

## **WHAT ANCESTRAL HAUNTS NEED TREATING?**

### ***Your Heritage - II***

Rev. Jack Donovan – 10/15/17

Unitarian Universalist Church - St Petersburg, Florida

#### **READINGS** (printed after sermon)

**Invocation** *Cathedral of the World* adapted from *A Chosen Faith*, by Forest Church

**Meditation** *All Souls*, by Mary Sarton (UU Hymnal #718)

**Hymn** *A Mighty Force of Love is God*, adapted from Martin Luther's *A Mighty Fortress*

**Readings #1** "And Yehovah Said," from *The Ten Commandments*, Deuteronomy 5

**Readings #2** "Here's the Thing," from *The Color Purple*, by Alice Walker

#### **CHILDREN'S SERMON**

Once upon a time there was a unicorn. Here's its picture, on my necktie.

It's name was Goodness, and it was happy. It ran and played and ate and slept, and all week-long it drew the carts to the fields with the farmers' tools and drew the carts with the crops to the markets, and on Saturday nights it held on its horn necklaces of fragrant beautiful flowers for the village dancers to wear and share, and Sundays on its back it carried the young children to church - and it was happy.

Then one morning it woke up from a lovely sleep, ready to help the village through the day, and it saw that it was inside a fence. And here's a picture of that, woven from dyed wool in a great tapestry for a castle wall.

Someone had built a fence around it. It was an old but strong fence; but why would anyone put an old fence around the unicorn? Anybody know?

Well, as they used to say at the church where I grew up, it's a mystery. But it's a mystery that I hope one of us will figure out this week.

Why would anybody put a fence around goodness? Next Sunday, if you or I can figure it out, we'll let each other know. Okay?

#### **ADULT'S SERMON**

Through ages and cultures, the unicorn has been considered emblematic of passion, purity, and grace. In medieval times – like the 1400s – a tale had emerged called *The Hunt of the Unicorn*. The tale is depicted on seven castle-wall tapestries, eight feet high and 12 feet long, dating from about 1505. They are now displayed at the Cloisters of the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art. The end of the story, shown in the last tapestry, is called "The Unicorn in Captivity." In gorgeous colors and weaving, it shows the unicorn, resting under a tree, with a collar around its neck, and a corral fencing it in.

Why corral a unicorn?

Last week, fifteen of us from this church joined about 700 members of other congregations to identify the injustices that corral and haunt many people in our county. We sat divided by congregation, but together in common purpose. You could hear theological differences about how liberation and progress happen, about what forces uplift or repress our lives, about what influence humans have over their own lives. Given how somebody would say, "Things happen for a reason," you knew that some believed that an all-powerful and all-designing God causes even the bad things in order to make good things happen, and that others believed if bad or good things happen, either way it is because of the choices we humans make.

This division is like the one that emerged 500 years ago on October 31, 1517 – All Saints' Eve – when Martin Luther hammered his "Ninety-Five Theses Disputing the Power of Indulgences" to the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg, Germany – and scared the bejesus out of Christendom. That was about 12 years after "The Unicorn in Captivity" was woven.

The question was this: Could people, as the Pope declared, buy their way out of God's righteous punishment for their sins or, as Luther declared, was what God required for forgiveness a profound repentance and behavior-change. Over the last five centuries, Protestants and Catholics have moved toward a more common understanding – that all forgiveness of sin is based on grace-given faith in Christ's redemptive sacrifice. Salvation only by faith only in Christ only by grace.

That is generally where things stand today theologically. And yet, aspects of the division could be felt at the meeting. Where is human passion and purity and grace in all of this, and human will and wonder? Despite theology, many thought it was in our hands. Where could the unicorn rest its head after a good day's work? I think everybody thought it should be in our hands. To avoid heresy, it was said that our hands are God's hands on Earth – and I think there are ways to understand that as true.

The introduction to the Ten Commandments – sacred scripture for almost everyone attending the meeting - puts a very interesting light on the issue of who or what influences or determines the course of a human life. Think of the great judging Father God thundering the following: "I, the Being of beings, am a jealous God. For the iniquity of their parents I punish the children to the third and fourth generation. But I show steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments." Seems rather harsh and authoritarian. This view has long influenced our Western ways.

But how does it sound coming from the nurturing mother god? Careful, children – get wrong with Mother Nature's ways and things won't go so well. Kill people and you and your children will lose community support. Steal, cheat, lie – who in the community will trust your family members for the next couple of generations. Teach your children by bad example and how often will they hurt themselves imitating your stunts? But do justly, act kindly, live humbly and what heart and hearth won't be open to you and your children and the light of your kindness be passed as a treasure for generations?

Now here's still another twist. If you see the divine according to its Hebrew name, as the *Being of beings* without gender but with the life-nurturing laws of nature and community, you can see that the Hebrew physics of life is a pretty good deal. Even if you do wayward deeds from time to time, their curse has only three or four one-thousandths the effect as the blessing of your good deeds. We accent the negative because we really don't like pain, and it threatens our survival. But if we focus our energy on what is positive and real and true and good for life, blessings flow to us and from us all the days of our life. What's not to like?

That, I think, becomes the biblical view when you speak of the divine as the Being of our beings, as Shug did to Celie – moved by the blessings of life in trees, air, birds, and people, she saw through loss, suffering and mourning to the oneness of the power of life in all things. When you see this, do you not see that you are the light. Do not your relationships, in the blessing of caring community, become your religion? Is not studying your ways of connecting to life and sorrow and joy a sure guide to whether you have more to learn and more to live?

For centuries, perhaps millennia, through much of Europe, the First of November has been celebrated as a time for honoring the primal spirits of ancestors and life forces. Half way between autumn equinox and winter solstice, as the veil between the spirit and material worlds thinned, spiritual passage was possible. If welcomed, the spirits' influences would bring blessings. If not welcomed and appreciated, no help could be expected except perhaps mischievous warnings.

Today, does "welcome" not translate into studying the influences of our ancestors from whose spirit we inherit so much for weal or woe? Do we trace influence from tycoon King David's murderous sin with Bathsheba to tycoon Harvey Weinstein's soul-wounding sin with Hollywood or rather from Moses' priestess sister Miriam's call to persistent courage to Gloria Steinem's courageous persistence? Do we trace influence from King George III's abuses and usurpations to those of JPMorgan/Chase or rather do we trace influence from Mohandes Gandhi's great-souled resistance to Malala Yousafzai's? Do we trace from Leopold II of Belgium's devastation of the African Congo to British Petroleum's devastation of the Gulf of Mexico or rather from Henry David Thoreau's awakening to the sacredness of nature to Rachel Carson's great call to the defense of that sacredness?

What influences impede us or misdirect us? The heritage of the Church of the past has haunted many with unreal idols of God, grace, authority, responsibility, potential, free will and salvation. The heritage of the State of the past has haunted many with unreal idols of class, race, gender, and ideologies of control, dominance, and complicity.

To change a wayward course, perhaps it is not so good to grieve or regret as to recognize repeated suffering as a sign of waywardness and to look for the error in our unquestioned inherited ways, then to seek alternatives and learn to consult, reflect, and to evaluate which alternatives are most promising and feasible.

Perhaps it will prove that Martin Luther and John Calvin were quite wrong on the matter of free will and salvation. Perhaps we will adopt Siddhartha Buddha's principle that reactivity can be forestalled by mindfulness, and physicist Albert Einstein's principle that imagination can free us to see untold alternatives, and moral theologian Karen Armstrong's principle that compassion towards ourselves and one another frees our wills to choose our best.

Have we inherited formative beliefs that seem good but prove bad from more comprehensive perspectives - beliefs about the nature of personality and intelligence and mind and morals that have hardened in dysfunction and keep us from comprehension, sympathy, empathy, graciousness? What if we could learn to step back from reaction, to look at the moment from a timeless perspective, to see the hundred ways to shape a better next moment? Would the potentials hidden in the darkness step into the nurturing light?

Perhaps as the Taoist says, the answer is to be like water - soft, flowing, transparent, transfusing, persistent. Then when you join companion streams, you can begin to change the course of things— perhaps widening, perhaps deepening, perhaps supporting whole new ways of life.

In reality, you can't corral a unicorn. It is spiritual energy, like dragons. Notice how low the fence is, really just marking sacred space, so easy to step over and expand. Notice that the tether is a woven ring, self-chosen sign of fidelity, not under anything's control except the unicorn's. Notice that the unicorn is in the corral with the Tree of Life. With passion, purity, and grace, the unicorn protects the Tree of Life upon which we all depend -- and the corral, the circle of life, preserves life's ground, seed, and growth.

Does the unicorn step out on the town from time to time? Yes. All the time – to carry tools for creation, to carry produce to market, to carry flower ringlets to the dance, to carry children to worship.

How do we change to be like the holy unicorn? Suffering do it for some folk, of course – but for many others there are also mountaintop joys, like a lover's smile, a baby's eyes, a dawn's promise, a sunset's pallet. Don't they all light a flame of hope for finding better ways and better days?

May we continue searching together to understand our choices, and choose them well, and share what we find with all our fellow creatures in St Pete, in Florida, and around the Earth. That will begin a new Reformation serving all souls.

## READINGS

**Invocation**    *Cathedral of the World* adapted from A Chosen Faith, by Forest Church

In the Cathedral of the World there are windows without number,  
**some long forgotten, covered with grime,**  
*others revered by millions, most sacred of shrines.*  
Each in its own way is beautiful; each tells a story  
**and our time so short, our vision so dim -**  
*that on our pilgrimage we contemplate only a tiny part.*  
**Yet by pondering and acting on our ruminations,**  
*we invest our days with meaning.*  
One light, many windows:  
**the windows are not the light,**  
*but are where the light shines through.*  
Awakened by the light,  
**we stand in the cathedral,**  
*alive with awe.*  
So may it be.

**Meditation**    *All Souls*, by Mary Sarton (UU Hymnal #718)

**Hymn**            *A Mighty Force of Love is God*, adapted from Martin Luther's *A Mighty Fortress*

A mighty force of love is God,/ of graciousness unailing;  
our saving strength against the flood/ o'er mortal ills prevailing.  
The world will work us woe/ if by its way we go;  
its darkness blocks our light/ and puts our good to flight  
if we forget our gracious Source.

We have no strength or being beside/ the grace of God's infusing  
that flows to us in unstemmed tide,/ for us beyond all losing.  
God's truth is our true way/ of caring come what may;  
our joy will know no bounds/ when our good news resounds;  
the light will shine within us.

And though our world in blindness dwells/ and threatens to undo us,  
we will not fear, our Source hath willed/ that truth will triumph through us.  
The spirit's strength is ours/ above all earthly powers;  
where we will live with care/ love's grace will enter there  
with joyfulness forever.

**Reading #1** “And *Yehovah* Said,” from *The Ten Commandments*, Deuteronomy 5  
(In Deuteronomy, God is called *Yehovah*, a compound word of unknown origin, pronunciation, or precise meaning, sometimes translated as “I Am What I Am” or “I Am What Is” or “Being that is becoming” – and for today, simply “*Being of beings.*”)

And *Yehovah* said, “I am the Being of beings, your god, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourselves an idol, whether in the form of anything in heaven above, or earth below, or water below the earth. You shall not bow to such things or worship them; for I, *Yehovah* your god, am a jealous god, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me; but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

**Reading #2** “Here’s the Thing,” from *The Color Purple*, by Alice Walker

Here’s the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don’t know what you looking for. Trouble do it for most folks, I think. Sorrow, lord.

It? I ast.

Yeah, It. God ain’t a he or a she, but a It.

But what do it look like? I ast.

Don’t look like nothing, she say. It ain’t a picture show. It ain’t something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you’ve found It.

Shug a beautiful something, let me tell you.... She say, My first step from the old white man (god) was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me; that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was....