

I think today is an interesting day because it's a real crossroads of interfaith. Today is both Passover and Palm Sunday. As Universalist Unitarians of Haverhill we celebrate our religious freedom as we remember our Judeo-Christian roots. That's evident by our large stained glass window of one of the most revered Jews of all time. With Jesus watching over us, we come together to honor life, to seek answers while on our search for truth, to be in fellowship with our shared values, to encourage one another as we are inspired by many religious and spiritual traditions and as we grow towards wisdom, compassion, and justice for all. In this sanctuary, we cannot completely separate ourselves from Jesus and I think that is a good thing.

We know of Passover as an early spring celebration which commemorates the emancipation of the Israelites from slavery in ancient Egypt. The holiday is one with many rituals. The celebration honors that God saw the enslaved Jewish people in Egypt and sent Moses to the Pharaoh with an important message to "Send forth My people, so that they may serve Me." You know the story, the Pharaoh didn't listen and all sorts of bad things happened; ten different kinds of plagues were unleashed. First Arron strikes the Nile and water turns to blood, then swarms of frogs, a lice infestation, hordes of wild animals invade the cities, pestilence kills the domestic animals, painful boils, fire and ice rain as a devastating hail, swarms of locusts devour the crops and a thick, palpable darkness envelops the land. The last straw was a plague killing the Egyptians' first born children. Meanwhile, God spared the children of the enslaved Israelites by "passing over" their homes. Pharaoh's defiance was crushed and the slaves were chased out of Egypt. While in such a hurry, the Israelites left before their bread had time to rise. The Jews left Egypt taking their unleavened bread with them to sustain them on their long trek through the parted sea on their way to Mount Sinai.

Palm Sunday is the Christians celebration of the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. Palm Sunday is referred to as "Passion Sunday" in many Christian Churches, indicating the beginning of the Christian Holy Week which concludes on Easter Sunday. As Jesus entered Jerusalem, crowds greeted him by waving palm branches and covering his path with palms. It was a great time of celebration in the ministry of Jesus. Paradoxically, it also was marking the end of his life as he embarked on a journey which ended in him being crucified. This tradition claims he's resurrected and his lessons and values live on. What we must remember now is, according to Christians, today is a holy day and the beginning of Christianity's most holy week.

I know you aren't just here for Judeo-Christian Traditions 101. You came to fill your spirit, to connect with the beloved people around you in a holy fellowship as you sing and hear fantastic music. You come to celebrate a post service Eucharistic meal, a breaking of bread and the sharing of UU's most sacred kind of holy water, coffee. We gather together because it builds us up and prepares us for the week ahead. And if we believe that the week ahead of us is a holy week, we better hope that our trusty sexton brewed up some high-test coffee for our coffee hour today.

We come because we love to come. Look around you- see into the eyes of the people sitting near you. Smile at the many members of your church family, your brothers and sisters, your many parents. You've

watched one another's children grow-up, you've watch each other grow up and deepen into the truest individuals you are today. You love to come together and many of you can't even go a week without wanting to return in between. I've seen you attending Vespers, committee meetings, religious education offerings, choir rehearsal. You come and you come and you come. This is your Mecca and thank goodness it's here! Do I hear an Alleluia?

I am asking if I hear an Alleluia because this is a test. Like the tests they do on TV, you know the ones that say, "This is a test of the emergency broadcasting system; this is only a test." Then an awful noise is sounded, pulsing a few times to get your fullest attention. If you haven't changed the channel by now, you'll notice a message scrolling across the screen confirming this has only been a test and if this was real-- important instructions would tell us what to do next. We are people of action after all; we need to know what to do next, right? These kinds of tests prepare us for a real event, if one should ever happen. Until then, we must be ready to go into action at any time.

We must remain vigilant, watchful, on guard, attentive, alert, observant, heedful, aware, cautious... have you fallen asleep yet? I'm not trying to bore you, just illustrate that this is what happens when we are asked to wait, to remain alert or watchful. We don't! It's not just you and me; it is human nature. It seems the more we try to be prepared, the more we lose our focus. A few of you may have nodded off just listening to me talk about all this waiting. This is no time to slumber; I think it's time to dance. I call it the '*dance of action and inaction*' and it's one we humans have yet to master.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus told his friends, "*My soul is very sorrowful, even to death.*" And as they prayed in the garden, he asked them to keep watch. "*Wait here and watch with me,*" Jesus said to his disciples. One would think if you were to keep watch, you might want to stay awake, right? They didn't stay awake. Let's hear what Jesus had to say to them about that: "*Could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.*"

Jesus wasn't asking his friends to keep watch because he was hoping they could warn him when Judas arrived so he could run away. No, instead he was asking them to be awake during his hour of need and crisis, to abide with him. I think Jesus believed he could endure any loss, even his own life, if he did it with the patience of a friend. What Jesus was asking of his friends was to wait **with** him, to partake in the most difficult and challenging discipline. Peter, James, and John were people of action, like us. Can you imagine how tough it was for them to be inactive even for an hour? Maybe it would have been easier for them if an annoying pulsing sound alerted them like ones we hear on TV.

So, how do you wait? How do you pay attention during times of inaction? Are you able to keep focused on the task at hand whether you are still or busy? In the time of a spirit's deepest suffering, I think it's this practice that is what we need to draw from to be faithful. It gives us the strength to abide with suffering.

So, what if you were a Zen master? What if you were Buddha himself? I read in Diana Eck's book titled *Encountering God* that "the Buddha, literally the '*one who is truly awake,*' was fully human, a person who through disciplined meditation saw into the heart of reality and woke up. It is said that after his

enlightenment the Buddha's face shone and he was stopped on the road and asked, '*Are you a god or a magician?*' He answered, '*No, I am not a god nor am I a magician. I am awake.*'" What Buddha was talking about was the practice known as wakefulness or mindfulness. Call it what you may, this is a practice of developing the ability of being fully present. It's not only for when you are in meditation or deep in prayer, it's for all times active or inactive. I've heard it claimed that meditation is action of inaction. Your mind and body are in perfect stillness; while you wait, you have the alertness of a tiger. It is a most powerful position to be in.

In *Thoughts in Solitude*, author Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk, wrote, "*The spiritual life is, then, first of all a matter of staying awake.*" What do you think about this spiritual life of yours? Are you awake? Have you been dozing off? Hey, if you are asleep at the wheel, to err is to be human. You don't even have to ask Peter, James, or John about that. This is the work of the serious spiritual life. Religious leaders don't have an advantage here. Atheists and Humanists, you have no excuse for getting out of this spiritual practice. If you are human, this way of being is for you. Now is the time to practice this way of being, especially if you find yourself spiritually out of shape.

And practice makes perfect, right? The truth is that we may never become perfect at this practice of being fully awake. That's no reason to give up; we must start again daily, in many ways, in every way. It must be what motivates us in each breath we breathe, in every action, and while we wait as we find stillness from within. Use a mantra if you must, be it a word like Love or OM or try a physical activity such as the Dances of Universal Peace or go on a pilgrimage. The goal is not what you say or do, the goal is to practice, practice until you reach the point of stillness within because that is where your elusive answers are hiding.

My fellow pilgrims, as we enter into this holy week may we remember the importance of a most powerful spiritual practice. May we experience the action of inaction and see into the heart of reality. While we wait, may we connect with our truest self in this elusive stillness. Awaken and may everyone who encounters you feel the change it brings upon you. May this practice help us to grow towards wisdom, compassion, and justice that the world cries for us to strive to achieve.

As we travel this crossroads of interfaith, celebrating today as both Passover and Palm Sunday, may we lift up our religious freedom remembering our Judeo-Christian roots. May we be grateful to have Jesus here watching over us as we worship. Let us continue to come together each week as our way to honor life and seek answers. Fellowship encourages us to return here, may we be fully awake for one another. Sleep not my friends; you won't want to miss what's coming.

May it be so. Amen.