

Theodore Parker Church
Looking (again) at Innocence Lost
February 28, 2021

As we finish our month of focus on Beloved Community, we'll consider the lessons learned throughout time that continue to challenge our hope for the elusive goal of peace and prosperity for all.

OPENING WORDS

Our opening words come to us from the writers, C.S. Lewis and Annie Lamott. Lewis said (though probably not directly to Lamott!), "You don't have a soul. You *are* a soul. You have a body." You ARE a soul. If this is right, (Lamott suggests) we have a purpose, which is to shine, like the moon shining in the sky; or to paraphrase the old bumper sticker (she says): think globally, shine locally.

Let us shine together this morning, for each other, and for our sweet and struggling world.

Candle lighting to honor Covid victims - w/ "Blessed Motion"

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dReyZsijOkc>) instrumental of Rent . . .

Remember that line from the musical Rent? - Five hundred twenty five thousand six hundred minutes in one year - a way of measuring time - which could be "in daylight, in sunlight, in midnights, in cups of coffee; in inches, in miles, in laughter and strife." The song and musical honor imagined lives intertwined with the enormous losses of the AIDS epidemic, another time when the mishandling of a virus cut short far, far too many vibrant lives.

This morning we want to take the time to acknowledge the time and losses we have suffered during the pandemic. Aside from remembering this year of our lives, if we were to mark each of the recorded deaths from COVID 19 in this country alone, one per minute, it would take a full year to read each name. Every minute of every day and all night - another loss . . . for a full year. If we were marking each death worldwide, it would be one per minute for five years . . . and the number is still going up. We haven't stopped counting. The loss is too huge to grasp . . . it is the rug pulled out from under us; it is an overwhelming sense of ground-shaking change and loss. It has challenged - once again - our sense of knowing what life has in store for us. In a way, our innocence may be one of the things we count as lost . . . again.

During the music we'll be playing next, we'd like to invite you to light a candle or two in your own homes, shining light on our many losses the same way we shine light on our living.

While our candles are being lit, we're sharing a piece of music called Blessed Motion - a 4-part acknowledgement of the nature of Life as an unpredictable, ever-changing movement toward itself.

I believed in solid ground until I saw the earth in motion,
in the winds of steady change and in the ever-rolling ocean.
All moves on in perfect, perfect motion.
All is change and ever-rolling ocean.

MUSIC Blessed Motion (lyric slide of ocean)

<https://soundcloud.com/user-478813445/blessed-motion-by-annie-zylstra>

recorded by Aly Halpert, Sol Weiss & Margot Seigle

HOMILY, pt 1

Speaking of time, it was a year ago next Saturday that I joined my friend Barbara Penzner, the rabbi at Temple Hillel B'nai Torah, for their weekly shabbat service. She had preached in our sanctuary the Sunday before, which was a year ago, today. The Torah portion that I responded to during that particular shabbat service was in the calendar for February 20th this year because it comes just ahead of Purim, the celebration of Jewish survival thanks to the heroic efforts of the young Queen Esther. Purim was celebrated just this past Thursday into Friday. The lead-up reading is from Deuteronomy - the fifth book of the Hebrew scriptures, chapter 25: 17-19, set during the time of the exodus from Egypt.

¹⁷ Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt.¹⁸ When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and attacked all who were lagging behind; they had no fear of God. ¹⁹ When the Lord your God gives you rest from all the enemies around you in the land he is giving you to possess as an inheritance, you shall blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!

My reflections during the service last year included these thoughts:

We heard the basic story earlier . . . the Israelites are traveling, having gotten out of bondage in Egypt . . . and they are attacked for no reason, apparently, other than who they were and it is mentioned in the passage, and worth note, I think, that the Amalekites had no fear of God.

Let me suggest for our purposes this morning that we not be too literal here, that the fact that "they had no fear of God" might simply mean they had no humility; no sense that there was anything more substantive or important than their own capacity to destroy. They had no imagination for a bigger picture.

I continued:

This feels somehow definitional to me; yet, I find the saddest part of this story is the suggestion in midrash that even though the Israelites ultimately won the battle, they lost their innocence. One reference (Tanchuma, Ki Teitzei 9) suggests that what stands out in this text is that, “though the Jews were victorious, **their aura of security was shattered.**” (repeat)

They survived, but a sense of innocence was lost.

MUSIC Instrumental/piano of In My Quiet Sorrow (1006)

MEDITATION/PRAYER from Mary Oliver
Dear Lord, I have swept and I have washed but
still nothing is as shining as it should be
for you. Under the sink, for example, is an
uproar of mice — it is the season of their
many children. What shall I do? And under the eaves
and through the walls the squirrels
have gnawed their ragged entrances — but it is the season
when they need shelter, so what shall I do? And
the raccoon limps into the kitchen and opens the cupboard
while the dog snores, the cat hugs the pillow;
what shall I do? Beautiful is the new snow falling
in the yard and the fox who is staring boldly
up the path, to the door. And still I believe you will
come, Lord: you will, when I speak to the fox,
the sparrow, the lost dog, the shivering sea-goose, know
that really I am speaking to you whenever I say,
as I do all morning and afternoon: Come in, Come in.

And this is our knowing and our hope . . . that there is something bigger than we are: more
bold, more compassionate - a spirit of love to aspire to - that in our right minds, our humble
minds, the minds that know we are but a small part of a very big reality and how much we need
each other . . . that we might say to that holy presence and wisdom beyond our own: Come in,
Come in.

MEDITATION MUSIC

We Pray (Michael and Robbie) audio only

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1uOngVXw7eEBIYAF3WEu5Nfg-PtbyMLKQ>

HOMILY, pt. 2

A very small, sweet number of us have met the past two Thursdays for a time of Vespers, some quiet reflection, poetry, music - space for imagining where we find ourselves in this ever-changing time. What is it we are each headed towards, or preparing for? I have begun with the statement shared in a blog post: **Beloveds. This. has. Been. a. year.** (show slide)

Yes. In so very many ways . . . (drop slide)

When I think about the year past, **my** mind goes first to the pandemic. And then to politics: the lead up to the election, the election, the aftermath. And then to Brionna Taylor and George Floyd and the amazing energy around antiracism and social reform combined or challenged by a persistent white power pushback. And then back to the pandemic and vaccines. In whatever order these events come to your mind and heart . . .

Beloveds. It has been a year.

A year of events that have caught us up short, challenged - for sure - our aura of security. And, you know, these are only the shared experiences. Many of us have had personal events do the same thing: the loss of loved ones to things other than Covid; financial challenges we didn't anticipate; health challenges we could never have guessed at; the very reality of distance we are still struggling with, each in our own ways.

The passage from Deuteronomy feels in some ways like a shared reality. We have been collectively attacked - from the back reminds us we have not seen it coming, necessarily - and the aura of our security has been shattered . . . again. Our innocence lost . . . again.

There may be some among us who demur of this idea. No, you maintain - I have not been surprised. I am always on the lookout for the next threat. I know there is always another shoe to drop. This world is not a friendly place. Aging, alone, assures me of this. No doubt some of us feel that way. And still, something - I am sure - something will surprise you.

So, then, how does it work, exactly? How is it we can hold an awareness of the possibility, the probability of the ground beneath our feet falling away, and yet not allow ourselves to live in constant fear of it? How do we hold what feels like the beauty of innocence even with all that we have witnessed and experienced in this living?

For such a question, the wisdom of two great minds jumps off my shelves - those shelves I look to for wisdom far beyond my own - minds influenced by many others, no doubt. Theologian, ethicist and political analyst Reinhold Niebuhr and psychiatrist and Nazi death camp survivor, Victor Frankl offer the shared belief and encouragement that what allows us to put one foot in front of the other time after time, disappointment after disappointment, is the belief that our lives have meaning, even if we are not quite sure what it is. We may be, Niebuhr says, "quite unable to define the meaning of life, and yet live by a simple trust that it **has** meaning." He calls this a primary religion, revealed "in the relation of the individual to his group." In other words, my meaning is inextricably linked to my relationship to others. My fall is your fall and thus at the very least we are not alone. In our despair, I think he is suggesting that we dare not leave others alone even if we are feeling lost. (*the essential reinhold neibuhr*)

And our friend, Victor Frankl, whose book, "Man's Search for Meaning," is surely required reading for us, offers a tandem response. "I doubt whether a doctor can answer this question (about what gives us meaning in life) in general terms. For the meaning of life differs from (person) to (person), from day to day and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment. To put the question in general terms would be comparable to the question posed to a chess champion: 'Tell me, Master, what is the best move in the world?' There simply is no such thing as the best or even a good move apart from a particular situation in a game and the particular personality of one's opponent." Which is to say our meaning is found in the moment we are in, in the joy or struggle we are facing, and who we are in it with. (*Man's Search for Meaning*)

Remember Amalek, our Jewish cousins are taught. Bad things will happen in our lives, unfair things, unexpected things, sometimes even when we have relaxed and least expect them. Our auras of security will be shattered, our innocence lost. Do not forget.

But also do not let these moments define you because there IS something to learn, a meaning to discover, and you are not alone.

In a recent podcast, Rabbi Ariel Burger shared the story of a woman going to market, made heavy by her burdens. "Have you looked at the sky today?" her teacher asked her. And in this question, she was reminded that she was made for something more than simply trading in the marketplace, as are we all. There was meaning to her life beyond the weight of her cares. Have you looked at the sky today?

I would invite us to keep that question in mind as we move through this next part of our lives - and every part that feels like a challenge set beside the gift of our being here at all.

Have you looked at the sky today?

I am reminded of our morning prayer, the yearning that “. . . there is something bigger than we are: more bold, more compassionate . . . that in our right minds, our humble minds, the minds that know we are but a small part of a very big reality and how much we need each other . . . (and that in our struggling moments when meaning is elusive) we might say to that holy presence and wisdom beyond our own: Come in, Come in.”

BENEDICTION

From *When the Unimaginable Happened*

Love will repair us, not the same, but stronger in some places,

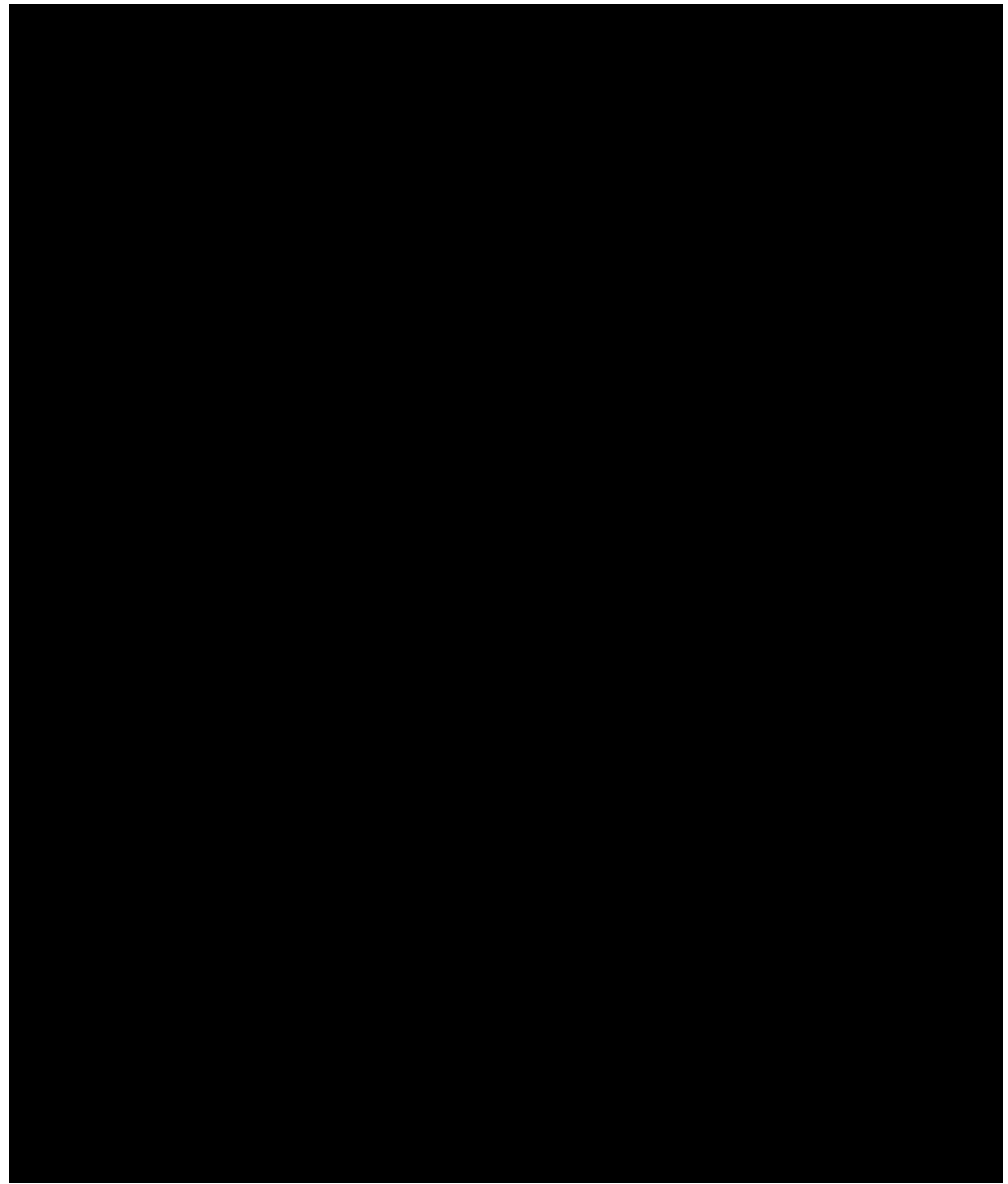
Honoring memories like treasures

Living out our lives' potential

In the shadow of the trespass

In the warmth of one another

In the light of what, restored, we will become.



“Modern man lacks the humility to accept the fact that the whole drama of history is enacted in a frame of meaning too large for human comprehension or management.” (Reinhold Niebuhr) . . . “even the most powerful nations cannot master their own destiny.”

Neibuhr - p. Xi (childlike innocence)