

DOES EVERYTHING HAPPEN FOR A REASON?

Rev. Jack Donovan – Unitarian Universalist Church - St. Petersburg, Florida - 6/03/18

READINGS (texts below, after sermon)

<u>Gathering</u>	<i>Affirmations #1 and #7 of the Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Congregations</i>
<u>Invocation</u>	<i>Remember</i> (part 1), by Joy Harjo; <i>May Ours Be a Religion</i> , by Theodore Parker
<u>Meditation</u>	<i>Remember</i> (part 2), by Joy Harjo
<u>Reading #1</u>	<i>David's Cause</i> , from 1 st Samuel chapter 17
<u>Reading #2</u>	<i>Legacies</i> , by Nikki Giovanni
<u>Benediction</u>	<i>Remember</i> (part 3), by Joy Harjo

SERMON

My darling wife and I met as most everybody meets these days – in unlikely circumstances. A committee of liberal clergy in Gainesville, Florida, gathered each fall to prepare an interfaith service for National HIV/AIDS Awareness Day. In the fall of 1994, Alisun was a new minister in town and started coming to the clergy meetings in company with a couple of her Presbyterian colleagues – friends of mine, too, actually.

That first year we didn't really notice one another - both gun-shy, perhaps, after divorces. But the next year, at the December 1st service, we ended up sitting together. (Coincidence?) After the service we chatted and agreed to have coffee together after the Christmas holidays. I could sense that she had Unitarian Universalist tendencies. And she checked on my tendencies, asking some colleague friends, "Is he gay?" "Not that we know of," they said. (Coincidence?) From that coffee date, we've been together. (Coincidence? We relied on the popular retort: "I think not." It was a relationship made in heaven.)

I am seventy-four years old. Don't gasp. I know. My secret is chocolate. I don't gasp, but I do sigh inwardly a little when I consider that my dad died short of 61 and both my grandfathers died in their 50s. Why did they die so young? Why am I living so well and so long? Were their early deaths divinely ordained for some reason – maybe that I would cherish longer life and discover I am ordained to carry out some special divine purpose and plan? Are you?

There are things people say, and even believe, like: "Coincidence? I think not"; or, "Everything happens for a reason"; or, "There are no accidents" or, "God works in mysterious ways"; or, "God has a plan".

Over three thousand years ago, on the battlegrounds east of Bethlehem, there might have been some who said, "Oh, I'm betting on David the Kid. He killed a stalking lion once, you know – with that slingshot of his. He's a shepherd boy, and they're vengeful, they are, if you mess with their sheep."

For most observers, though, it would have seemed highly unlikely that the unarmored stripling David would slay the mighty warrior Goliath. Yet the very first stone David cast by-passed Goliath's helmet armor and knocked Goliath unconscious and helpless unto death. As David had asserted to King Saul, "Yehovah saved me in battle over my sheep against bear and lion – and He will save me in battle with the giant Goliath. I come in the name of Yehovah, God of the armies of Israel. The battle is Yehovah's and he will give Goliath into my hand."

What did the Israelites conclude from this? Yehovah intervened according to plan. He killed Goliath with David's arm. Yehovah is on our side and He is supreme. He sends us a savior and we are victorious.

And what would they have concluded if Goliath had killed David and they had become a subject people (as would happen in generations to come)? Since everything happens for a divine reason, they would have seen their loss as divine punishment for their waywardness from their covenant with their god. Everything happens for a reason – the divine purpose of the divine plan.

But wait. There is a hint in the scripture that not all the Israelites believed that way. And David seems to have been one of the doubters. To King Saul he made the case for being the one to go against Goliath by claiming he had killed a lion and a bear that had marauded his flock. And to his brothers he revealed his great motive when he said, "Is there not a cause?" Is there not a driving reason of our own for going up against the Philistine? To prove we are trustworthy to the god we trust to give us land, resources, power, honor, family – but most of all, a sense of unique allegiance with the Source of life and blessing? Everything is to gain, nothing is to lose. Everything happens for a reason. Tell me the reason that is your cause and I'll tell you your deeds and what will likely happen!"

Nikki Giovanni gives us a poem about a grandmother and her grandchild. The grandmother interrupts the child's playing to make her come in to do what the child would probably consider a chore – "I want you to learn how to make rolls." Well – if it's an invitation to stop playing and come inside to eat rolls, then, Yes. But if it's an order to stop playing and come inside to work? No. "Lord, these children."

Everything that gets said or done or thought happens for a reason - or really for a set of reasons – not because of some divine purpose other than cosmic energy's general thrust to be creative and transformative in a way that will survive and thrive – but for a specific human purpose. What the Giovanni grandmother meant was, I have a gift with which to empower you – a skill that will give you pleasure of your own making for any time and be a source of accomplishment for you in the world. I give it to you because you are special to me and I love you. You are the cause for my choice.

Sadly, that's not what the child understood because it was not said in a way a child could understand. So the child's response was sassy, which meant the grandmother could not understand, either. "No, I don't want to. When you bake the rolls, I get the gift of you, my grandma, doing something for me and making me feel special. That's what I want. What would

I get from learning not to be close and loved by you? That I don't understand." And that was the girl's misunderstanding.

It seems that sometimes we deny someone's request because it is against our well-being. But it seems that lots of times we deny someone's request or hope because we don't realize it would be good for us, too, and connective with them. We don't communicate and understand because we are too defensive or assertive to be able to pause and ask, Why? What for?

What for, Grandma? Well, dear, because Grandma wants to spend time with you and the kitchen's my place - and because I want to show you some neat kitchen stuff that lots of kids don't get to enjoy -- and also to give you a few more choices for what to do with your life. I promise you, girl, you make rolls, then next you get to make dumplings, then I'll teach you wild blueberry pie with flakiest crust, and then your own ice cream right here in this kitchen.

Well, Grandma! You are the flakiest. But you're starting to get me interested. I just needed to know the reason -- just because.

There is manipulation in the world. But what doesn't seem to prove true is that there is a supreme hidden power pulling strings to bring about some final good end -- because in the meantime lots of folks are suffering and dying without meaning.

There are lots of human choices that are reasons for things happening - and there are lots of natural dynamics that are reasons for things happening. But if things are accomplished that humans want to happen -- like gaining power or gaining peace or gaining lasting love -- the reason is that the humans make good or lucky choices.

What if, on Bethlehem's plains, David had compassion and, after disarming the unconscious Goliath, he called to the Philistine leaders and said, "Can we end this? Can we be brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, sons and daughters? May I teach you about the one God and learn from you about the many? The more options we have and the more reflection we share, the freer the will and the greater the good."

Unfortunately, instead, he cut off their man's head. And it's still happening today. Coincidence? I think not.

Alisun and me - we were only joking about coincidence. We knew there was coincidence in our meeting. Overlapping timing of taking up ministries in the same town; overlapping interest in social justice and caring; overlapping recovery from past relationships, and many other overlapping conditions. And, yes, there was what could fairly be understood as the divine role of energy-provider for life that made us present to one another.

But the choices were ours. And over time, as our degree of understanding grew and the number of caring Yes's accumulated in our choices, the more deep good things happened. Though conditioned by our humanness with its needs and potentials, those were our choices. Once given the power of life, humanness becomes the biggest reason things happen, especially

as we accumulate that highest human capacity known as being aware of and reflective about our choices. Then we ourselves become the primary reason things happen.

As for me at 74, I know that working in the coal dust of locomotive engines killed my dad's father; and that the bad genetic luck of leukemia killed my mother's father; and that the corporate drive to turn America's military men into Marlboro men killed my father. My sadness over those fine men losing out on lovely years with their wives and children and grandchildren and communities gives me reason to cherish my years. But it is mainly my own reasons for living now that give cause to my life and make things happen.

The arm of the universe is indeed long. But it doesn't bend toward justice. It must be bent by you and me if it is to bend toward justice and toward caring. Life is for us. But if we are to be for life, we must choose our cause well. Among all the influences and all the choices, it seems we each are the reason things happen.

May the cause be with you. And may you help make the earth as fair as heaven above.

READINGS

Gathering *Affirmations #1 and #7 of the Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Congregations*

We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person... and respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part.

Invocation *May Ours Be a Religion*, by Theodore Parker (Hymnal #683)

Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere -
its temple, all space;
Its shrine, the good heart;
Its creed, all truth,
Its ritual, works of love;
Its profession of faith, divine living.

Invocation, Meditation, & Benediction adapted from *Remember* (parts 1, 2, & 3), by Joy Harjo

This morning together,
May we remember the sky that we were born under,
know each of the star's stories.
May we remember the moon, know who she is.
Remember the sun's birth at dawn, the strongest point of time.
Remember sundown and the giving away to night.
May we remember our births, how our mothers struggled
to give us form and breath.
You are evidence of your mother's life, and her mother's, and hers.
May we remember our fathers.
He is your life, also, and his father, and his.
Remember.

Remember the earth whose skin we are:
red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth,
brown earth, blue earth –
Remember, we are earth.
Remember the plants, the trees, the animals –
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 this universe.

May you remember you are all people and all people are you.
May you remember you are this universe and this universe is you.
May you remember all is in motion, is growing, is you.
May you remember language comes from this.
May you remember the dance that language is, that life is.
May you remember and from there may you grow.

Reading #1 *David's Cause*, adapted from 1st Samuel chapter 17

The youthful David of Bethlehem was tending his family's sheep – and his father sent him with food for his elder brothers who were in the army of Israel against the army of the Philistines. So David went off to the battleground, to the army of Israel, and came and saluted his brothers.

And as he talked with the soldiers, there came forward from the Philistines their champion, the giant Goliath. As he had for forty days, he challenged the army of Israel, saying, "Choose your man. If he be able to fight and kill me, then we will be your slaves and serve you. But if I prevail and kill him, then shall you be our slaves and serve us. Send forth your man and let us fight."

The men of Israel were terrified. David spoke to those who stood near him, saying, "What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine and takes away reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?"

David's eldest brother Eliab heard David and his anger kindled, and he said, "Why did you come here? You came just to see the battle. I know your pride and your wayward heart." And David said, "What have I done now? Is there not a cause?"

Reading #2 *Legacies*, by Nikki Giovanni

Her grandmother called her from the playground -

 "Yes, ma'am."

 "I want chu to learn how to make rolls" said the old woman proudly.

But the little girl didn't want to learn how because she knew, even if she couldn't say it, that that would mean when the old one died she would be less dependent on her spirit, so she said,

 "I don't want to know how to make no rolls"

with her lips poked out;
and the old woman wiped her hands on her apron saying "Lord, these children" -
and neither of them ever said what they meant
and I guess nobody ever does.