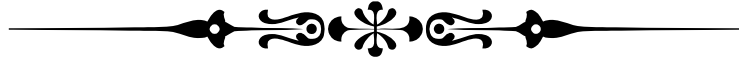
religion is not about some fanciful idea about what happens to you when you die. Religion is that which sustains your very being when everything else is gone. It is your ultimate concern. To use Buddhist language, it is your refuge. If you were like Job, stripped of everything you loved and cared for, what would make you go on living?

There are religions out there that will tell you that there is only one answer to those questions: God. Others might say it is our innate goodness or the interconnections we have with nature and each other. But in any case, there is usually one answer. Unitarian Universalism is unique as a religion because it allows these existential questions to remain open, to evolve over time, and to differ between people. So that the way you answer the question of what would keep you going when everything you loved is taken from you may differ from that of the person sitting next to you. It may be different from what you would have said ten years ago or what you will say ten years from now. But whatever your answer is, whatever it is that you believe to be holy and sacred in the universe, that answer is important to you and it is important to all of us as a religious community. Let us share our answers so that we may be enriched by the variety of our responses. Let us celebrate our diversity!

May we read our sacred text with an open mind but also with an open heart. May we seek the answers to the questions that are hard to ask. And may we find solace among a group of people who nurture the asking and the answering of such questions. Amen Blessed Be.



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