

12 April 2009 * “How Good News Becomes Gospel Truth”
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A few weekends ago, I visited a dear friend. Beth is UU minister, too, and she spent Saturday morning making a few phone calls to parishioners. I could hear Beth talking in her home study when the doorbell rang. She poked her head out of the study, hand over the phone, and said, “Erika, I think it’s the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Will you please go be nice to them?”

It wasn’t the Jehovah’s Witnesses, after all, but rather a pair of women from the nearby Baptist church, extending an invitation to worship with them. “Thank you,” I responded, “but we’re both church pastors, so we’ll be tied up tomorrow morning.” We wished each other a good day, and in parting the women gave me a brochure: “Bible Essentials for Mankind’s Salvation.” (When Beth got off the phone, I gave her a report of the visit and quipped, “It’s okay – I read the brochure and we don’t need to worry, because it only applies to *mankind’s* salvation.”)

Grammar aside, this thin pamphlet reminds me that we Unitarian Universalists tread a delicate religious line on ordinary Saturdays, let alone the highest holy day of the Christian calendar. Bear with me, please as I try to live out my UU respect for all people who voice their spiritual truth, even as I explain why the theology in this brochure is antithetical to my own faith, and even hurtful.

The Christian tradition holds that Jesus saved humanity through his suffering, death, and resurrection; this is Christianity’s “good news,” or gospel. The pamphlet’s Summary of Salvation says, “Christ has paid for your sins by His death (Christ’s shed blood), burial (Christ descended into hell), and resurrection (Christ rose from the grave to live forever.”¹ There are different versions of this salvation story; the more conservative a Christian is, the more literally he or she interprets this gospel, and its Biblical context: it is God’s inerrant word.

We Unitarian Universalists, on the other hand, hold a different view of Jesus, and of what constitutes “good news,” and even what “salvation” means. We tend to view the Bible as part poetry and myth, part puzzle. We believe scripture – not just Christian scripture, but any religious text – to be “true” in the sense that all powerful stories are true, and have threads of wisdom to guide our human decisions.

In reading the Bible, UU’s and liberal Christians align themselves with scholars of historical criticism, who sift through the shadowy hints in ancient texts to hear not just the stories, but also the distinct voices of the *storytellers*. We believe that the Bible was written by very human hands, from very different perspectives.

Take today, for example. The Bible as we know it tells the Easter story from four perspectives; Jesus does and says different things in each gospel. The Jesus in Mark and Matthews hangs, bloody, from the cross, crying, “Why have you forsaken me?” (just as David does in Psalm 22), while the Jesus in Luke is more composed, saying, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

When fit together, the four canonical gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – produce more yawning gaps in the space-time continuum than they do tidy stacks of consistency... and that’s just *those* four. There are more ancient texts describing the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth – some of which we have copies of, and others of which we’re quite certain exist but haven’t, so far, surfaced in corroboration.²

Here’s the thing about these gospels, these records of the good news of Jesus’ ministry and teachings: first, most were written at least a generation or two after Jesus died; it’s barely feasible that the authors known as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John knew Jesus, or were eye-witnesses to his life. Second, their stories were written for particular audiences; with clear agendas to fulfill, each author embroidered and embellished the sayings and qualities of Jesus that most strengthened the text.

Staying within the bounds of historical accuracy, here’s what we can say definitively about Jesus’s life and death: Jesus of Nazareth was a real person. We know that there was something magnetically compelling about this man; his presence and his teachings drew throngs of supporters, and raised enough concern among the Roman authorities that they put him to death.

Let’s talk about the world to which Jesus introduced new sensibilities. The Roman Empire was a world fractured by ethnicity, language, and social class: you were a Levite, a Pharisee, a Samaritan, a slave, a woman. It was a brutal world, “saturated with cruelty,” in the words of one sociologist.³ Then consider Jesus of Nazareth, who sought after people who had been forgotten and cast out, and told them they were loved. He told simple parables that exposed the folly of those with power, and reminding the powerless of their own authority. He preached a gospel of compassion and care, breaking stale social boundaries and bringing “a new conception of humanity” to the world.

Christianity didn’t begin as a *religion*, one scholar reminds us/Shaye I.D. Cohen.⁴ Rather, it began

as the movement of people around a single charismatic teacher... What began as a[n]... assembly of followers of a holy man turns into... a Jewish sect, a group... which now has interpreted the life, teachings and death of its holy man somehow as having cosmic significance, as having meaning for all time, not just for the specific moment, but somehow affecting God's relationship... with the whole world.

In other words, the message of Jesus “revitalized” his world, and awoke a wake of followers who refused to let go of that message, even when their leader was killed for its radicalism. Is it any wonder, then, that – in the words of Biblical scholar Marcus Borg⁵ – “the followers of Jesus continued to experience Jesus as ‘a living reality’ after his death”?

It’s not hard for me to find “good news” in the life of Jesus; through his ministry of “boundless love,”⁶ he fed people who were hungry to know that the poor and the outcast mattered. It’s harder for me to find the “good news” in his death; I will never believe that his death was fated or pre-ordained. But I echo the words of a UU colleague, who finds good news in imagining that “God...was standing by with the kick-[butt] Response of all time so that we would never doubt that Love will triumph over violence, hatred, ignorance and fear.”⁷

Was God’s “kick-[butt] Response” the physical reincarnation of a dead body? I don’t believe so. I simply think that the Holy works through people who are awakened by the call to love, compassion, and justice. I give the name “God” to people who are awake and living the call to love, compassion, and justice.

Unfortunately, that Easter message has been lost, or at least obscured. And it happened quickly.

In the two centuries after Jesus died, Christianity had grown into a diverse but thriving religious movement. Even then, people held different opinions about who Jesus was, and how to best follow his example. It might be more accurate to say that there were *Christianities*, in that some “Followers of the Way”⁸ (as they called themselves) emphasized the wisdom and message of Jesus, while others become focused on his godliness, his death and resurrection, “and the saving power of that death and resurrection.”⁹

These two (or more) prongs of belief clashed, sometimes bitterly and sometimes violently, up until the year 325, when Emperor Constantine made a fatefully savvy geopolitical-religious move: in order to unify an unruly empire, Constantine called together the Council of Nicea, and established Christian orthodoxy and doctrine. That Council defined “salvation,” Christian dogma, and Jesus himself, for millennia of followers.

This, perhaps, is why Easter isn’t *that* significant to us, as UU’s, or why we cloak it in metaphors about hope and renewal. Our understanding of salvation, and of Jesus himself, are at spiritual odds with what most of the Christian world is celebrating today. Our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors didn’t prevail at the Council of Nicea; they haven’t bullied out the competing beliefs about Jesus. But they refused to be silenced. They refused to profess a belief in Jesus as supernatural god; refused to consider a hell, where the condemned and sinful are punished.

I'm a Unitarian Universalist – I chose Unitarian Universalism – because I can't and won't be part of a religious faith that draws lines between “worthy” and “unworthy;” I will not consider myself part of a religion in which some are considered “inside” a circle of grace, and others are relegated “outside.” I believe that, as my colleague the Rev. Davidson Loehr says, *salvation* is when you pause to assess your life – the decisions you made, the way you treat others, the values you've demonstrated – and say, *If I only had one shot at this life, I'm glad I did it the way I did.*

May you, in this Easter season, discover “good news” in how you live, how you love. And may it bless you. Amen.

Endnotes

1. The pamphlet is from the West Coast Baptist Church in Vista, CA.
2. The most conspicuous of these is “Q.”
3. Rodney Stark. See www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/why/starktheology.html
4. Cohen is Samuel Ungerleider Professor of Judaic Studies and Professor of Religious Studies, Brown University. See www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/why/legitimization.html
5. For example, see www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/religion/jesus_3-28.html
6. Victoria Weinstein, on her Facebook status update, April 10, 2009.
7. Weinstein.
8. The name that the earliest Christians gave themselves.
9. Holland Lee Hendrix. See <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/first/diversity.html>