



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Connecting With the Divine,”
a sermon given by Dawn Fortune
on February 19, 2012

“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”

So reads the first chapter of the Gospel according to Mark, beginning a tradition of asceticism and fasting that has lasted longer than two millennia. Scripture is not generally where I tend to start sermons, but there’s a lot of talk about Lent during this time of the year, and I think it’s worth exploring. One need not be a Christian, or even a theist, to spend time being mindful and intentional in an effort to connect with the divine.

The 40-day period of Lent begins this week on Ash Wednesday and ends on Easter, in April. Here at the UU Church of Haverhill, we mark this period with weekly Lenten Vespers services which offer opportunity for contemplation and community. The Christian Holy Week begins on Palm Sunday, includes Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday and finally, Easter Sunday. The rituals of Lent are familiar to many of us. Fasting on Friday, or perhaps no meat – growing up we always had fish on Fridays. I was never clear about how or why baked haddock was supposed to bring us closer to God, but I grew up in a Catholic tradition that did not encourage questions. “Because that’s what the church says” was sufficient for my grandmother, so we ate fish.

For Christians, Lent is a period of penitence and preparation for the commemoration of Holy Week, culminating with Jesus’ crucifixion and faith-proclaimed resurrection on Easter. We, as Unitarian Universalists, are not Christians by creed, but our history, as both Unitarians and as Universalists, is rooted deeply in Christianity and a belief in Jesus and the gospels that tell the story of the man and his works. Whatever one thinks of the gospels, they – like any holy text – contain some truths, some legends, and some wisdom within their pages. Much of Jesus’ message was about treating one another with kindness and compassion, recognizing the worth of each person, even tax collectors, prostitutes and undocumented immigrants. Somehow, that seems like something we should be able to handle.

Traditionally, the penitential aspect of Lent has been the focus of the time. As a young Catholic, I was encouraged to deprive myself of something I loved so that I might be reminded of the suffering of Jesus. I was encouraged to choose a thing that I really loved – chocolate, for instance – something that I wanted every day and often had, and give that up so that I might be reminded that Jesus suffered much worse on my behalf. Even as a child, I was skeptical of that connection, but dutifully gave up chocolate for Lent and indulged in obscene fashion on

chocolate bunnies and eggs in my Easter basket when it was done. If there was any lesson to be learned, it was that of delayed gratification sometimes being associated with gastric distress, not anything related to pious suffering and redemption.

Over the years, the tradition of Lent has called people to give up everything from all food to chocolate, sex, facebook, and, in the case of one seminary colleague, new purchases of high heeled shoes and lingerie. Hey, everybody comes to the divine in different ways, I suppose.

While asceticism was the common practice for centuries, modern people are less inclined to fast for multiple days or engage in painful rituals to heighten their religious experience. Understanding of Lenten practices today more commonly run the line of “getting closer to the divine,” which seems, after all, to be the main reason for religious tradition in the first place. Church is about bringing us closer to god, however we understand god to be.

On Mondays, UU students at Andover Newton gather for lunch and fellowship followed by UU worship in the Wilson Chapel. Conversation last week included consideration of Lent. Some do not observe Lent at all, while others are being especially mindful of the season, joining our Christian colleagues in a tradition that is meaningful to them in a way that is accessible to us. What is Lent, after all, if not an opportunity to spend some time getting closer to the divine? Our understanding of the tradition and ritual is not that of asceticism for asceticism’s sake. Recreational suffering is not generally our thing, nor do we typically engage in behavior that we don’t think honors our dignity and worth. Hair shirts are out, as is a 40-day fast.

A word about the 40-day thing. Instances of 40 are scattered throughout the Bible, in both Christian and Hebrew canons. Jesus was tempted for 40 days. Moses wandered in the desert for 40 years. It rained on Noah and his menagerie for 40 days and nights. Why 40? Was there some kind of calendar based on the number 40? Not really. Scholars have come up with a marvelously simple and accessible – and NON-theological – answer. Forty simply meant “A WHOLE LOT.” People had ten fingers and ten toes. That makes 20, which is quite a lot of almost anything. 40 means you and your friend used up all your fingers and toes to count that many, and that was deemed A WHOLE LOT. It was a generic term, not unlike the more modern phrase “a month of Sundays” is used to describe a long time. So, 40 days does not necessarily mean 40 actual days. It means a length of time that was longer than we’d really care to count accurately, thanks. A long time.

So now the UU seminarians are contemplating Lent. Aside from the occasional irreverent comment, most are very serious about this tradition that has its roots in the same place as the roots of our Unitarian and Universalist heritage. While we do not necessarily ascribe to the idea of substitutive redemption or that of the inherent sinfulness of humanity, most agree that an exercise that improves our spiritual health is not a bad thing. Much talk has revolved around not just the giving something up for Lent, but of the practice of taking something on, as a way to intentionally draw closer to god.

Getting closer to the divine is a noble ambition, and certainly the sort of thing that seminarians ought to be considering. But I would argue that such contemplation is not the exclusive realm of those devoting their lives to ministry or those who are otherwise devout in their

religiosity. Many of us could benefit from a closer relationship with the divine, however we understand it.

One way to get closer to god is to simply become more mindful about our relationship with god. Some pray more often, or change the manner of their prayers. Some meditate, some invoke ancient and beautiful rituals honoring the four directions of the Pagan wheel. But one thing is nearly universal in this effort. Something must be abandoned in order to make room for the new practice. Something must be peeled away that gets in the way of our relationship with the divine. Something must be removed to allow our inner selves to be waited upon by angels.

Every one of us has things that obscure us, that interfere with our own divinity. What is it that separates you from your own inner divinity? What is getting in the way of your connection with that which you consider holy? How much of what is in the way can you let go of, maybe for a day, maybe for a couple days (or 40) that will allow you to reveal your inner divinity and get in touch with god?

Benjamin Hoff tells us “The first thing we need to do is to recognize and trust our own Inner Nature and not lose sight of it.” As Unitarian Universalists, we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of each person. We believe that the divine exists in each of us in some way, and that it can be found and celebrated.

There is a story about a sculptor who chisels beautiful angels from massive blocks of stone. Asked once how such magnificent sculptures were possible, the artist replied “I saw the angel and simply removed all the parts that were not it.” To me, this is part of what Lent calls us to do – to remove those bits that do not serve us, to remove those bits that do not allow us to have authentic experiences, to remove the things that obscure the divine within.

During this season, one of my UU colleagues has decided to swear off Facebook for the period of Lent, and instead is going to focus his time and energy on improving his relationships with people IRL (in real life). Another colleague is shutting off her television and renewing her dedication to reading the Gospels and deepening her relationship with Jesus. My friend who has vowed to curtail her shoe and lingerie shopping until after Easter is also pledging to drop negative self-talk from her everyday life and replace it with positive and affirming words and thoughts about herself.

What is it that I can do? What is it that comes between me and the divine? Self-care is probably on that list. I need to eat better, exercise more, and sleep on a schedule that resembles something sane. So I stand before you this morning to say that I will commit to those three things each day. What will fall away to make room for those things? Well, unhealthy foods will have to drop out of the way to make room for more vegetables. Facebook time will make way for more walks, and better time management will be necessary to create and keep a reasonable sleep schedule. That is my commitment during this Lenten season.

This is not about penance. This is not about asceticism or self-inflicted suffering. It is about leaving off the bits that are not the angel, of letting go of the things that do not serve me, of making room for the divine in my life.

Now I ask you: what is it that gets between you and the divine? What comes between you and serenity? What is in your life that does not serve you? What is not part of the angel within the block of stone? What is it that you can let go of, to allow it to transform from negative into positive, to go from stumbling block to stepping stone? What is it that you would do during this coming month? Remember, I am not asking that you do MORE than you already do, but to exchange something that does NOT serve for something that does. Let us think this week about what those things are and how we might come in closer relationship with the divine, both within and without.

Blessed be. Namaste. Amen.