

THE INFLUENCE OF PRENATAL COMPANIONS

Who Journeyed with Your Mother?

Rev. Jack Donovan – Unitarian Universalist Church
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CHILDREN'S SERMON

Remember Goodness, the unicorn? Last week she was sitting right there, and also, I noticed later, he was sitting right over there. And here is Goodness's picture again, inside a corral.



The mystery for us last Sunday was, Why would anyone corral Goodness – a creature of passion, purity, and grace who was always helpful for the village – pulling workcarts, bringing flowers, carrying children.

Did you figure it out? Why would anyone put a fence around goodness? ...

There are probably many answers. Our church believes in many answers. You might call us the Church of Many Answers – or, the Unicorn Church.

And here's another answer to the unicorn mystery. That answer is, you can't corral a unicorn. You can't corral goodness. Notice how low the corral fence is. The unicorn, with its great power, can just hop right over it and often does.

Actually, that old fence was Goodness's play pen when it was a baby unicorn. Now the world is where it plays. It just keeps going and growing. If we are the *Unicorn Church*, you might then also call us the *Growth Church*.

But the old fence is still there to help the unicorn protect this tree. This is the Tree of Life. The Tree of Life feeds and shelters every living thing – and gives everything a place to be together. That's why the unicorn helps protect the tree and even keeps alive the blessings from everything that has ever lived before - which is what we really celebrate on Halloween and the Day of the Dead.

So, if we are the Unicorn Church and the Growth Church, we might also be *The Tree of Life Church*. The unicorn and the tree of life give everyone the power to keep growing in wisdom, kindness, and friendship – the big three.

I think that's why the unicorn's name is Goodness. Maybe the name of our church should be, *For Goodness' Sake Church* – where we never let anything corral us except to protect what is good. Know what it is our church really believes in? We believe in you. *For Goodness' Sake Church, where we believe in you.* And that's why we hope to help one another grow.

So now we will pull these carts to collect some food or checks to help feed families and individuals in need. And that's how you become the answer to the mystery of the unicorn.

READINGS (printed after sermon)

Gathering	from <i>Late Autumn</i> , by May Sarton
Invocation	adapted <i>The Task of the Religious Community</i> , by Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed
Meditation	<i>Imagine</i> , by Siddhartha Buddha; <i>The Big Heart</i> , by Anne Sexton
Readings #1	<i>Companions to Mother Maya (Awaiting Child Buddha)</i>
Readings #2	<i>Companions to Mother Mary (Awaiting Child Christ)</i>

ADULTS' SERMON

Two teachings often proved worthy are, *Know thyself*, and *Know history*. Know your potentials, and know how they are influenced toward fulfillment, or could be. Influences begin long before we are conceived and they never cease – but their effect depends on how we respond.

One of humankind's great stories about the influences on an unborn child's potentials is that of Maya Gautama and the child she conceived who grew up to be known as the Buddha, the awakened one. At the time, some 2500 years ago, a dream came to Maya, the young queen of a kingdom in what we call India and Nepal. She dreamed a divine being in the form of an elephant came from heaven to grow as a child within her – perhaps she pictured Ganesh, god of the power to create harmony between heart and hearth and heaven. And she dreamed that many other gods with many other powers or potentials came to be with her.

Maya also had a community of support as she carried her child – helpful young women, a caring husband partner – and inspiration from seers who predicted her child would grow to be someone who shows others the way to a fearless, peaceful, blissful life. Those were powerful influences.

And wherever the pregnant queen went, people came to her and were healed of their wounds and woes. And her good news influenced the king who began to use his wealth and power to help the poor, the hungry, the thirsty.

What influence would all of that have on you if you were Maya? I might have thought, What great power there is in me and my child to help the world. And if you were her child, Siddhartha Gautama, growing up hearing these stories - perhaps you'd say, These ways of being are what my loved ones believe are possible for me and that I too can find the way. Know thyself; Know thy history.

I know of another people far away with their own story about a mother and influences on her and her influences on her children. They live on an island named *Fefan* in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Their word *Fe* means *Woman* and *fan* means island – so *Woman Island*, perhaps because it is shaped like a woman.

“How did the people of *Fefan* get here?” I asked the seventh graders at the island school where I taught as a Peace Corps volunteer. Neonina, one of my students, said, “A woman came from the east in a sailing canoe and when she landed, there were many demons and she chased them all away – and then she gave birth to all our first people. That’s how we got here” The whole class nodded, some solemnly, some matter-of-factly, all happily.

On *Fefan* and the nearby islands of Tchuk Lagoon, from what I was told and from what I could see, every woman giving birth felt somehow that she was following in line with the first mother, birthing the people, as in the story the children told me. How did it influence life there? I know that all ownership and use of the land passed through the women’s lineages and authority – which meant that no child born there was ever illegitimate or disenfranchised. In every village, bountiful with shared fish, sweet potato and breadfruit, and mango and banana, a child could toddle all around the grassy circle of story-telling diners and plop in any number of welcoming laps.

How might that experienced understanding of life influence who they were and how they lived? From what I saw personally and read in anthropology texts, no children there ever doubted that they belonged to the land and people and the land and people belonged to them. At the same time, their personalities, undergirded by a harmonious spirit, were individual and full. When asked to choose between Western ways and island ways, the people expressed a strong preference for “Tchukese custom,” started over 2000 years ago.

What about a great story of humankind where conditions were more oppressive – the story of Mary, mother of Jesus? Her experience started off like Queen Maya’s. Divine beings caused her pregnancy and attended to her. And though preachers like to say Jesus’ family was poor, the Gospel stories report that Mary was related to powerful people like Zechariah, honored priest at the central temple in Jerusalem. Some scholars even argue that Mary was related to the Jewish sovereigns at the time when Persia was dominant in the area before Rome.

But Mary’s fiancé had doubts about her. Perhaps it was not the holy spirit, but a licentious temple priest or a brutal Roman centurion or a reckless old boyfriend. Then, goes the story, a heavenly being also spoke to Joseph in a dream like Maya’s and resolved his doubts. Or maybe he just loved her and she him and everything was proper. All this would have been experienced somehow by Jesus in the womb, flows of anxiety, flows of elation, and, later, stories of the womb times.

There was also Elizabeth’s jubilation over her cousin Mary - “Hail, Mary, full of grace – the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.” Mary herself was so thrilled she sang, “My soul magnifies my God (the Being of my being).” Was there ever a more succinct and intimate claim of influence between humanity and divinity? And these two jubilant women were to bear John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ. What influence had this jubilation on these women and the babes in their wombs?

Then, seven or eight months later, Mary with Joseph, riding for days on a faithful donkey, to abide in the home of Joseph’s powerful family of David in the City of David – perhaps still with a

shepherd family's commitment to members of the flock. No homeless people there, but the bearer of a child descended from priests and kings.

What potentials – what influences! Was there courage to be drawn on and developed there? Devotion? Cooperativeness? And yet, the very power and influence of the family and the child would draw down forces of misunderstanding and oppression and execution.

You and I have influences from the same kinds of sources even in our prenatal days – families, facilitators, opponents, oppressors, lovers, losers – and it is all happening before we have even begun. And when does the value dawn upon us – to know the potential within your self and to know the influence of history upon you.

My mom and dad dated for seven or eight years through the Great Depression, a time too iffy for them to risk marriage and the Catholic family that would ensue. I think World War II precipitated their marriage in 1941 as the young men went to soldier. I was a long-awaited baby, born in 1944 in Massachusetts while my dad was stationed in California preparing with his unit to invade Japan. How do fear and longing in your mother influence her potentials and yours?

But my mom's companions through pregnancy were numerous and gracious – she lived with her dearest sister Catherine (the smart one) while their husbands were in the service. Their own mother and five brothers and sisters were a trolley ride away in Boston. And two blocks away was my dad's childhood house variously filled with some of his eight brothers and sisters.

We were not alone. But it was a fearful time with the war news. Uncle Charlie had already had two ships disabled under him in the Pacific, one to torpedoes, one to kamikaze. My mom's brother Fran was shipped back from North Africa, a basket case. That was just the beginning of casualties. What influences on my mother and on me in the womb, and on two or three generations of Americans in those times?

What can children understand, or imagine even when grown up, about their prenatal influences? When I heard these stories as a child, it seems to me I presumed that this was the story of life as it needed to be - adulthood, marriage, separation from family in the name of a great cause, heroic return to family, life happy ever after. By experience and reflection, I have learned that it's not really a necessary model, much less the best - though for my parent's generation it seems to have been the necessary one.

One positive understanding for me from all these stories, mythic, historic, cross-cultural, personal - by the time I became a father, I knew nothing was more important than time with my own child, for the sake of having time just being together, for the sake of dialoguing over the million big and little mysteries of life.

I used to think that not all of us could become Buddhas or Christs. But now I think that is precisely our potential, if only we become aware enough to understand our potentials and our influences and use them to their best. This, I think, gives us a path: We believe in the potential

goodness of life - that's our Reality. So we try to be good for life - that's our Morality. And so we build a Community – for goodness' sake.

READINGS

Thoughts for Gathering

from *Late Autumn*, by May Sarton

On random wires the rows of summer swallows wait for their lift-off. They will soon be gone, before All Saints and before All Hallows, the changing time when we are most alone. Love, say "hush" to my fears, and warm the night.

Invocation

adapted *The Task of the Religious Community*, by Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed

This morning let us celebrate the calling of our religious community:

to unveil the bonds that bind each to all –

to recognize the relationships amid the particulars of our lives.

to live with kindness, to act for justice,

to be assured we do not struggle alone.

Let us remember we are essential to one another,

for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen,

our strength too limited to do all that must be done.

This morning, let our vision widen, let our strength renew.

Meditation

Imagine, by Siddhartha Buddha

The Big Heart, by Anne Sexton

Imagine that every person in the world is enlightened but you.

Each of them is your teacher,

each doing just the right things to help you learn

patience, perfect wisdom, perfect compassion....

There is so much abundance in the people you have:

Max, Lois, Joe, Louise, Joan, Marie, Dawn, Arlene, Father Dunne,

and all in their short lives give to you repeatedly,

in the way the sea places its many fingers on the shore, again and again,

and they know you, they help you unravel,

they listen with ears made of conch shells,

they speak back with the wine of the best region.

They are your staff. They comfort you.

Reading #1

Companions to Mother Maya (Awaiting Child Buddha)

A dream came to Queen Maya as she slept. She dreamt of a young elephant, white as snow, with six great tusks, descending from the sky and entering her womb. Thousands of gods suddenly appeared before her and praised her, and Maya understood that never again would she feel discontent or hatred or anger.

When she awoke, she felt happier than ever before. Dressing in bright colors, she walked with her most beautiful maidens out through the palace gates to the garden and sent for her husband, King Suddhodana. The king hurried to her, filled with worry, when suddenly a great voice thundered from the sky:

"Be happy, O King! One who seeks supreme knowledge is coming into this world through your family and your most noble wife, Queen Maya. And the king rejoiced as he entered the wood where Maya awaited him.

Brahmans familiar with the mystery of dreams were summoned to the palace and they said, "Rejoice, your son will be a Buddha!"

The king then ordered alms be distributed to the poor, food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, and flowers and perfume to the women. Wherever the queen went, the sick healed, the blind saw, the deaf heard, the dumb spoke, and the dying recovered health and strength. Above the city blew a ceaseless melody, from the sky rained exquisite flowers, and around the palace walls rose songs of thanks.

Reading #2

Companions to Mother Mary (Awaiting Child Christ)

When Mary of Nazareth had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, God sent the angel Gabriel to tell Mary that God was with her and the Holy Spirit would conceive in her a son to be named Jesus. And so it was, she was found to be with child.

Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But an angel of God appeared and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit, to save his people from their sins. So Joseph took Mary as his wife.

At that same time, Mary learned that her aged relative Elizabeth, wife of a priest of the temple in Jerusalem, was also pregnant, six months along – and Mary went and was received with great joy and stayed for Elizabeth's delivery, then returned to Joseph in Nazareth to await the birth of Jesus.