

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Time to Wake Up!

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CALL TO WORSHIP

The Promise of Easter

Eugene B. Navias, adapted

Who is to say what Easter is that we should celebrate this day and sing for joy?
Easter is promises remembered and fulfilled of death and life and all that lies therein.
It is the promise of the planets in their turn, the infinite fidelity of stars and suns and seasons.
Easter is winter promising to Spring that earth shall yield its death to life again.
It is the growth promise of the dormant seed, the barren meadow and the naked bough.
It is the birth promise of all creatures which have life and breath and being.
Easter is ancient sorrows stilled and hopes remembered.
It is the memory of Jesus dying in Jerusalem.
It is the promise that the heart shall be reborn as hatred dies and love is given birth.
It is the promise that the mind shall be renewed as ignorance is lost to newfound truth.
Easter is the promise to everyone who journeys from the death of prejudice to the life of understanding.
Easter is promises to everyone who casts away the errors of [ignorance and arrogance] to dwell within the light.
...Easter is of earthly promises and human hopes ...
A song of life which springs from death, a joyous human song.
Forever Alleluia sung.

READING

Born Again
Lynn Ungar

Let's be clear about this:
It isn't the same as being sick
and getting better. It isn't
changing your mind at the last minute
or pushing away from the brink.
The only way to be born again
is to die. The Phoenix doesn't just
go up in a blaze of glory. It
feels the fire lick up and sizzle
every feather, until each quill becomes
a column of flame carried straight to the core.
Whatever the legend of re-birth, there is always
time in the fire, under the ground,
hanging on the cross or the tree.

Don't skip over that part of the story.

If you would be reborn, you have to die.
But what then? After the dying
how are we to rise again into new life?
The earth, the hero, the god, you and I-
how does any of us find our way back
from the Valley of the Shadow?

The same way we die:
Walk into the light.

Time to Wake Up!

Amy and Shay have shared beautiful stories this morning. I want to share one more, one I know some of you have read either recently or long ago when you were younger, a story that, like the two we've heard, is part of a larger cycle of stories. In this story, two children and their uncle and a wicked witch and a horse and the driver of that horse (so, an odd collection of people) are stranded in a dead and barren place. They're lost in the dark and the cold and they are anxious and afraid. The story says:

In the darkness something was happening at last. A voice had begun to sing. Sometimes it seemed to come from all directions at once. Its lower notes were deep enough to be the voice of the earth herself. There were no words. There was hardly even a tune. But it was, beyond comparison, the most beautiful noise ever heard. It was so beautiful they could hardly bear it.

This comes from C.S. Lewis. It's the story of how the magical world called Narnia was made, when the great lion Aslan stepped onto the earth and started to sing. C.S. Lewis was not the first nor the only person to imagine the creation of the world by music and by words. This happens a lot in mythology all around the world, and in scriptures of the world, including Christian scripture. In John's gospel the entire cosmos begins with the Word, spoken into eternity, into infinity, when there were yet no ears to even hear it, no animals or people or planets to receive it. *In the beginning was the Word and then there was light*, and then water and land and wind and trees to catch the music of the wind, and even now the Word and the music and the light all echo still, infusing this world that we know with meaning (according to one story), or with magic (according to another).

Often in the spring, especially when the spring comes cold and hard, like this year, I think of Narnia, and almost always at Easter.

From C.S. Lewis: *The music was so beautiful they could hardly bear to hear it. And suddenly the voice was joined by other voices; more than you could count, in harmony, but far higher up the scale: cold, tingling, silvery voices. And the blackness overhead, all at once, was blazing with stars. They didn't come out gently one by one, as they do on a summer evening. One moment there had been nothing but darkness; next moment a thousand, single stars, constellations, and planets.*

Far away, the sky began to turn grey. A light wind, very fresh, began to stir. The sky, in that one place, grew slowly and steadily paler. You could see shapes of hills standing up dark against it. All the time the Voice went on singing. It rose and rose, till all the air was shaking with it. And just as it swelled to the mightiest and most glorious sound it had yet produced, the sun arose [and] laughed for joy as it came up.

And as the Lion walked and sang the valley grew green with grass. It spread out from the Lion like a pool. It ran up the sides of the little hills like a wave, creeping up the distant mountains, making that young world every moment softer. [Tiny bristles sprang up everywhere and in moments they were mighty trees.] Far overhead from beyond the veil of blue sky which hid them

now the stars sang again; a pure, cold, difficult music, and the deepest, wildest voice they had ever heard was saying: "Narnia, Narnia, Narnia, awake. Love. Think. Speak. Be walking trees.

[This to the beings who were being made into people:]

Be walking trees.

Be talking beasts.

Be divine waters."

“It’s time to wake up!” says the lion (not exactly but pretty much). “Get on up! The snow is melting into music and the music is spreading into everything and you have slept in darkness long enough. You have dwelt in fear and silence, in apathy, denial, greed and violence, long enough. You have lived with sorrow long enough.”

No one really knows how everything began, before the stars were made, and planets, before infinite nothing exploded somehow into infinite everything. No one knows what happened at dawn on earth’s first day, but when spring comes on in Minnesota, in years like this when we go from cold and barren one day into green and warm the next, ice and snow on one day, mud and crocuses the next, when you see the mallard pair in the stream out here, swimming with snow on their backs on Easter morning, you could almost believe in early April, just when we can bear no more, that in the night while we’re asleep, a singing cat, a lion, will walk through our neighborhoods and fields, and call us to wake up. Sometimes in Minnesota the spring has to come like that or it won’t come at all.

In this story as in many, many others, the world is made, the world is offered, not only as a gift, but as a promise, and not freely. There’s a kind of reciprocal understanding, that those to whom it’s given, those who dwell within the magic country, the lovely earth, the animals and plants and people, will guard it; will cherish it and cherish one another; that they’ll live rightly; that we’ll love bravely, with compassion and wisdom, dignity, imagination and joy, with gratitude infusing everything, as befits sacred beings born of music and of light – gratitude like sunshine shining out of us, gratitude like rain in spring, washing through us and among us. That’s the reciprocal promise from when the world was new and we first were born: wide-awake-ness is our end of this magic-sacred bargain called life.

How far back can you remember? Humans have short memories; unlike the other animals and trees, we forget and break our promises. We can’t remember any singing lions, and as we age we forget about enchantment altogether, and sanctity, humility, bravery, perspective. The self gets bigger, ever more needy and demanding, more skeptical and wary, and the world beyond the self - beyond the border of our skin, or our experience, beyond any kind of border - the world out there seems somehow less important, incidental, secondary. We get weary, we get tired, disappointed and discouraged. We forget to keep the promises we started with, to be simply grateful and amazed, to stay enchanted, stay awake. When we’re awake we notice things – beauty all around, and brokenness, all around. When we’re wide awake, not drifting in complacency or apathy or cynicism or denial – when we’re wide awake and brave enough to notice things, we can keep our vows.

This week marks the 50th anniversary of the speech that came to be known as “the Mountaintop speech,” given by Martin Luther King on April 3, 1968, in Memphis in a church packed with people in the midst of a campaign for the rights of sanitation workers there. Five days before armed and violent white protesters had attacked a peaceful march, and white police cracked down on the marchers, scattering them to hospitals and jails. King flew back to Tennessee and that night in the church he looked at all these people – hundreds of poor people, exhausted, bloody “garbage men,” who had marched that week each wearing a placard that said “I AM A MAN,” because this campaign was not only about race but about poverty across race, a deeper, more complex indictment of interlocking systems of capitalism, colonialism and militarism. And he was weary too by then. This campaign felt heavier, and harder. He was not sure that they could win. He began to talk about Moses, moving with his people toward the promised land – a fitting scripture passage for the spring. “I may not get there with you,” he said, in what 24 hours later became the most haunting, most apocalyptic passage in that speech. “I may not get there with you,” he said, but “I’ve been to the mountaintop,” and he told them he could see the promise of justice in the far-off distance, American justice - and as he spoke it was clear that he could see it in their faces, the faces of the people, and their resolve then strengthened his, reawakened his. You can hear this if you listen to the recording: their light, their love of truth and freedom, their spirit and determination reawakened his that night, and he could see that they were ready, completely willing, poor as they were, to take up and carry forward what he called “a dangerous unselfishness.” He told them, “Only when it’s dark enough can you see the stars,” and he called their strike another step on the journey from “the dark and desolate valley to the sunlit path of justice.” The promised land is not a place, not somewhere that we come from or somewhere that we’re going. It is a way of traveling together, awake and fierce and faithful all together. It is a promise that we make and keep for one another. And you can say it ended there and then, when on the next day King was murdered – crucified – but I say there are signs of resurrection everywhere you look, especially recently: all these signs of life and love and righteous rage and hope, this devotion to a dangerous unselfishness.

In the ancient Easter story, the women who loved Jesus come early to his tomb, in the dark. Everything they loved and everything they lived for is destroyed. Their teacher has been murdered and his teaching seems irrelevant and weak against the power of the Roman state. Their friends are scattered and divided. The women come in abject mourning, looking for the body, to anoint it, but the gardener – or angel – says, “He isn’t here.” And suddenly they see they have a choice: to wander in confusion and despair, clinging hard to shards of grief - or waking up. No more sleeping through the watch, no more following like sheep someone else’s lead, no more wallowing in bitterness or disbelief or sorrow. If anything of their teacher, any scrap at all of that living testament of love and justice, radical love and radical justice - any concern for the poor, for the young, for the old, for the sick, for the stranger, for the ones on the margins, the ones without voice – if anything at all was to be rescued from the tomb and lifted up and carried on, they would have to do that. They themselves would have to tell those stories, do that work, claim that “dangerous unselfishness” not as a one-time action, but as a way of being. They saw, as the sun was rising in the morning and the day was coming on, that they themselves would have to be the agents, the embodiment, of any resurrection, because there is no other kind of resurrection. What came to life, back to life, that day was their own imagination, the renewal of their old promise to say yes to love and yes to life, regardless of the cost.

They said, *we are the ones we've been waiting for.*

They said, *now the ears of my ears awake, now the eyes of my eyes are opened; I who have died am alive again today, and this is the sun's birthday, this is the birth day of life and love...*

Something within them, the echoing memory of their beloved friend, and also something deeply planted all along like a little dormant seed inside them, whispered, sang, shouted, "It's time to get up! Shake off your slumber, lean into your sorrow and transform it. Sit tall, stand up, wake up, stay woke. Life and love are calling you out as they have from the very beginning, and you have promises to keep."

From Lynn Ungar, Unitarian Universalist:

*Let's be clear about this:
Being born again isn't the same as being sick
and getting better. The only way to be born again
is to die.*

Don't skip over that part of the story.

*If you would be reborn, you have to die
[to your old ways, to your old despondencies.]
But what then?
The earth, the hero, the god, you and I-
how does any of us find our way back
from the Valley of the Shadow?*

*The same way we die:
Walk into the light.*

We had a call this week from Isaiah, the statewide interfaith organization with whom we've partnered in the past on social justice work and public witness, most recently last year, when this congregation joined dozens of others in Minnesota and hundreds nationwide to become a Sanctuary Church. We were alarmed by the rising threats against undocumented immigrants, especially against young people and children; we were alarmed by the raids here and elsewhere, rising detentions, deportations and splintering of families. After many congregational conversations all last winter and last spring, we said that we were ready, and since then we have marched; we've shown up at the capitol and at local mosques when they've been attacked or threatened; we've supported other congregations who have taken people in; a number of you have been trained as rapid response volunteers and as courtroom watchers when neighbors are detained. This week, the sanctuary coordinator from Isaiah called and asked us, "Are you ready to be ready?" Our Sanctuary Committee gathered Wednesday with members of our Board, and they said yes. We don't know yet what that means, or when or whether anyone is ever going to need to come here, but we said we're ready to be ready. We made a promise, not just the promise last year to be a Sanctuary Church, but somewhere along the way we made a deeper, older, underlying, overarching promise as a people, to side with love and side with life, to stay

open, grateful, and amazed, as if life itself were a kind of promise made to us, to keep and guard and cherish with as much compassion, dignity and joy as we can muster, to answer life with life and love with love.

The message of Easter is older and more primal and more joyful even than its sources in the bible: The snow is melting into music and the music is spreading into everything and we have slept in darkness long enough. We have nothing to lose in this life – and everything to lose, because that's part of the original bargain, part of the promise: that we're only passing through, and each person only once, and time's a-flying. It's time to wake up and greet the shining morning. It's time to spend our lives in love.

BENEDICTION*Wendell Berry (adapted)*

Come to the window, look out, and see
 the valley turning green in remembrance
 of all springs past and to come, the woods
 perfecting with immortal patience
 the leaves that are the work of all of time...
 the river quivering under the morning's breath
 like the touched skin of a horse,

Come to the window, look out, and you will see
 also the shadow cast upon it by fire, the war
 that lights its way by burning the earth.

Come to your windows, people of the world,
 look out at whatever you see wherever you are,
 and you will see dancing upon it that shadow.
 You will see that your place, wherever it is,
 your house, your garden, your shop, your forest, your farm,
 bears the shadow of its destruction by war and by greed and by plunder.

Every household of the world is at their mercy,
 the households of the farmer and the otter and the owl
 are at their mercy.
 Greed is the hatred of mercy.
 Their pockets jingle with the small change of the poor.
 Their power is the willingness to destroy
 everything for money, which is power,

... which is ashes sown by the wind.

Leave your windows and go out, people of the world,
 go into the streets, go into the fields, go into the woods
 and along the streams. Go together, go alone.
 Say no to the Lord of War which is Money, which is violence and greed.
 Say no by saying yes
 to the air, to the earth, to the trees,
 yes to the grasses, to the rivers, to the birds
 and the animals and every living thing,
 yes to the small houses, yes to the children.

Yes.