

## SERMON for December 16, 2018

### ***YOUR RECLAMATION, THEN:***

#### ***Influencing the Parental Influences on Your Infant Spirit***

Rev. Jack Donovan – Unitarian Universalist Church - St. Petersburg, Florida

#### **READINGS** (printed below, after the sermon)

<b><u>Gathering</u></b>	<i>Genesis – A Rabbinic Retelling</i>
<b><u>Invocation</u></b>	<i>Litany of Restoration</i> (Hymnal 576)
<b><u>Meditation</u></b>	<i>You Are the Light</i> , adapted from the Gospels of John 1 and Matthew 5
<b><u>Reading</u></b>	<i>A Compassionate Person</i> , adapted from <u>Steps to a Compassionate Life</u> , Karen Armstrong
<b><u>Reading</u></b>	<i>Born Anew</i> , from the Gospel of John, chapter 3
<b><u>Benediction</u></b>	<i>As We Go Our Way</i>

### **SERMON**

“What is your business with me?” asked Ebenezer Scrooge.

“Your welfare,” said the Spirit of Christmas Past.

“Thanks, but no, thanks,” said Scrooge.

“Your reclamation, then,” said the Spirit, with which words the Spirit took a firm grasp on Scrooge. Off they flew to revisit the early childhood parental influences on Ebenezer's spiritual growth.

Might not the Spirit visit you, too, and ask, What were your parents' influences on your spiritual growth, even in your earliest formation and birthing? Was there much by which your light has been empowered? Was there much that now could be reclaimed?

A woman from Indiana reports that she was an unmarried pregnant teenager in 1969. Her “respectable” family sent her away to relatives to have the baby in secret and give it up for adoption. For decades she wondered about her child and the influence of her actions. And what about the influence on her? What does it do to you, to have to give up your child and know nothing about its life journey and be unable to be there for it – and, indeed, to have to call it “It” if you mention it at all?

A woman from Michigan reports that her mother abandoned the family when she was little. How did that influence her spirit and what could she do about it over time? Her father blended families in a new marriage and the stepmother was harsh and uncaring toward the little girl, with no mitigation by the girl's father. How did that influence her spirit and what could she do about it over time?

A woman from Virginia reports that her mother always longed to return to Priverno, Italy, to reconnect with her roots. But on a family trip to Italy during her childhood, her father would not include Priverno on their itinerary for fear of encountering the imagined squalor their

families had left behind decades before. How did that influence the family spirit and what could the woman do with that influence over time?

My parents got engaged in the middle of the Depression and waited to marry until the war began in 1941. I was born three years later while my dad was stationed on the West Coast. My mom and I lived my first year with her sister Catherine and in daily connection with my mom's and dad's sisters and brothers, all of whom lived nearby. How did the required absence of my father and the constant cheerful presence of uncles and aunts and grandmother and cousins influence my spirit and what would I do with that influence over time?

Each of the people from whom these stories come might ask themselves, what was the spiritual influence of these beginnings – of parental courtships when perhaps dreams were shaping, of time in the womb when perhaps households were being shaped for them, of the first years of life when parenting was shaping them.

Have you ever researched stories of your parents' romance and courtship - their hopes and worries and plans - your months growing within a world that was your mother, washed with hormones of elation, anticipation, anxiety - your months of infancy in joy or woe?

Once poets said we come to the world with intimations of immortality, trailing streams of glory, and that life is but a little sleep and a forgetting. But now, have we not come to realize our potentials are seeds that awake and grow with experience and reflection and imagination – that influence comes from questions and answers with our parents and their comrades and with our comrades and ourselves? Stepfather, why was I adopted? Stepsister, why was stepmother cruel? Mother, what did father fear if we are well-off and our old family is poor? Stepmother, am I yours? Father, did you miss us when you were away – and what did we miss of you?

As you have grown, have you been able to reclaim influence over your potentials? Have you come to terms with your resources in the newborn's instinctual grasping, crying, and nursing? As a child, have you developed the contingent tools of imitation, fantasy and reaction? As a youth, have you added greater awareness of reality, of rules, and of consequences that you can use to influence your safety and happiness?

As a young adult, have you added sympathy and judgment to your skills for making decisions, influencing not only your own childhood conditionings, but also those of your own children? As a mature adult, has greater experience added greater choice, greater free will, greater confidence, greater wisdom for overriding the confining influences of birth and childhood, and providing greater benefit for your community? And as an elder, have you had time to reflect on how life and life's systems could change for the better and to influence yourself and the world in that direction?

It is to these later phases that Jesus' late night teaching to Nicodemus and Buddha's Deer Park teaching to the ascetics applies. Yes, we are born into this world as material beings, conditioned to possess and be possessed. But the time comes when we may see the light

within ourselves and within all and we are born anew, liberated to become beings of a higher order of understanding, caring and belonging, free and willing to give and be given. No longer is our only influence to cry or grasp or nurse, but also to understand the cry, the grasp, the nursing and to care for them.

After decades of wandering and wondering and longing, the woman from Indiana was reunited with the child she had had to give up, and reunited into his family, including a seven-year-old grandchild who has become the joy of her life. It had taken her a long time to overcome the influence of the community judgment and shaming of her youth. She became whole at last.

The woman in Michigan, abandoned as a little child by her mother and raised harshly by her stepmother, returned to help when her stepmother was bedridden with cancer. And her stepmother said, "I was not a good mother for you and I'm terribly sorry about that. You are a good daughter." It was the first apology and first compliment she could remember from her stepmother. Kindly, she responded, "You were – and are – a good mother." Encouraged, the woman searched out her birth mother to reconcile and she wondered aloud to her stepmother, "Can any child have too many mothers to love them?" And her stepmother replied, "I don't think so. And I'm sure no mother can have too many daughters to love."

The Virginia woman always remembered her mother's longing and under its influence thirty-five years later she went and found the family in Priverno. All were flourishing, all jubilant at her return. And on a wall of photos, to her lasting joy, she found a photo of her mother, 20 years old, with her four younger siblings and her parents, cherished in this place she always wished to know.

My mother and I joined my dad at his Army post for the second year of my life – and I have many pictures with him in his uniform, holding happy me high with one hand and my mom beaming. In my third year, we were back home, living in veterans housing. On Christmas Eve, my parents put up a Christmas manger with a blue light shining upon the holy family – and I knew it was perfect like my family.

How did that influence my spirit and what would I do about that influence over time? When some poor choice fills my spirit with regret, I find I can recall the divine blue light and know that regret is not my epitaph – that the light is full of sacred potential awaiting a decision to turn it into a holy reality.

That, I think, is when the worth and dignity that is inherent in every person as potential becomes actual – cherished by the individual as fulfillment and cherished as a gift by those who receive it, claim it, and shine it forth.

In this season of new life, may we all claim and reclaim that light.

**READINGS** (printed below, after the sermon)

**Gathering**    *Genesis – A Rabbinic Retelling*

In the beginning, God made light of the world. – *Genesis*, A Rabbinic retelling

I dwell in possibility... and spread wide my narrow hands to gather paradise. – Emily Dickinson

We affirm and promote the worth and dignity of every person. – UU Association Covenant

**Invocation**    *Litany of Restoration* (Hymnal 576)

**Meditation**    *You Are the Light*, adapted from the Gospels of John 1 and Matthew 5

All beings receive the light – and, all who realize it, receive the power to become beings of divine light. You are the light of the world. Let it shine so others may see.

**Reading**    *A Compassionate Person*, adapted from [Steps to a Compassionate Life](#), Karen Armstrong

A person who is impartial, fair, calm, gentle, serene, accepting, and openhearted is indeed a refuge. In the person who has gone beyond the limitations and partialities of selfhood (like the Buddha), many experience a humanity that makes them feel that life is more than endurable. A truly compassionate person touches a chord in us that resonates with some of our deepest yearnings. This is the ideal to which we aspire, and it is not beyond our capacity. Even if we achieve only a fraction of this enlightenment and leave the world only marginally better because we have lived in it, our lives will have been worthwhile. There is no more to be said. We know what we have to do. This is the end of words and the beginning of life.

**Reading**        *Born Anew*, from the Gospel of John, chapter 3

To Nicodemus, a leading Jewish elder who came to him secretly in the night, Jesus said, “I’m telling you the truth – no one can see the world divine without being born anew.” And Nicodemus replied, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can you enter the mother’s womb a second time and be born again?” And Jesus said, “You cannot enter the divine realm without being born of water and of spirit. What is born of flesh is flesh and what is born of spirit is spirit.”

**Benediction**    *As We Go Our Way*

And now, as we go our way in the world, may we wonder about everything. May we not be afraid of troubling answers, for they open new windows and doors of possibility. No need to rush in. But no need not to look. The spirit of life is there somewhere for you and you are the light.