

The Sound of the Sacred

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City, MD, Oct. 11, 2020

Imagine the dark, night sky riddled with the light of twinkling stars lightyears away from us, full moon reflecting on the still, dark water of the ocean, waves crashing on the cooled sand. That awe filled scene that may, in a striking way, connect us to the sacred; that may offer a chance to engage with and listen to the holy. The holy that says, “There will always be beauty in the world. There will always be a sacred presence. You are never alone.” That is the awesome. But what about the mundane?

What about the mundane click of shoes on the sidewalk, the sound of the holy saying, “Keep going. Keep moving forward. Don’t give up.”

What about the aroma of a cup of coffee, the first sip of the warm liquid, the holy saying, “it’s a brand new day.”

While the awesome is spectacular and may overwhelm us with a sense of the sacred – whether a forest draped in greenery, insects peeking through the undergrowth, or New York City, an intricate maze of towering architecture – the daily mundane offers this as well; the mundane touches us at each moment; the mundane is readily available. We need simply shift our focus and notice the holy all around us. To listen to the holy speaking to us moment to moment, offering sustenance, strength, guidance, and reprieve. Frederick Buechner writes, “there is no chance thing through which God cannot speak.”¹

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What is God? What is the holy? This may change for each and every one of us! Perhaps science. Perhaps nature. Perhaps human agency. Perhaps Goddess. Perhaps Allah. Perhaps God, as it is for Frederick Buechner. Perhaps Spirit of life, Spirit of love.

In our Unitarian Universalist faith, when our sacred speaks, we hear love, inspiration, compassion. This is what the holy is telling us. This may pose a stark contrast to those other voices often whispering in our ears! Perhaps voices of failure, of not good enough, of self-criticism. Perhaps we are simply struggling with day-to-day life. A body, cloaked in a refrain of criticism! A body, a mind, offered a choice, instead, to listen to the holy. A choice that may take time and practice. Instead of this negative refrain, perhaps we can hear the holy in a song, the sound of instruments harmonizing with one another, reminding us of the intricate unity of all creation. Or hearing the holy as ants scatter to rebuild a fallen home, telling us that what has been destroyed can be rebuilt. We can listen to that which builds us up, not to that which tears us down.

In the poem we read earlier, Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes asks questions of both the awesome and the mundane. In all of his inquiries, he found God. He asked the blossoming tree, “who are you?” The response? I am God. He asked the sea, “who are you?” and found that it was God living within him. He asked his troubles, “who are you?” and it was God as his own broken heart. He asked of the mundane, and, in return, found sacred connections with his God.²

Throughout a tapestry of cultures, religions, theologies, and eras, people have listened to the voice of the holy. Not only in profound times of awe, but also in the mundane, the day-to-day. People have listened to this sacred voice that is always present. To make sense of things, to understand life, to gain sustenance, to persevere. People ask questions and receive answers. While everyone hears different

² Oct. 2020 *Soul Matters* Packet

words, everyone finds ways to persist. Nothing spectacular or necessarily awe-filled, but a voice of the holy that keeps us going, that gets us through our day. Let's explore some theologies.

Humanists hear the holy saying, "You can do this." Humanists believe that humans – all of us – need to do the work to make a change in the world. God will not make change, we will. To humanists the holy may simply be human agency. Their God says, "this is for you to fix – and you can fix it." This God cries out for social justice! Imploring individuals to make the decision to better the world. Urging us to the streets of DC, marching and chanting with signs raised.

The God of process theologians says, "things can and will get better." In process theology, each person has their own personal connection to their holy – to their God. God is consistently working to make the world a better place. God is not all-powerful, but God does have the power of persuasion. God works with each individual to help guide them towards their best decision possible. When a process theist reaches out to their holy, they hear guidance towards a better life, they hear what they can do to continue to build a better life. Theologian Monica Coleman writes, "God is the one who offers possibilities to the world, urging us to choose the paths that lead to a vision of common good."³ The refrain - "Things can and will get better."

Religious naturalists find meaning in nature. To a religious naturalist, God says, "see me and feel me when the grass becomes moist with dew, when the warmth of the sunlight peeks through the clouds." God urges a connection with the natural, a holy connection with the earth and all that the earth provides.

Black liberation theologians hear God say, "I am with the marginalized. See me in the oppressed." Black liberation theology is a theology primarily of black folks who identify as men. James Cone writes that

³ *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* Monica Coleman pg 8

until we see the suffering of the black body the same as we see the suffering of Jesus, there is no true understanding of Christianity. Until then, there is no escape from the chains of slavery or the suffering that stems white supremacy.⁴ God is in the suffering black body, God says, “see me in the oppressed.”

What does God say when all seems desolate? In womanist theology, God says, “even if it feels like there is no way, we will make a way.” This is a theology primarily of black folks who identify as women, individuals experiencing racism and sexism simultaneously. Individuals who experience immense hardship and may feel at times as if there is no way forward. In womanist theology, God works with women to find a way possible to keep going. God is there with them, in the struggle and in the healing.⁵⁶ “Even if it feels like there is no way, we will make a way.”

While there are such a wide array of indigenous religions and theologies that is it impossible to summarize in a simple word, many indigenous theologies stress a connection and harmony with the natural world and humans. There are often important practices around community connection. The holy speaks of harmony, of sacred connection⁷. We heard in our Time for All Ages about Father Sun and Sister Rainbow of the Lakota people.⁸ The holy says, “we – everything in the natural world – we are all one.”

What about our own Unitarian Universalist theology? What does the holy say to us? Stemming from the ideas of Universal Salvation, from the goodness of God and the goodness of humanity, when we reach out to our holy – and “holy” may mean a different thing entirely to each and every one of us! But, when

⁴ *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* James Cone

⁵ *Sisters in the Wilderness* Delores S. Williams

⁶ *Making a Way Out of No Way* Monica Coleman

⁷ <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/indigenous-religions>

⁸ *Greet the Dawn the Lakota Way* S. D. Nelson

we reach out to whatever we find to be holy, what pours into each of our ears is that “You are good, you are whole, and you are loved.”

And so we explore this wealth of theologies and this idea that the holy is speaking these refrains each day, each and every day. Not only when we gather in sacred community, or when we are overcome with an awesome site, or engaged in a sacred ritual, but in that morning coffee, in those scurrying ants, in our own human agency or the sacred in a dew-damp blade of grass.

And this is intentional! This is a choice, a commitment to listen to the holy all around us. Spirit of Love and Life let us be reminded of this! Who do we intend to be? Who are we? What can we become? What gives life meaning? Listening to love, to inspiration, to what allows us to persevere. We spoke earlier of being pulled down under a cloak of despair, of self-criticism, of anxiety, some folks overcoming oppressions. Right at that time when we are hearing so much negative, we can gather strength from the holy’s gentle whisper around all of us.

Listening to love instead of listening to hate

Listening to what builds us up instead of what knocks us down

Listening to that which guides us towards a better life instead of living the status quo

Listening to our own human agency!

When we listen, we internalize. When we are repeatedly reminded of love, our own goodness, of the goodness of the world, we become this. When we hear “You can do this!” or “Things can and will get better” or “You are good, you are loved, and you are whole.” When the mundane becomes holy, the holy never leaves us. When the mundane becomes holy, we are reminded of the sacred even when all else seems lost. When we ask the sacred these questions that dictate how we live in the world – when

these questions and their answers become a daily ritual – we grow. We find beauty. We find safety and stability. We find courage to keep going. Beuchner writes, again with an acknowledgement of gendered language. “God says he is with us on our journeys. He says he has been with us since each of our journeys began. Listen for him.”⁹ Listen for the holy – the holy is there.

I have a story from a friend in seminary of which I’ve been given permission to share. My friend – we’ll call him Tom – was struggling, and yet he experienced the holy in a way he will never forget. His own health was in question, and that very afternoon he heard his sister had a concerning conversation with her own doctor. He spent the rest of the afternoon helping her schedule referral appointments to specialists in the area. That evening, he stepped out of his house to pick up dinner for his family. On his drive to the grocery store he turned on his music – his opera – and in those moments, time nearly stood still. In the fluctuating, intermingling notes, the intricate mix of voices rising and falling - he heard the holy – he felt the holy was floating through the very music he was listening to. This voice spoke to him through the music – giving him a sense of peace, and an affirmation that all would be well. In hearing the holy in the mundane, he gained a sense of peace. Of calm. He gained the strength to keep going.

I know I have had my own personal experiences out in nature, sometimes when things are full of awe and sometimes not! A light blue bush in my mother’s yard that calls to me in a time when I need prayer. A rock that I pick up and wonder – what has this rock seen in the countless years it has passed through the history of this great planet? This connects me to me and what I find sacred.

Every day we are surrounded by the mundane. The mundane that says, “I am with the marginalized.” That says, “Even if it feels like there is no way, we will make a way.” That says, “See me in the clouds!” That says, “We are all one.”

⁹ Oct. 2020 *Soul Matters* Packet

What is the spirit calling us to do? It calls to us in times of hope and despair, in times of service and love, when we need to heal our own brokenness, when we need to laugh and to sing just as much as when we suffer.

I wonder, what can my morning cup of coffee offer me tomorrow morning? What wisdom can I obtain from the clouds? What is peaking out, calling to me, as I run along the sidewalk pavement around my apartment complex?

Things get hard – things are hard! – and the holy is here. The holy is always here. Throughout a pandemic. Throughout a divisive election – no matter what the results may be. Through a racial uprising and a climate crisis. No matter what, rocks persist. Music persists. We have that option to listen to love whispering in our ears. To find a theological answer to life's questions. Listen. We can hear it.

May it be so, and Amen