

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“God is Change”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore November 6, 2022

Call to Celebration

Good morning and welcome to the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, commonly known as Albany UU. My name is Rev. Sam Trumbore and I serve as the lead minister of this congregation.

Today I will be tackling a challenging theological topic, exploring the nature of God. I will be examining the assertion that “God is Change.” This framing of God shows up in Octavia E. Butler’s afro-futurist novels *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*.

JOHN HALSTEAD is a devotee of this way of thinking and creator of the godischange.org web site. He writes:

Octavia Butler’s *Parable* books [written in the 1990’s] are set in the near future [of the 2030’s] when the United States has all but collapsed due to economic, environmental, and political pressures. Corporations hold people in virtual slavery. People live in walled neighborhoods. Hunger, theft, rape, and murder are normal outside of the walls. [Police work for a fee.] It is the resemblances to the present day that are most disturbing—including an ethno-nationalist president who promises to “Make America Great Again”.

Lauren Oya Olamina is the prophetic teenager who narrates the story as diary entries. She is the one who feels chosen to reveal this theology. It isn’t something she believes she is inventing. It is what she believes to be demonstrably true. She brings this theology into language, language that becomes scripture for the small community of refugees she gathers around her. Central to her theology is *God is Change*.

I bring this theology to you today because there are features of Butler’s “God is Change” theology that may be appealing to Unitarian Universalists, especially as we navigate the difficult times that may be ahead that parallel the novel’s uncanny predictive power. May we find inspiration, support, encouragement and even hope in this unusual way of approaching God as we join together in the celebration of life.

Reading

Here are a selection of verses and words from the first three chapters of Octavia Butler’s book *Parable of the Sower*. Prophetic narrator Lauren Olamina names her writings, *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*.

All that you touch You Change.
 All that you Change Changes you.
 The only lasting truth Is Change.
 God Is Change.

A lot of people seem to believe in a big-daddy-God or a big-cop-God or a big-king-God. They believe in a kind of super-person. A few believe God is another word for nature. And nature turns out to mean just about anything they happen not to understand or feel in control of. Some say God is a spirit, a force, an ultimate reality. Ask seven people what all of that means and you'll get seven different answers. So what is God? Just another name for whatever makes you feel special and protected? (p.15) ...

Beginning of Chapter 3 Earthseed reading:

We do not worship God.
 We perceive and attend God.
 We learn from God.
 With forethought and work,
 We shape God.
 In the end,
 we yield to God.
 We adapt and endure,
 For we are Earthseed
 And God is Change. (p.17)

For whatever it's worth, here's what I believe. It took me a lot of time to understand it, then a lot more time with a dictionary and a thesaurus to say it just right—just the way it has to be. In the past year, it's gone through twenty-five or thirty lumpy, incoherent rewrites. This is the right one, the true one. This is the one I keep coming back to:

God is Power— Infinite, Irresistible, Inexorable, Indifferent.
 And yet, God is Pliable— Trickster, Teacher, Chaos, Clay.
 God exists to be shaped.
 God is Change.

This is the literal truth.

God can't be resisted or stopped, but can be shaped and focused. This means God is not to be prayed to. Prayers only help the person doing the praying, and then, only if they strengthen and focus that person's resolve. If they're used that way, they can help us in our only real relationship with God. They help us to shape God and to accept and work with the shapes that God imposes on us. God is power, and in the end, God prevails.

But we can rig the game in our own favor if we understand that God exists to be shaped, and will be shaped, with or without our forethought, with or without our intent. (pp.24-25)

Spoken Meditation

Let us connect now with being an Earthseed
 Each cell of our body contains the complete description of our genome.
 The history of our evolutionary path
 Written in the language of nucleotide base pairs abbreviated “A,” “C,” “G,” “T.”
 Plant bacteria, viruses, a bit of algae, or some fungus,
 in alien soil, water, or air, and it might grow, change and evolve.

That very process might have happened here,
 maybe more than once.

Is our destiny as Earthseed to take root among the stars as Lauren prophesizes?

Let us take this contemplation and our own thoughts, reflections and prayers
 into a time of silence as we enjoy some grass seed waving in the wind.

Silent Meditation

Sermon

I remember being intrigued and a little disturbed by defining God as Change as described in the Parable of the Sower by Octavia Butler. I came across it during the beginning of the pandemic listening to a chapter by chapter analysis of the book by two women of African descent, Adrienne Marie Brown and Toshi Reagon on their podcast called [Octavia's Parables](#). The book and their podcasts inspired me to create our Octavia Butler study group that meets on Sunday nights at 7pm which you are welcome to join.

The theology behind the expression “God is Change” goes against just about all the traditional Christian ideas about God you may have learned in catechism or in Sunday School. In Christianity and other religions, God exists outside of space and time because God created them. Traditional Christianity believes God is eternal. God exists outside of space and time yet can be present in every moment of time. Along with Omnipotence, Omnipresence, Omniscience and Omnibenevolence or being all powerful, present, knowing, and loving, God has another key attribute: Immutability or unchangeability. God may change a course of action, get angry or make a covenant with humanity, but God's nature or being isn't changed. What I've never quite understood is how this theology works for those who might pray for some something or someone to be rescued by God, to change God's will.

Within the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Islam and Christianity, all find strong support for a God that doesn't change. Buddhism has a little different slant on the topic because anicca, or the changing nature of existence is core mark of existence. The experience of liberation however is to have a direct experience of what doesn't change, to know nibbana or nirvana, what exists that isn't touched by birth and death, what is beyond the constant worldly change all around us.

What we can all agree on is the changeable nature of human existence is troubling. There is no place to rest. When we have what we want it can easily be lost. What we don't want persists much longer than we'd like. Much of our misery is caused by change.

Prophet Lauren unflinchingly names the very thing that bothers us “God.” She argues for how that could be true. In Chapter 7 she says:

I’ve never felt that I was making any of this up—not the name, Earthseed, not any of it. I mean, I’ve never felt that it was anything other than real: discovery rather than invention, exploration rather than creation. I wish I could believe it was all supernatural, and that I’m getting messages from God. But then, I don’t believe in that kind of God. All I do is observe and take notes, trying to put things down in ways that are as powerful, as simple, and as direct as I feel them. (p.78)

Using her protagonist’s words, Octavia Butler outlines a faith for difficult times, times when traditional religion may not be able to offer support; times when the world is collapsing around us, the dystopian future she paints in the book.

Chapter 3 gives us a framework to begin to unpack this theology.

Lauren says,

God is Power— Infinite, Irresistible, Inexorable, Indifferent.
And yet, God is Pliable— Trickster, Teacher, Chaos, Clay.
God exists to be shaped.

This definition of God is not ontological, describing the being or nature of God, but more about what God does. There is no negotiation with this God. No boundaries can be set. It cannot be persuaded, moved, or stopped. And it doesn’t care about us. This God is completely impersonal. There is no walking and talking with us and putting a loving arm around our shoulder here. This God is pure power, movement, energy in motion.

And somehow, this God is adaptable, malleable, plastic, supple, and flexible.

A parallel might be to consider the Sun. It shines on the planet and gives us all the energy we need to survive as organic lifeforms. Whether we like it or not, the sun will come up and go down every day independent of how we feel about sunrises or sunsets. The sun came up before we were born and will continue to go down after we die.

There is no negotiation with the sun about coming up a little earlier or not having any solar flares that are big enough to blow out all our satellites. The Sun is a pure power source that is independent of the lifeforms that completely depend on it to exist.

And the rays of the sun that come toward the earth are pliable. We can use them to grow food, generate electricity, drive windmills, form clouds to water the land and use the visible spectrum to see where we are going. The warmth of the sun can heat water to a pleasant temperature for taking a shower, even cook a meal. The power of the sun can be used and shaped, can be our friend even if it doesn’t care about us.

Lauren has a vision of how we should relate to God even if God doesn’t relate to us in this next Earthseed verse:

We do not worship God.
 We perceive and attend God.
 We learn from God.
 With forethought and work,
 We shape God.
 In the end,
 we yield to God.
 We adapt and endure.

This could be interpreted as being as a quasi-scientific approach. Study God. Observe God. Measure God. Learn from God. Publish papers about God. Write dissertations on God. Become a God expert. Studying the processes of change—if God is Change—seems quite reasonable.

The next part of that verse challenges conventional thinking. With forethought and work, we shape God, we shape change. Whether we are successful in shaping change or not, we yield to God, we adapt and endure.

Lauren advocates an active rather than a passive response to the nature of God as Change. In this way, God is like clay for us to mold out of God’s chaotic trickster nature.

This indifferent God doesn’t quite line up with the loving God of Matthew 10:29 that cares even about the sparrow that falls from the sky (which is way more than I’d care about this invasive species). When Lauren explains her vision of God to people, they are often unmoved. This isn’t a god of comfort and care holding us in God’s heart and wishing us well. This isn’t a vision of a God that would be waiting for our prayers so God could answer them. In Islam, a common expression is, “If I take one step toward Allah, Allah will take ten steps toward me.” That is way more warm and fuzzy vision of God.

The world Lauren survives in is anything but warm and fuzzy. The dystopian world in which Lauren lives requires her to carry guns and dress like a man just to survive. Lauren explains what she means by shaping God in Chapter 18 in response to a question about the value of an uncaring God:

... there’s hope in understanding the nature of God—not punishing or jealous, but infinitely malleable. There’s comfort in realizing that everyone and everything yields to God. There’s power in knowing that God can be focused, diverted, shaped by anyone at all. But there’s no power in having strength and brains, and yet waiting for God to fix things for you or take revenge for you. ... God will shape us all every day of our lives. Best to understand that and return the effort: Shape God.”

Throughout the Parable of the Sower, Lauren is the exemplar of one who is constantly learning, adapting, adjusting, and shaping each moment. And she is always expending her energy in the direction of shaping people around her to create community and connection, often by giving of herself and putting her life on the line. Like any good prophet, she puts her community first. She does it risking relationship with people she senses have good hearts who will become community assets. She builds the Earthseed community that begins to sound like a religious community. Here is another Earthseed verse:

Once or twice
 each week
 A Gathering of Earthseed
 is a good and necessary thing.
 It vents emotion, then
 quiets the mind.
 It focuses attention,
 strengthens purpose, and
 unifies people.

One of the big controversies in Christian theology is God's impassibility, the inability of God to suffer as we do. Does God know our pain and have compassion for us? Theologian Jurgen Moltmann famously said: "Were God incapable of suffering in any respect, and therefore in an absolute sense, then God would also be incapable of love." (Quoted in the Introduction to James F. Keating book *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*)

Classically, in the Trinitarian construction of God, God as Jesus would be affected by the sparrow falling but God as the Father would not be touched at all. As happens a lot in trinitarian theology, you can have it both ways because it's a mystery.

Contemporary Liberation and Process theologians reject impassibility and frame suffering differently. God is deeply affected by everything that happens and is completely responsive to the suffering of humanity but in ways we may not comprehend with our limited cognitive ability. A simple comparison might be the Karner Blue butterflies would not be able to comprehend the care for them by Friends of the Pine Bush aware of how they fit into the ecosystem. Termites will never comprehend our wrath as they attack the timber in our homes, and we seek to exterminate them.

Some of the folks who have been drawn to Earthseed Theology have been social justice activists. These are people who intensely experience the dystopia of contemporary life and are not witnessing much Divine agency at work fixing anything without our active participation.

Adrienne Marie Brown and Toshi Reagon I mentioned earlier are dedicated to planetary transformation. They experience most institutionalized religion as captured by the dominant patriarchal, capitalist, heteronormative, racist, ableist, gender binary that reinforce the status quo. They don't experience God as present in that status quo. If God exists, God must be part of the process of dismantling that oppression. God is experienced as change. Jesus wasn't a status quo kind of guy either. Nor was Mohammed a status quo kind of guy. Buddha wasn't a status quo kind of guy. Real religion is the religion of the revolutionary they might say. God is change.

While I appreciate God is Change theology, especially to activate social change, there is something missing for me in the impersonality of God as Power and pure agency of change. It misses a heart dimension that has been critical to my deepest experience of human existence. For me, God is Love is more meaningful than God is Change. That love exists independent of what happens in the world, whether I live or die, of the changing nature of material existence. That love isn't personal, yet it is the foundation for our ability to exist at all. It is what we arise from and where we are going after we die. For me this is the ground of Universalism. It is the ultimate source of comfort when things don't go the way we want them to go.

A fascinating aspect of Lauren's character is her hyper-empathy syndrome. She feels what others are feeling viscerally. The ability to feel that powerfully turns out to be a major liability that can disable her when she must fight and even kill to survive. She must hide this capacity because people will use it to control her.

And yet that capacity is of great help to her as she builds community. It assists her following her prophetic call to teach the world they can be Earthseed and spread life to the stars.

Is God change? Is God love? Is this irrelevant because God doesn't exist?

Unitarian Universalism puts its faith in you to figure it out.

I'm here, this congregation exists to be a place to help you figure it out in the context of creating beloved community together.

Prayer of Affirmation

This is a petitionary prayer
I'm going to ask for something.

Not in my lifetime has there been such a challenge to democracy.

Not in my lifetime have so many elected officials
embraced a lie told by a former President unwilling to recognize he is a loser.

Not in my lifetime has the boring process of running an election
been so endangered by election officials
who already know the correct outcome.

What I pray for today
as people vote and the polls close Tuesday night
is for our democracy.

I pray that our elections are trustworthy and not corrupt.
I pray that the candidates accept the outcomes when the votes are counted.

May the God of Change, change the hearts
of those who would subvert the process and intimidate the voters.

I pray that around the country
no matter which candidate wins
democracy is the undisputed winner.

So be it.