

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“The Road to Jerusalem”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore March 3 ,2019

Spoken Meditation

Aristotle by Billy Collins

This is the beginning.
 Almost anything can happen.
 This is where you find
 the creation of light, a fish wriggling onto land,
 the first word of *Paradise Lost* on an empty page.
 Think of an egg, the letter *A*,
 a woman ironing on a bare stage
 as the heavy curtain rises.
 This is the very beginning.
 The first-person narrator introduces himself,
 tells us about his lineage.
 The mezzo-soprano stands in the wings.
 Here the climbers are studying a map
 or pulling on their long woolen socks.
 This is early on, years before the Ark, dawn.
 The profile of an animal is being smeared
 on the wall of a cave,
 and you have not yet learned to crawl.
 This is the opening, the gambit,
 a pawn moving forward an inch.
 This is your first night with her,
 your first night without her.
 This is the first part
 where the wheels begin to turn,
 where the elevator begins its ascent,
 before the doors lurch apart.

This is the middle.
 Things have had time to get complicated,
 messy, really. Nothing is simple anymore.
 Cities have sprouted up along the rivers
 teeming with people at cross-purposes—
 a million schemes, a million wild looks.
 Disappointment unshoulders his knapsack
 here and pitches his ragged tent.

This is the sticky part where the plot congeals,
 where the action suddenly reverses
 or swerves off in an outrageous direction.
 Here the narrator devotes a long paragraph
 to why Miriam does not want Edward's child.
 Someone hides a letter under a pillow.
 Here the aria rises to a pitch,
 a song of betrayal, salted with revenge.
 And the climbing party is stuck on a ledge
 halfway up the mountain.
 This is the bridge, the painful modulation.
 This is the thick of things.
 So much is crowded into the middle—
 the guitars of Spain, piles of ripe avocados,
 Russian uniforms, noisy parties,
 lakeside kisses, arguments heard through a wall—
 too much to name, too much to think about.

And this is the end,
 the car running out of road,
 the river losing its name in an ocean,
 the long nose of the photographed horse
 touching the white electronic line.
 This is the colophon, the last elephant in the parade,
 the empty wheelchair,
 and pigeons floating down in the evening.
 Here the stage is littered with bodies,
 the narrator leads the characters to their cells,
 and the climbers are in their graves.
 It is me hitting the period
 and you closing the book.
 It is Sylvia Plath in the kitchen
 and St. Clement with an anchor around his neck.
 This is the final bit
 thinning away to nothing.
 This is the end, according to Aristotle,
 what we have all been waiting for,
 what everything comes down to,
 the destination we cannot help imagining,
 a streak of light in the sky,
 a hat on a peg, and outside the cabin, falling leaves.

Readings

Mark 6:17-29; Matthew 14:13;

It was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.

But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. For when Herodias's daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom."

And she went out and said to her mother, "For what should I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her.

And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.

from *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Beacon 1992)

The practice of biblical interpretation in terms of a feminist rhetorics seeks to make present the different voices inscribed both in the text and in its ancient and contemporary contexts. Following historical re-imagination of the story of Herodias...Here is an example of such a feminist interpretation...

Let me warn you my Sisters, ... that in this story from Mark there is but a kernel of actual historical evidence. According to the historian Josephus, John the Baptist was put to death by my husband, Herod Antipas, but the rest of what you read and hear in this biblical account is merely legendary embellishment ...

In this gory story by Mark, my poor, remorseful Herod emerges slightly tarnished--the victim of my manipulation and influence--and John becomes the innocent victim of my violence and revenge. Yet, in truth, am I not the victim? Yes, I did historically exist, and I was the wife of Herod; but, though the name is the same, the facts have been changed to protect the guilty. I am the victim of a patriarchal world that has refused me voice and showered me with accusations, and, for centuries, I have been condemned by Bible readers for a crime I never committed. Like women before and after me, my story has never been told...

...with the entombment of John--we had the burial of my true self. The truth of who I am was gagged, bound, and entombed these many centuries, while a legendary figure by the same name has stalked your biblical world in the guise of truth--accepted, protected, and proclaimed by a patriarchal church as the "Word of God."

My Sisters, I reach across the centuries to speak to you today: In your search for truth about women of the past--even women of biblical times--beware--because often what you find are stories by men about women.

To know me may not have been to love me, BUT
 To know me only from this biblical text is NOT to know me.
 My hope now lies in YOU, My Sisters --
 Have courage to question
 to be suspicious of biblical texts about women like me
 found on pages dubbed GOOD NEWS and
 proclaimed as WORD OF GOD.
 Be tenacious in your struggle to know the truth
 to name the oppression where you find it
 and to set free and proclaim a
 LIBERATING WORD . . .

Sermon

The death of John the Baptist is one of the few Gospel stories that has external historical collaboration. That gives it a special significance.

The Roman historian Josephus mentions the execution of John by Herod Antipas. He also gives us a little more background on Herodias. She was Herod's half-brother's wife. Herod Antipas was already married to Aretas king of Nabataea's daughter Phasaelis. This was a strategic wedding that may have been arranged by a Roman emperor to keep the peace with Herod's Galilean southwestern border. Nabataea was an important trade route from Syria through Palestine to Egypt that needed to be kept open and active.

Herod desired Herodias however and rejected Phasaelis who and home to her daddy. Aretas was majorly upset and went to war against Herod. Herod lost his battle against Aretas partly because Herod's half-brother's troops changed sides, joining Aretas. Herod appealed to Tiberius to save him. Tiberius sent Syrians to attack Aretas. The legions marched down stopping in Jerusalem for Passover. Tiberius died and the legions retreated home, probably not very excited about this military adventure in the first place.

Josephus was critical of Herod for killing John. He described John as "a good man [who] had exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives [and] to practice justice towards their fellows and piety towards God..." Though Josephus tells us about Herodias, he doesn't mention her or her daughter as the motivation for John's death. John's critique of Herod, that he violated the law that prohibits marrying a kinsman's wife (while he is still alive) was certainly enough to get him killed.

It is also notable that Josephus never mentions Jesus by name in his history. John was more historically significant when Josephus was writing his history. John baptized Jesus and sent him out *not* the other way around. The Gospel writers work hard to undermine John as the main prophet and replace him with Jesus. John must have had many followers that Jesus' disciples were working to recruit. Positioning Jesus as the one who carried forward John's mantle to fully realize it through resurrection would have been very appealing to John's followers. It is no accident that Jesus feeds 5000 and walks on water right after John's death in Mark's text. These feats establish Jesus as a miracle working God-man to continue the work John could not complete.

I'm moved by the line from Matthew 14:13 that I quoted: When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Jesus may have expected something bad to happen to John but may not have expected he would have been executed. This violated the traditional Jewish understanding of the role of the prophet. Prophets were the checks against royal power and abuse. Kings helped solidify the power needed to form armies for self-defense against invading neighbors. And that

power could be abused as was feared before the twelve tribes of Israel organized as a kingdom under Saul against the wishes of Samuel, the last of the judges. The role of the prophet was to speak truth to power, humbling the high and mighty through their righteousness.

Instead this good and holy man was executed like a criminal.

Empires like the Roman Empire compromise their vassals' moral agency in service of the empire's ends that are disconnected from the people's welfare. Rome couldn't care less about the wellbeing of the Galileans. They existed only to produce grain and wealth for the empire.

Herod is the real villain in this story. So why might the writer of Mark's gospel, the earliest of the four, blame Herodias for John's death? Given the defeat of Herod's army, I can imagine there must have been resentment against him in Galilee afterwards. This shows up in Josephus' account as well.

Herod's enchantment by Herodias' daughter, in a sense, parallels his unwise enchantment with Herodias herself. His foolish offer to give her anything she wants including half his kingdom sounds like a drunken promise to be abandoned the next day. The head of John the Baptist could have easily been refused as an unacceptable request. Herod's promises didn't seem to be worth much after all, with his first wife. His willingness to honor his promise by doing the dishonorable thing makes him look even weaker and more vile.

I've built this case against Herod so we can better appreciate how offended and inflamed Jesus might have been as he took that boat to a solitary place. He couldn't walk away from the murder of his righteous teacher. Yet to prophetically confront Herod directly would probably get Jesus killed too. Jesus would need to go to the center of the Jewish power, the Temple, to make his prophetic statement. He set himself on a journey to Jerusalem.

The 40 day period before Easter that begins with Ash Wednesday symbolically reenacts that journey. In Christian belief it is a journey that doesn't end with Jesus' death on the cross. It continues with his return from death to start the journey of a church that will embody him and his message and teaching until his physical return in the flesh again. It was a return his followers expected in their lifetime. Almost 2000 years later, we're still waiting. And some of us here have our doubts if that day will ever arrive.

Whether or not we are Christians or believers, the period of Lent can be for us a time to reflect on the journeys we have taken in the past, or the journeys we are currently on or the journeys that may be calling us right now from outside or within.

Some of you may already be familiar with what this sense of being called to a journey feels like. The "Access Hollywood" recording of Trump bragging about sexual abuse lit a fire under a lot of us, especially women. The need to go to the Women's March after Trump's inaugural celebration was very strong among many of us here today. Whether you went or not, many of us felt the pull to make a visible protest against his unapologetic display of misogyny.

Others of us remember the buildup of lies and manipulations before the 2003 invasion of Iraq to depose Saddam Hussein and dismantle his weapons of mass destruction that turned out to not exist. Some of us here boarded buses to go down to New York City to protest. Millions of people around the world protested ... to no avail. Yet I remember the compelling feeling that I needed to do something. I was the captain on one of those buses making sure we all got back on again at the end of the march.

The death of Michael Brown gave birth to Black Lives Matter. Not that protests hadn't happened on the same issues before but the outrage caught fire in a new way amplified by social media, especially Twitter. People were called to that journey to fight for justice and against the racist use of police violence.

Some of us felt compelled to journey to New York City in September of 2014 to demand action on climate change. It brought over 300,000 people out. That action organized new networks of people to work on these issues. The coming bug apocalypse we've been reading about may be stimulating others to take up the journey of environmental justice.

So sometimes the call to begin a journey (like the call to go to Standing Rock) comes clearly from the outside and we may have felt the call to act. But other times it comes from the inside in a very personal way.

In my twenties, I didn't take good care of my teeth and I didn't floss. Seemed like a waste of time to me. I was blessed with strong teeth. I didn't get cavities very often, so I thought I didn't have to bother with flossing. Then I got a really nasty toothache - the kind that drills into the center of your brain with intense pain. I didn't know I could feel this much pain and be so miserable. I was in my first month of seminary and had lost my great dental insurance. Still, I went and saw my dentist. He told me I'd need a root canal to save the tooth. And the day he drilled out the inside of the tooth I was ecstatic as the pain abruptly ceased.

And then there was a period of grief. My tooth was now dead and ready to be filled with metal. If I wasn't more careful with my teeth, I could lose more of them. I also found out I had gum recession five years later. If I didn't clean between them better I could lose that root canal and have to have a false tooth. Those moments of truth called me to step up my oral hygiene or suffer the consequences. I've been on a journey to keep my teeth ever since that has included getting a sonic toothbrush and using neem toothpaste that helps my gums better adhere to my teeth.

The call to change my diet has been a similar journey of discovering the foods that bother my digestive tract and choosing to eliminate them rather than suffer intestinal pain. It is a very unpleasant process to stop eating foods I really enjoy but can't stomach. Others of us have reflected on the abuse of animals by the agricultural industry using confined farming practices, and abusive use of hormones and antibiotics and eliminated those foods from their diets. The call to eat local food raised without harmful chemical intervention is good both for the earth, our health and the climate.

And sometimes the call to journey is more spiritually oriented. We might have an experience of the holy, an experience of love that is unlike anything we've ever had. It might feel like something deep inside us has changed. A door opened that we didn't even know was there. So often that experience gets discounted or ignored because it is so unfamiliar to our daily existence. Others may not have had anything like what we've experienced so we put it away. But these powerful spiritual openings tend not to go away. They keep showing up and reminding us of their existence.

I had one such experience playing chess when I was in college. I experienced a kind of transpersonal love I'd never encountered before. I decided to put it to the side after I graduated from college and continue my path into manufacturing engineering. But it didn't go away. And when I was confronted with a reluctance to leave the San Francisco East Bay to move north to take a job that would have been my dream job five years before, the call of that experience became suddenly clear to me. It was a call to pursue UU ministry that was hidden in my heart. I had so effectively suppressed it, I didn't even realize it was there until it broke through as an emotional reluctance to take what before that moment would have been the perfect job.

But once I realized what my heart desired, I said yes. And here I am still on that journey of ministry 34 years later, still saying yes.

So my encouragement to you this month or for the period of Lent this year if you want, is to reflect on the

journey you are on and if there are journeys you feel called towards, either from inside yourself or from the outside. I can guarantee to you, there are plenty of messages coming your way both inwardly and outwardly.

Your challenge is the process of discernment. What am I doing, that is going well and moving me in the right direction. What might I stop doing that is taking me in the wrong direction. And for some of us, there is a new journey that you may be ready to begin. May Lent this year be a time of assessment and reflection as you journey on through this one beautiful and precious life we are living right now.

Benediction

I close with these words by Debra Haffner

We are on a journey.

We didn't plan it.

We didn't have time for the bread to rise.

We may find ourselves in the wilderness, hungry, thirsty,

Doubting that we should have ever come.

But look around:

We are not alone.

It is our journey together:

A journey to our better selves,

A journey to a better world,

A journey to a more promised land.