

WHAT PROTECTS AND PROJECTS YOU FROM THE STORM?

Rev. Jack Donovan – 9/17/17

Unitarian Universalist Church - St Petersburg, Florida

READINGS (printed after sermon)

Opening	<i>A Unitarian Universalist Invocation</i> (UUA Covenant)
Meditation	<i>The Stream</i> , by Rabindranath Tagore <i>Remember</i> , by Joy Harjo
Reading #1	" <i>Sound Doctrine That</i> ", Wm E. Channing in <u><i>A Chosen Faith</i></u>
Reading #2	<i>A Still, Quiet Call</i> , Hebrew Bible, Book of Kings 19
Closing	<i>A Unitarian Universalist Blessing</i> (UUA Covenant)

SERMON

A few days before Hurricane Irma hit the U.S. mainland, I heard a news correspondent from the Caribbean island of Antigua report, "Very little damage here. Winds much less than feared. We've been blest. But we are worried about our neighbor island, Barbuda, which is directly in Irma's path."

Later, as I was heading for my car to come to the Board's hurricane planning meeting, my neighbor, who's always out pacing the alley, called out, "Looks like the Man upstairs is going to teach us a lesson! God's gonna show us." I replied, "My God doesn't do that. This is Mother Nature's work. "Oh," he replied, "God's wife."

After the hurricane passed rather gently over St. Pete, some people were saying, "God heard our prayers." A local weatherman said, "Looks like we got some help from above." My neighbor, a bit of a Calvinist, caught me again, "The big guy really put it to us!" he said, then added without irony, "Or, maybe His wife did."

Different people, different stories to explain the outcomes of the storm. That's one of the things that always emerge from the whirl and scattering of the storms of life – stories. We humans tell stories – to remember, to explain, to entertain, to comfort, sometimes to deceive, and perhaps most beneficial, to understand and to guide forward.

I am so glad we all made it through Hurricane Irma's scattering of our bodies, minds, and spirits. It feels very good to be safely gathered together and to know that others are on their way back.

You've probably heard quite a few hurricane stories already – from friends and neighbors here and away, from the news media, from local and national officials. And you have your own.

Before this storm hit, the stories I heard were mainly cautionary tales or explanations of how to respond. After the storm, the stories seemed mainly to be experiences and explanations of what happened and what was still happening and who was doing what and who needed what.

Of course, for a couple of weeks before we became anxious over Irma, we were hearing the Houston/Hurricane Harvey stories. The big stories were how titanic the storm was, how long it hung over Houston, how much rain fell, how fast the flood waters swept into the neighborhoods – and why these things happened.

There was also a less highlighted backstory to all the Houston flooding and destruction. Houston has no City building codes regulating what kind of development can go where – no rules regarding construction in the flood plains, no rules keeping residential housing or schools or hospitals separate a distance from oil refineries or the chemical processing plants. With the flooding and loss of power, fires have been breaking out in the processing plants, releasing massive volumes of toxic fumes, and putting neighborhoods in risk of huge explosions. That of course is not due to the work of Mother Nature or her husband.

Texas is not alone in catastrophe or in irresponsible failure to plan so its residents don't have to be rich to be safe and secure. During Irma, as you've heard, ten residents in a Florida nursing home died of heat exposure after the electricity and air conditioning went out.

That nursing facility operates freely and legally under the unregulated free market philosophy of the Florida legislature, which not long ago voted down nursing home safety regulations. Perhaps instructive is the principle articulated 200 years ago by the founder of classical free market economic theory, Adam Smith - a free market works very well for the benefit of humankind, but only if everyone in it has the means to be free rather than coerced or exploited.

Here in Pinellas County, we didn't get hit very hard and damage was mainly limited to the most vulnerable trees and homes. But electricity and communication were not restored for long enough to make us wonder what would have happened if Irma hadn't weakened and veered east at the last moment. Whence then our protection and our strength?

Mainly, the stories about protection and strength here in Pinellas County have been positive. The Pinellas County sheriff and others gave high praise to the level of preparation and response that public officials provided – especially by police and by school staff and teachers. On the other hand, a letter to the editor of the TBT was published yesterday decrying the lack of preparation and training for those who volunteered to help at the shelters, resulting in chaos and unnecessary hardship for shelter-seekers. Will those shelter-seekers go back next time?

But the newspaper also reported on the superb humanitarian service provided by the “Cracker Navy” – a group modelled after the “Cajun Navy” that provided much needed rescue help by boat to New Orleans during Katrina and again to Houston during Harvey.

The founder of the Cracker Navy, a 24 year old Tampa pipefitter, fittingly named John Steele, said a couple of things that speak to me about what it is that influences the outcomes from life’s hurricanes. He said, “We did it because we’re Florida Crackers and that’s what we do. We look out for each other. We take care of each other. Race, creed, religion, political views, everything that’s so important these days you put aside and look out for your fellow Floridian, your fellow American. People everywhere have it in them to do what I did in Texas, what the Cajun Navy did in Katrina – that courage is in everyone.”

That boils down to Love your neighbor as yourself - and see everybody as your neighbor.

And where does that courage and concern and care come from, that strength of heart to break with routine and convenience and go serve?

John Steele said this strength is in everyone. The story of Elijah gives a very ancient testimony that it might be in everyone, but it’s not always easy to access. Before Elijah found strength to overcome his fear of Queen Jezebel, he hid in a mountain cave for forty days and nights. It took a hurricane, an earthquake and a great fire before he could hear his call – a still small call to return to his calling, his prophetic work, his duty as a person of the people.

For John Steele, the hurricane, earthquake and fire are the things he said must be put aside in times of general disaster – race, creed, religion, political views. But a bigger question remains unaddressed: how to put those dividers aside on normal days, when the majority is not subject to

disaster, but a minority lives with it daily. Where is our still small voice of calling then? Whence comes our protection and our strength then?

Perhaps John Bunyan's hymn has the answer. To be a pilgrim is to be intent on the quest to change this world of suffering to heaven on earth. But it takes acts of true valor – of faith, of hope, of caring – that is, determination, purpose, service.

In the news article, Tampa Fire Rescue Chief Ken Huff added a reality to John Steele's insight, saying, "Once you're organized and know where you're needed, you can truly help out. But just to show up at one of those disaster areas could be extremely dangerous."

That was in fact Elijah's response to the still, small call. He knew he had to go organize help -- because prophets on their own achieve nothing but martyrdom. There must be comrades, civic partners, community commitment – and that's what he came down from the mountain to seek, to help serve the deep inner call.

And that is one of the great reasons we need this church and the many fine service organizations we affiliate with: to stay connected, attentive, informed, active as the kind of powerful community that can ensure that everyone has the safety and opportunity to grow to fulfillment.

We have our own lovely stories right here in the walls and in the homes of UU St Pete. Their outline of the story is this: The Board had made a fundamentally sound emergency response plan last year for shelter during hurricane season. This year the Board met to make specific plans as Irma entered the Caribbean. It listed members who seemed most vulnerable to the storm and gave each Board member several names to contact. It planned for opening the church to members, their families, and staff. It sent out an Infonet message to announce the church would be open and also to see who else needed help, who was staying safely in place, and who had space for others.

I think we had five or six households volunteer safe space in their homes, with a number of people pleased to accept those offers. Here at the church, we had ten people on Friday night and 16 on Saturday night. Your president and your minister kept bouncing back and forth to check that folks had what they needed. And those staying here at church did a grand job of cooperating and supporting one another.

The church lived up to its call as a sanctuary – keeping ill fortune out, keeping peace and love in. Because many contributed, this church for all

souls, UU St. Pete, can continue to contribute to the growth and well-being of every soul.

For me, the meditation poem by Joy Harjo gives us a superior summation of how we can draw help from the whirling and scattering and confluences of life. She says, Remember! In short, remember everything is part of you and you are part of everything. Not just remember in passing, but count up and count on, be aware of, stay connected to all that gives you strength and all that collaborates in strength with you – stars, sun, moon, parents, all people and peoples, the world's waters and biospheres - all pouring forth grace into you – the many-formed power of life in its great dance.

Were we lucky?

Did we make a good showing as a community of friends and neighbors? From our experience can we learn something for the next time that we must go on alert?

Will we plan ahead for self and neighbor to better prepare for the worst possibilities within the cone of predictions?

Will we project ourselves out to care on a global scale?

Will we feel, with Hindu Unitarian Rabindranath Tagore, the stream of life in us and acknowledge that its glorious sameness in all things makes us an interdependent One?

What, after all, is the sound doctrine that William Ellery Channing sought for the fulfillment of our selves and our societies?

My neighbor may see a divine hand and mind sending punishment on us for some evil. Some news commentators and preachers may see a divine provider who chooses to protect only select people.

But in sun or storm, our sanctuary stands for something else, symbolized by our Water Communion ceremony and our ingathering. It stands for the protection and renewed projection of the spirit, inspired by the eloquence of nature and by nature's strength and beauty in so many forms. Our sanctuary stands for reverential gratitude to the mighty power in all things, to which we can turn, and become conscious of, in ourselves and in one another.

In the course of fulfilling all our vast potentials, our tradition believes, and I believe, we will be good for one another. Is that not our way?

READINGS

Opening

A Unitarian Universalist Invocation (UUA Covenant)

In our morning together, and in our lives,
may we grow and feel more deeply:

the inherent worth and dignity in every person;

love of justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

**acceptance of one another & encouragement to spiritual
growth in all;**

joy in free and responsible search for truth and meaning;

rights of conscience and democratic process in our decisions;

*commitment to a world community with peace, liberty, & justice for
all;*

**respect for the interdependent web of existence, of which we
are part.**

May it be so.

Meditation

The Stream, by Rabindranath Tagore

Remember, by Joy Harjo

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day
runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.

It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth
in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves
of leaves and flowers.

It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and
death, in ebb and in flow.

I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of
life.

And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood
this moment.

Remember.

Remember the sky that you were born under,
know each of the star's stories.

Remember the moon, know who she is. I met her
In a bar once in Iowa City.

Remember the sun's birth at dawn, that is the strongest point of time. Remember sundown and the giving away to night.

Remember your birth, how our mother struggled to give you form and breath. You are evidence of her life, and her mother's, and hers.

Remember your father. He is your life, also.

Remember the earth whose skin you are: red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth, brown earth, we are earth.

Remember the plants, trees, animal life who all have their tribes, their families, their histories, too. Talk to them, listen to them. They are alive poems.

Remember the wind. Remember her voice. She knows the origin of the universe. I heard her singing Kiowa war dance songs at the corner of Fourth and Central once.

Remember that you are all people and that all people are you.

Remember that you are this universe and that this universe is you.

Remember that all is in motion, is growing, is you.

Remember that language comes from this.

Remember the dance that language is, that life is.

Remember.

Reading#1 "*Sound Doctrine That*", Wm E. Channing in A Chosen Faith

William Ellery Channing was born in 1780 in Newport, Rhode Island. One day, when he was a boy, his father took him to a public gathering to hear a famous itinerant preacher. As Channing recalled it, The revivalist painted a terrific picture of the lost condition of the human race rushing into hell and beseeched his hearers to flee from the coming wrath into the arms of Jesus who waited wounded and bleeding at the hand of an inexorable God extracting from him the uttermost penalty due to a world of sinners.

At the end of the sermon the boy was terrified as well as skeptical, but submitted when he heard his father say to a friend, "Sound doctrine that! Leaves no rag of self-righteousness to wrap the sinner in!"

On the way home, he expected to hear solemn words on the family's plans for fleeing "the wrath to come." Yet all his father did was whistle! At supper, Mrs. Channing inquired whether the preacher had been a disappointment. "No," said her husband, "he's a strong man."

By bedtime, young Channing had a insight that led to questions. His father did not really believe the revivalist at all! Neither did most people. Did people really become better because of fear? He thought not. Was God really so harsh and cruel? Then why praise God in worship? Why did people say they believed one thing when their actions showed they believed something else? Is doctrine the most important thing in religion? Or is it the way people live?

The negative tone of religion during his boyhood was an "unhappy influence," he wrote. His spirit was renewed only by long walks on the beach. "There," he wrote, "in the sight of that beauty, in the sound of those waves ... I poured out my thanksgiving and contrite confessions. There, in reverential sympathy with the mighty power around me, I became conscious of power within. There struggling thoughts and emotions broke forth, as if moved to utterance by nature's eloquence...."

Reading #2 *A Still, Quiet Call*, Hebrew Bible, Book of Kings 19

The prophet Elijah had enraged Israel's Queen Jezebel by defeating her court's pagan priests. For forty days and forty nights Elijah hid in the wilderness of neighboring Judea. Then his God, the Being of beings, came and said, "Elijah, what are you doing here? Go out from your cave and stand on the mountain before me, for I am about to pass by."

And then there was a great wind, so strong that it split mountains and broke rocks in pieces, but the Being of beings was not in the rocks; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Being of beings was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Being of beings was not in the fire; and after the fire a still, small call. And Elijah heard the call and wrapped his face in his mantle and went outside his cave on the mountain. And the Being of beings said to Elijah, "Go from here and return to your work (or course or way)."

Closing

A Unitarian Universalist Blessing (UUA Covenant)

What awaits you now as you go out into the world?

Light, sound, movement, choice, bliss.

May you experience transcendence from it all.

May we hear the prophets' call and rise to it with power.

May reason and science guide you beyond idolatry.

May we feel the spirit flowing in us

and may we use its power to care for friend and foe.

May you appreciate all stages of life and feel rapture in their rhythms.

May all life live in peace and fulfillment.