

BORROWED AND LENT
Of Spring & Seeds & Sprouts & God Most Small

Sermon by Rev. Jack Donovan, February 26, 2017
Unitarian Universalist Church of St Petersburg

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SERMON

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. From dust you come, to dust you return. What is lent to you is only borrowed by you.

You might be reminded of this when you see some people in public this Wednesday with a smear of black ashes on their foreheads. It will be Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent – a forty day period of religious fasting and examination of conscience as to how one is living.

The forty days of Lent reflects Jesus' forty days of spiritual testing in the Judean wilderness. The ashes remind us of the Christian beliefs about sin and mortality– the waste of life, the end of life.

Like the Advent season leading to Christmas, Lent is a season of waiting and watching. We are watching to see what will be rising from the dust and ashes and coming into the world.

The word *lent* also has a parallel but different meaning which preceded Christianity. In old European languages, *lent* meant springtime – probably derived from springtime's lengthening (lent-thening) days following the yuletide of winter solstice. In winter season the harvest of grains is being consumed and some is being set aside as seed in hope that there will be enough for a full spring planting, lest there be starvation the following winter.

In the Christian story, the baby Jesus is the new seed, full of vast potential – the same as in you and me, inherited through our forebears from the divine source of all. On the twelfth day of Yuletide after the birth of hope, while still facing the dire uncertainties of winter, humankind receives an epiphany.

Through the renewing sunlight it realizes anew that this seed of divinity, this light of the world, this soul of life, still and always resides within us.

Then comes Lent, springtide, when we wait again to see what will come. There is much uncertainty in the Lenten season. Will the past harvest last until the next harvest? Is it perhaps best to fast for a while? Will the snow and ice recede before too late to plant? What sprout, what sprit, what spirit, will grow from the seed of the soul? What will come to be the fruit of labor and of life?

What is lent to you is only borrowed by you. For the people to prosper, the seed of life must be put to good use.

Yet even the sun is yet uncertain. Groundhog and bear come out of their burrow refuges borrowed from the earth. They look for a sign of spring. But if they see the darkness of their shadow, they burrow deep and hide again in sleep, as do we all.

Perhaps you've seen the movie *Groundhog Day*, wherein a vainly childish meteorologist (Bill Murray) earns constant frustration and slaps in the face that drive him back down into sleep. But gradually, after much necessitated burrowing into his own depths to loosen and free his potentials and his hopes, and after much borrowing of nurturance and light from others, we see his spirit bend. He starts to grow toward the light and he comes to bear fruit and be fruit that the world is sustained by and thanks and loves.

Such, it seems to me, is the hope of spring and salvation. What is lent to us in all the springtimes of our lives is an investment of divine capital. What is hoped for is a rich return with which to build a world of wiser kinder beings, more attuned in spirit with the graciousness of their source. Such, it seems to me, is our journey of light in every stage of life.

How are we to realize that we have such potential and that we can fulfill it? In Nature and Culture there are constant reminders of the power and order underlying all things - the haunting beauty of the spring orchard, the happiness of the bees, the attraction of the birds, the power of a poem. This is love, and nothing else is love. It moves us to prayer.

Okay, if the energy of love is reserved for God above to sanctify to what far ends God will - or, in alternative wording, if life's power flows in many streams and the final end is only known in the convergence, then so be it. But the Creator Energy still needs that we fulfill its potential in us, that we use it well and sanctify each moment, in order that any ultimate sanctified end can be

reached.

It seems to me that this is the human goal with which we can be fully satisfied and completely fulfilled: to bring forth the fruit of the moment - not worry about a distant harvest – but to take pleasure in the buzzing, darting process and the moments and movements of flourishing. God's to sanctify the end; ours to sanctify every moment.

The meditators and contemplators here, the poets and musicians and true lovers who have prayed in praise just for seeing and hearing and feeling and thanking – I think they know this sanctification at least in part, and perhaps before long in full – to be blessed and to bless. Perhaps, like the two sweethearts in Robert Frost's poem walking up the mountain forest, we will all discover there is always more on every path until we find the fulfillment wherein we know earth returns our love and fulfillment is completed.

The Sufi mystic Bibi Hayati also points to the world of possibilities in this power – all the unknown potential from the beginning, duly awaiting the unfolding present moments and relishing them with thankfulness for the beauty of love.

I hear the same mystic insights from young Mary of Nazareth: *My soul magnifies, my soul enlarges, the Being of my being, and my spirit rejoices in my source and sustainer.* For Mary, the seed of soul and sprout of spirit growing in her is enhancing the Being of beings to be wiser and vastly more caring. She could do penance; she could fast, she could dress in ash and sackcloth – or she can appreciate from the depth of her soul what her being is and does and can do. She knows she can bless the world by growing the light – and so she chooses.

This god, "Yehovah", this "Being of beings" whom Mary magnifies and makes greater, this singular source, I think should be called "the god most small" or "the god most lowly", in contrast to "almighty God most high". "Yehovah" – not to be interpreted "I am that I am", but "Being of beings" – this is a fitting name for the originating singularity of existence – Bibi Hayati's first seed of being.

I think this is an understanding worth contemplating. Was the Source, and is the Source, somehow a cosmic black hole that could emit itself as light energy that gradually slows to become world and stars and you and me?

Whatever it was and is, we are that which comes from this source of unlimited energy. It appears that our limited frames can borrow to their full capacity

the power of life that this source has always loaned out freely – and we can borrow at least until our frames are transfigured into something new.

Transfiguration. Today is Transfiguration Sunday on the church calendar. “There came a day when Jesus and his closest disciples went upon the mountain to pray, and there he was transfigured before them, his face shining like the sun, his clothes dazzling white.”

The story leading to Jesus’ transfiguration tells us a lot about our own story. In the winter darkness, a birth, a seed of new life and light; in the growing light, an epiphany of continued hope for all; in baptism, recognition of life in covenanted community; and in prayer on the mountain, the full transfiguration of will and heart – the metamorphosis of spirit that shines a fullness of grace upon a needy world.

Jesus’ story goes on to tell what comes next. The transfigured one goes down the mountain to his group of disciples – and he sees along with them, gathered in hope, multitudes, oppressed, bewildered. That is when work and divinity expand together; the fruit of loving care will be fed to the world for its healing and growth. The end of Lent is the Easter season, when the fruit of life will be consumed and returned to the earth, and its seeds will spread, at least for a while, toward all the corners of the garden.

What about you and me? Have you ever had the feeling of being transfigured, maybe in a great flash of illumination or in reflection becoming aware of a gradual illuminating?

If we want to see what transfiguration looks like in black and white, we can look at the Unitarian Universalist Affirmations and Sources from which we’ve read today and last Sunday – located in our hymnal two pages before Hymn #1. You can note how the Affirmations describe human transfigurations in caring. You can note how the Sources describe human transfigurations in understanding. They start with the individual. But note how they both lead to transfigurations into community that fosters growth in understanding and caring for life in all stages and dimensions. You can see the same sequence in developmental psychologist Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Human Needs and Potentials, from the cry for survival at birth to the cry of fulfillment in creativity and peak experience.

Is this not our journey – to recognize our real potential for ever-enlarging growth of light and life, for ever-enlarging understanding and care of life, for ever-enlarging joy in each moment along the way? Is this not our journey –

to open our hearts and minds until our cups runneth over and goodness and mercy follow wherever we go, all the days of our lives?

Can we live like that? Can we come to live like that? Together, I believe, we can. What is lent to us is only borrowed by us for a time. For the people to prosper in our time, we must put the seed of life to good use. So may we join one another in the journey to our individual mountaintops of truth and grace. So may we join one another in community back in the fertile valley of comfort and joy.

READINGS

Gathering

My soul enlarges the Being of my being
and my spirit rejoices in my source and sustainer.

- Mary of Nazareth, Luke 1:46-47

Invocation from the *Covenant of UU Congregations*

LEADER: As our congregations covenant, may we grow in understanding of life and living through:

SOUTH: Our direct experience of the transcending mystery and wonder which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;

NORTH: Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;

SOUTH: Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;

NORTH: Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;

SOUTH: Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;

NORTH: Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Hymn #64 *A Prayer in Spring* by Robert Frost

Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers to-day;
And give us not to think so far away
As the uncertain harvest; keep us here
All simply in the springing of the year.

Oh, give us pleasure in the orchard white,
Like nothing else by day, like ghosts by night;
And make us happy in the happy bees,
The swarm dilating round the perfect trees.

And make us happy in the darting bird
That suddenly above the bees is heard,
The meteor that thrusts in with needle bill,
And off a blossom in mid air stands still.

For this is love and nothing else is love,
The which it is reserved for God above
To sanctify to what far ends He will,
But which it only needs that we fulfill.

Words for Meditation Bibi Hayati (Persia, c. 1850)

Before there was a trace of this world of beings,
I carried the memory of a lock of your hair,
a stray end gathered within me, though unknown.

Inside that invisible realm,
your face like the sun longed to be seen,
until each separate object was finally flung into light.

From the moment of Time's first-drawn breath,
love resides in us,
a treasure locked into the heart's hidden vault;

before the first seed broke open the rose bed of Being,
an inner lark soared through your meadows,
heading toward Home.

What can I do but thank you, one hundred times?
your face illumines the shrine of Hayati's eyes,
constantly present and lovely.

Pre-Sermon Reading from *Luke 4 & 9*

After Jesus was baptized, he was led by the holy spirit into the wilderness where for forty days he was tested by the tempter – and when every test was finished, Jesus was filled with the holy spirit and he returned to Galilee and began to teach the good news of liberation from suffering and the nearness of the realm of heaven

And there came a day when he went upon the mountain with Peter, James, and John to pray, and he was transfigured before them, his face shining like the sun and his clothes dazzling white, and his companions saw his glory.

Benediction

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. From dust you come; to dust you return; from dust you rise again and again, to use the power of the god most small to make the world better with the fullness of your life.