

“Making the Path as We Walk it”©
Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society, Madison, CT
The Rev. Jeanne Lloyd
April 9, 2017

Gathering Music *Sonata in A major, Allegro*, Kuhlau Carol Wright

Sounding of the Gong

Welcome Beth Skudder
Board of Trustees

Prelude *Petites litanies*, Gabriel Grovlez

Chalice Lighting & Bell John Porter
(The flaming chalice is the symbol of our free faith)

Opening Words Rev. Lloyd

“A Fallen Friend” adapted from the work of Toni Vincent¹

. . . In this place we bring our scattered lives together,
groping for meaning and looking for truth.

[Spirit that sustains us], be with us as we continue our search for understanding of the
mystery of the temporal.

Stay with us as we wander through our memories,
seeking pathways to the future.

Move with us as we unravel the implied imperatives of hopes unfulfilled.

Justice makes tireless demands, and we grow weary.

As we touch one another in common cause,
and with the [Spirit of Life] in our midst,

Let us find the way and the courage to realize the dream which still lives within us.

¹ Morrison-Reed, Mark, and James, Jacqui, Editors. **Been in the Storm So Long.** (Boston, Skinner House Books, 1991) 24.

When you walk through a storm, hold your head up high
And don't be afraid of the dark.
At the end of a storm, there's a golden sky
And the sweet silver song of a lark.
Walk on through the wind, walk on through the rain
though your dreams be tossed and blown.
Walk on, walk on, with hope in your heart
and you'll never walk alone.
You'll never walk alone.
Walk on, walk on, with hope in your heart
and you'll never walk alone.
You'll never walk alone.

We thank you for your generosity.

Sermon *Making the Path as We Walk It*

Rev. Lloyd

Now is the time we enter the season of Passover. The season of Exodus. A season of freedom. A season of growth. We remember today the Hebrews, who lived in Egypt under slavery imposed upon them by Pharaoh. The Passover story tells us that the Hebrew G*d² cajoled, lured, and persuaded a humble Moses, into stepping forward to assume leadership of the Israelites. This was not something he wanted to do. The book of Numbers 12:3 tells us that Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth. He was quite happy tending his sheep, and was really rather frightened by this ever-burning never-consumed bush that embodied the great "I AM."

Even then, as now, fire was a well understood medium of a divine presence.³ And, when the Hebrew G*d said, in Exodus 7:10, "Come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt!" Moses said, words to the effect . . . "Uh . . . I don't think so, I don't think this is such a good idea. I think you've got the wrong man for the job." And, he proceeded to enlighten the great I AM as to why he thought G*d's judgment was off that day. He tried 5 times. He first said, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" And, his G*d assured him, "[I'll be right behind you, your words will be my words.]"⁴ And, Moses said, words to the effect,

² Rev. Lloyd does not spell out the word, "G*d," because the term is loaded with many misconceptions and preconceptions. That which is the spirit of life and community, the spirit of love and death, the spirit of humanity, cannot be relegated to one three letter word. Rev. Lloyd invites others to reconsider the meanings of this word, and, to contemplate whether it is a noun or verb. Is G*d Love? The reader is invited to expand their vision and understanding . . .

³ Harper Collins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version, 1993, 82.

⁴ Exodus 3:12, Harper Collins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version, 1993, 83.

"[They're not going to believe that I represent you! I can't even speak your name!]"⁵ And, so, his G*d gave him a name he could speak, "The Lord," and told Moses, "They will listen to your voice!"⁶ Then Moses answered, "But suppose they [still] do not believe me or listen to me." And, so G*d gave him miraculous signs by which to persuade the people and Pharaoh (changing a staff into a snake, a leprous hand to health, the water of the Nile into blood). But, Moses still said, "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; [feeling overwhelmed he said,] . . . I am slow of speech and slow of tongue."⁷ But, the Lord answered, "Go, and I will be your mouth and teach you what you are to speak."⁸

[This was true leadership development!]

And, finally, Moses breaks down, and pleads mercy. He says, "O my Lord, please send someone else."⁹

PAUSE

It is then that G*d hatches a different plan for Moses, drawing on the concept that there is strength in numbers . . . a *shared* ministry was needed. This plan was designed to bolster Moses' self-confidence, and G*d said words to the effect that "[I will speak to you, and you will speak to your well-spoken brother, Aaron and the other leaders of your people; and by your *leadership together*, I will deliver you from bondage and slavery to the promised land of milk and honey]."¹⁰

And, at last Moses agrees.

He did not seek this post, he was in no mood to accept this risk, he knew it would mean change for him personally, his people, and Egypt. It was transformation for which he wanted no personal responsibility. But, there it was. There was no choice.

And, as the story goes, Moses acted as the Lord's emissary with Pharaoh. He gave him a number of unheeded warnings that resulted in nine plagues. And still that stubborn Pharaoh resisted change and refused to let the slaves go. In the last plague, it was promised that "every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die," children and animals alike, *unless* the Pharaoh released the slaves.

⁵ Exodus 3: 13-18, Harper Collins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version, 1993, 83.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Exodus 4:10.

⁸ Exodus 4:12.

⁹ Exodus 4:13.

¹⁰ Exodus 4:14.

To the Israelites, the Lord said, "This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you."¹¹

"[Take the blood of a lamb] and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of [your houses]."¹² "When I see the blood, I will [pass over] you, and no plague shall destroy you . . ."¹³ And, so it came to pass: the last plague killing all the first born, passed over the homes of the Israelites, and only then did the Pharaoh agree to let them go.

And, the Lord led them into and through the wilderness in a roundabout way, **deliberately**, going in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night . . . for forty years.

Now, the path from Egypt to Canaan, the promised land, does not take forty years. It is about 380 miles as the camel trots. But, this path, any path that challenges a people to transform themselves, takes time and perseverance: time to develop a change of perspective, time for a change of heart, time to then try to change themselves, time to make mistakes, and, in the making of those mistakes, time to build again the courage and self-confidence to try again. The Israelites had to move spiritually as well as geographically, from a slave mentality where decisions were made in the ways they had always been made . . . to one of self-awareness and self-direction. They needed to form a new self-determined culture of self-reliance. To do that, they needed time to grow.

It was a tall order and a long journey whereby the wilderness became the tool by which their spirit and resilience would grow. But, the wilderness is, by definition, not comfortable. Often, they would be lost. And, in that feeling of "lostness" doubts would arise. Moments would occur when they would regret having left the security of Egypt, where . . . in their roles as slaves, they knew stability, even if it was at the mercy of others. The wilderness was chaotic, confusing, uncomfortable, and challenging to their understanding of themselves. Lacking faith, "[the] Israelites said to [Moses], 'If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; [but . . . noooooo . . .] you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."¹⁴

So, they clamored for water and their Lord gave them sweet water. When they complained to Moses that they needed food, their Lord provided morning bread that tasted like sweet honey . . . and . . . quails that rained down each evening to provide them with meat. And still the people complained. A most unhappy lot were they. And

¹¹ Exodus 12: 2.

¹² Exodus 12:7.

¹³ Exodus, 12:13.

¹⁴ Exodus 16:3.

Moses cried out, in his anxiety, to the Lord, "What shall I do? They are almost ready to stone me."¹⁵

He was struggling with how to lead, trying to do everything himself. His father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. The task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone."¹⁶ And so, with a bit of inspiration from above, Moses established some new ways of doing things. Hadda form a leadership structure that would support a more responsive way of meeting the people's needs. A shared ministry.

And so, by the chaos, discomfort and anxiety, that comes with being in the wilderness of the unknown, they became more resilient and were spurred on to form themselves into a new and stronger people. Their uncomfortable journey in the wilderness allowed them to create a sustainable and inheritable culture for the next generation. By their journey, they were transformed into a people ready to govern themselves in a promised land.

All this struggle and stretching and reaching took tremendous courage. It took courage because they were venturing into the unknown. It took courage because they were not confident. It took courage because they were rightly anxious and fearful. And, yet, as they took each step forward through the wilderness they were leaning into the people they would become, forging a new identity in the process. And, what made this transformation possible is that though mistakes were made, ultimately, they did not give up on their ideals or each other.

Likewise, we are a people at a new beginning. Like Moses, we've been looking for the promised land of spiritual growth and fairness for all. As a congregation, we started out at nearly the same time our denomination was created out of the ancient traditions of Unitarianism and Universalism . . . about 55 years ago. Like Moses we are making the path as we walk it. The path is not always known. The path is not always straight. Sometimes it is circular. Sometimes it is a spiral. Whatever it is, courage is required. Resilience comes when we unflinchingly face adversity together.

Last year, on May 1st, and, then again, last Sunday, you and I committed our best selves to this congregation and faith. In that commitment, you answered with a resounding, "Yes!" "Yes!" that you are ready to enlarge your spirit, compassion, courage, and faith. "Yes!" even though you know that to do so means the seed must break open and the chrysalis discarded. "Yes!" to change, even though it almost always creates some chaos

¹⁵ Exodus, 17:4.

¹⁶ Exodus 18:17-18.

and anxiety. "Yes!" to change, even though we may hope that it will be someone else who changes, not us. ;-)

The natural resistance to change applies not only to Pharaoh, Moses, his people and our congregations. It also applies to our denomination and, I dare say, a few other organizations. It applies to all of us who claim the principles and purposes of this faith. It applies:

- to "we" who will gather at our national convention in about 10 weeks to reflect and declare our continued commitment to being an open and welcoming faith for all people.
- to "We" who guide and govern our association.
- to "We," who once again have been provoked to ask ourselves these questions
 - *"are we living our faith of openness and inclusion as faithfully as we claim?" As faithfully as we promised?*
 - *Are we too comfortable with the status quo?*
 - Have we forgotten what it is like to live in the wilderness?
 - Is it time to gear up and set out for the wilderness, choosing a path that is not yet formed, in order that we may more closely align our lives with our stated values?

PAUSE

It seems that, with spring we have awakened, and the burning bush is summoning us. We are reminded of Moses' fear before he accepted his charge to free his people. He was hesitant, fearful, and lacked confidence. He did not know whether he had the skills to navigate a path that alone he could not chart.

In these times, I understand that some of us may have no more confidence than Moses did at the beginning. I get it. But, I also know that the strength of our faith is that if we lean on and listen to each other, then, in each step together, we will make the path as we walk it.

And, though it may seem altruistic to want others to have the opportunity of self-reflection and growth, our real need is to have the company of others who also want to grow in spirit, heart, mind and deed. Because it is by **their growth**, that our opportunities for growth are enlarged and transformed. It is this type of shared growth that offers the human spirit . . . hope. We, as a people, cannot change by ourselves.

...

Is an uncharted path a little scary? Yeah, it is. Do we need help to make it? Yeah, we do. Is it worth making, even if we stumble and fall? Even if we are humbled by our mistakes? Yes, it is. Why? For the same reason it was worth it to Moses . . . so that we can incrementally but persistently inch forward toward a promised land where all people // no matter their skin color, no matter their gender identity, no matter their ability, no matter their age, no matter their education, no matter their language, no matter their profession, no matter the label others give them // . . . are afforded the opportunity to follow their individual conscious' toward that which sustains them in their path toward freedom of thought and religious liberty.

As we adjust from the rigors of winter, taking off our coats and putting away our boots. As we adjust to the shedding that spring requires, we as individuals, we as members of this congregation, and we as a denomination have the opportunity to compassionately and courageously bring to life again, a faith that *opens wide our hearts and minds and doors*.

Just as Moses required cajoling and wooing in order to lead his people toward a promised land that he had no idea how to get to, so too, other voices now tell us that this is the time to venture into the wilderness and learn together how to put into practice, what we have stated in faith.

“Spirit of the Pioneer” Adapted from the work of Mel Hoover¹⁷

We can't change the past, but we can learn from it and build on it.

We can't control the future, but we can shape it and enhance the possibilities for our children and grandchildren.

We can't discern in the present the fullness of our actions and their impact, but we can be pioneers in our time, exploring [with others] . . . the crevices and cracks where knowledge and new insights might be found.

We can explore our spectrum of relationships and confront our complacency and certainty about the way things are.

We can dare to face ourselves in our entirety,
to understand our pain, [and other's]
to feel the tears, [and other's]

¹⁷ Morrison-Reed, Mark, and James, Jacqui, Editors. **Been in the Storm So Long**. (Boston, Skinner House Books, 1991) 26.

to listen to our frustrations and confusion, [and other's], and,
to discover new capacities and capabilities that will empower and transform us
[in our entirety].

In the spirit of the pioneer, let us now go forth.

May it be so.

***Closing Hymn #6** *Just As Long as I Have Breath*

***Closing Words**

We extinguish this flame, but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the
fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

Extinguishing the Chalice

Sounding of the Gong



Announcements

Beth Skudder
Board of Trustees

* Please stand as you are able and comfortable.

Latecomers may be seated.