

“A Year for Authority”

Sermon by Jim Foti

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When I was a kid, I hated New Year’s. New Year’s was the death of all things Christmas. Christmas Eve and Christmas Day were great – long, gatherings of my extended family, piles of home-made food and, of course, lots of presents. But as the last days of the old year ticked by, all those things that brought me joy began to peter out, or sputtered to a halt. The toys lost their novelty with remarkable speed. The three-dozen sugar cookie was tiresome and a bit stale. And New Year’s Eve itself, to my young and somewhat puritanical mind, was the exact opposite of Christmas. Instead of presents, there were none. Instead of food, there was booze. Instead of a religious and sacred holiday, there was the turning of a secular calendar. Instead of abundant Christmas carols, there was only one song, with weird words, and you only sang it at midnight. And instead of all the generations coming together in celebration and love, the generations went back to their segregated lives – the oldest people stayed home, the youngest people got sent to bed, and the adults in the middle went out and drank too much champagne. Yuck. New Year’s Eve was really the slaughter of innocence.

Now, as you may know, on the first Sunday after Christmas, it is the tradition of this church community to take note of a Christian feast day known as the Slaughter of the Innocents. (that’s innocents as in the plural of innocent) If you haven’t spent much time at other Unitarian Universalist congregations, I can tell you that this tradition is an

uncommon one, to say the least. My understanding of this tradition at Unity is that it's meant to punctuate the end of the Christmas season, to cause us to pause and take a serious look ahead. It is also the tradition of this church to have monthly themes. Today is the first day of our month on the topic of "authority," and authority is a dominant theme in the biblical story about the slaughter of the innocents that we just heard. A third tradition I'll be exploring today is the turning of the new year, a year that's barely ten hours old and is still itself quite innocent. It is a year that will ask a lot of us, a year that will ask us to claim our authority.

Let me start with the biblical story about the slaughter of the innocents. It's a story that can be hard to listen to. As we heard in the reading from Matthew's Gospel, the baby Jesus, from when he was first cradled in his mother's arms, was seen as extremely threatening to those in power. They knew that there would come a time when Jesus would not only question their authority but deny it altogether, when he would encourage others to look beyond the kings and their earthly laws and instead toward God.

An alternative telling of the story of the innocents is offered by the Portuguese writer Jose Saramago. In his Pulitzer-prize winning novel, "The Gospel According to Jesus Christ," Saramago writes the story from the perspective of Joseph. Joseph is working as a carpenter when he overhears a couple of soldiers having a conversation. The soldiers are talking about an order they have received, an order they suspect has been handed

down from their king. It's an order to kill all the children under the age of three in the city of Bethlehem. Joseph is suddenly consumed with anguish. He fears for the life of the newborn son he loves so much. He quickly leaves for the cave just outside town where he and Mary and the baby have been living. He arrives at the cave and tells Mary to pack up their things. But before they're able to flee, they hear screams from the village and realize that the soldiers have already begun to carry out the order. Mary and Joseph's family manages to stay hidden until the soldiers are done. And among the infants in Bethlehem, the baby Jesus alone survives.

A bit later, in Saramago's telling, an angel visits Mary. Mary has grown somewhat accustomed to visits from angels. But this time is different. The angel tells Mary that Joseph has committed a terrible crime. Mary is baffled – what crime? The angel explains that Joseph, by focusing on saving his own son, neglected the opportunity to warn the other parents of what was coming. The angel deems Joseph's crime unforgivable and insists that Joseph had the responsibility to act to try to save the other innocents in Bethlehem. The angel's visit leaves Mary heartbroken.

As free religious people, we are able to hear these two versions of the story of the innocents, the Gospel version and Saramago's version, without having to choose between them, without having to deem one to be true and one to be false. We are able to embrace them both, and learn from them, and see what they stir in our hearts. Individually and collectively, we have the authority to define what for us is scripture, to

discern which words connect us to the larger and the beyond, which words influence the way we live our lives.

By determining what scripture means for us, we are following in some very big footsteps – the footsteps of some of the most important theologians in western history. As part of my seminary training, I just finished up a class on the history of Christian theology, so now I think I'm expert. The class confirmed for me the role that each individual's lens, each individual's sense of the world, plays in determining what sources of authority one accepts for doctrine and faith.

The class had several lectures about Augustine, the early Christian saint. Augustine had a tremendous influence on church thinking. But that's not because he sat down one day in the fourth century and tried to take a clear-eyed, objective look at the scriptures. Rather, Augustine was on a quest as an individual tormented by his own guilt, guilt over what he defined as his sins. Christianity was the faith of Augustine's mother, but Christianity only began to make sense for Augustine later in his adulthood – only after the wild days of his youth had passed, only after he tried a Persian religion called Manicheism, and only after he accepted that the stories of the Bible could be read as allegories rather than as the literal truth. It was a long journey, one that started because of Augustine's personal, internal struggles. I'm telling a very abridged version of his story, of course. But one outcome of Augustine's decades-long effort to come to terms with his own sin was for Augustine to declare all of humanity trapped by sin, just

like he was. It was a theology of “miserable loves company” on the grandest possible scale. Augustine then took his authority a step further and decided that maybe he wasn’t among the miserable. He declared that some humans ultimately would be saved from sin and death, some humans would not, and those decisions would be made by God. One can guess what side Augustine imagined himself to be on – the side of the chosen, the side of the saved. The same side that, a thousand years later, Martin Luther would imagine himself to be on.

Now, I grew up Catholic, and in my Sunday school, Martin Luther and the Reformation did not exist. Do not ask, do not tell. In fact, when I was a little kid, I thought my Lutheran neighbors belonged to a church founded by Martin Luther *King*. Today, thanks to seminary and a few other things, I know that Unitarian Universalists owe Luther and other reformers much gratitude for moving Christianity into richer, more diverse territory, and the Western world owes Luther for advancing the cause of critical thinking. But as I sat in my theology class this past semester, I was struck by some similarities between the path of Luther and the path of Augustine. Luther, it turns out, also found himself personally plagued by sin and by insecurities about his own salvation. It was this problem, this very personal problem, that started him on a path of redefining authority and theology. It set him on a quest for a way to live in greater harmony with his idea of God. Luther boldly rejected the traditional authority handed down through the centuries in the Roman Catholic Church. The church placed authority in the hands of bishops and popes who were seen as successors to the original apostles. Luther

instead deemed the Bible to be the ultimate and sole authority, the most direct path to God.

But for Luther, only a certain kind of Bible would do. Luther sought out a translation of the Bible different from the one endorsed by the Catholic church, and he deemed that translation to be the true and authentic one. He proceeded to interpret that Bible in ways that supported his belief that humans could only be saved by grace and not by the good works that they do. Through grace, through God's undeserved mercy, some humans would be saved from death, others humans would not, and everything was decided by God. Luther, like Augustine, imagined himself on the side of the saved, and he wound up there because of the choices he made about authority. Or, one might argue, he made choices about authority in a way that reinforced his own salvation.

A quick example: even with Luther's preferred translation of the Bible, his theology ran into a problem in a New Testament book known as the Epistle of James. That's because in James, there's a verse that clearly and directly contradicts Luther's belief that humans are saved by God's grace alone. That verse says that humans can be saved by grace *and* their good works. There was no way to translate around it – that's what it said. And so what did Luther do? He discredited James as an authority. Now, I want to mention that Luther can be quite satisfying to read. His writing is clear and lively and often biting – he referred to the Epistle of James as the Epistle of Straw, I think because straw was easy to burn. But Luther's logic in discrediting James is lacking. Luther argued that James' view

on salvation was not valid because it was not in full agreement with other statements in the Bible – in other words, it wasn't valid because Luther didn't agree with it.

Whether or not you believe that Luther was divinely inspired, he was still a human being, with the human tendency to favor one's self and one's view of the world. Those of us here in modern times know what it's like to seek out sources that reinforce our view of the world and to discredit those that don't – people who work in the media, for example, know that we're more likely to seek out news from news organizations that seem to share our values. We choose to give such sources more authority – just as Luther did, just as people always have done.

And today, on this first day of the new year, on this day that is also an observance of the slaughter of the innocents, we can make many choices about our sources of authority. We can take Matthew's Gospel as the literal truth, as Luther would have done, or we can take it as an allegory, as Augustine might have done. We can turn to various Christian traditions, which say that 3,000 innocents were killed, or 64,000, or 144,000. Or we can turn to other analysts, who say that, in a village the size of Bethlehem two thousand years ago, the number of children under the age of three would have been as few as six. We can turn to scholars of history, most of whom find no evidence that the slaughter took place at all. We can turn to Jose Saramago and see what truths we find for ourselves in the words he has woven together. We ourselves, together and as

individuals, must do much disciplined discerning about our sources of authority, whether that source is an interesting new website or a leader of the Reformation.

And today, on this first day of 2012, we look ahead to a year of choices about asserting our own authority. As I noted earlier, this new year is not even a day old; it is full of promise, and it is also at risk. Like a child, it is waiting for our influence. It is waiting for us to claim our authority.

It can be hard for any one person to feel as though he or she has any authority on this noisy, crowded planet. If we exclaim, who will hear? If we raise our hand, who will notice? And how much can any one person, or one congregation, influence an entire year?

But if we are mindful, if we open our eyes, we can see people all around us claiming their authority, claiming their right to shape the world.

We can look back at Augustine – one person, one person who went from youthful hell-raiser to a father of the Christian church. We can look back at Martin Luther – one person, one person who went from quiet monk to a shaper of the Christian world. But we don't need to look back centuries or even decades. We only need to look back to last year, the year that just ended at midnight.



That's because 2011 saw countless people around the globe claiming their authority as never before. Time magazine's person of the year for 2011 was not a president or a business person or a pope. The person of the year was The Protester. Not a specific protester, but rather the idea and importance of protesters all over. The everyday people in Tunisia and Egypt and Syria and other countries who have claimed their authority in the public square, leading to greater awareness of repressions throughout the Arab world. Closer to home, we saw tens of thousands of Wisconsin protesters, including my own parents, taking a stand to preserve workers' rights. In Minnesota, thousands of people converged on our State Capitol to speak out loudly against the idea of putting a constitutional amendment, one ostensibly about the sanctity of marriage, on the ballot. And then, beginning in September, the whole country saw the blossoming of the Occupy movement, a movement that sparked an overdue national conversation about who makes the rules and why, who benefits the most, and whether anything can be done to move us away from rule by a wealthy and selfish few. In a country where the national conversation often seems to be about celebrity marriages, it has been wonderful to hear words like "oligarchy" and "plutocracy."

In this new year, the protester and all citizens of this world still have a lot to do. The Arab Spring was revolutionary, but there is much freedom left to win. The Occupy Movement has moved indoors for the winter, but it continues to pursue structural reforms in our economy and society. And in this new year, a lot will be happening in Minnesota, where we'll be choosing legislators and members of Congress, we'll be

weighing in on the presidential race, and we'll be deciding on important amendments to the state constitution.

One of those amendments, one you may not have heard as much about, would require anyone voting in Minnesota to present a photo ID at the voting booth. Supporters of this measure are promoting it as a means to stop fraud, but voter fraud is quite possibly the least important problem facing Minnesota right now. A report co-sponsored by the Minnesota UU Social Justice Alliance found 26 fraud convictions out of nearly 3 million votes cast in the 2008 general election, and none of those instances of fraud would have been prevented by a photo ID law. Such amendments do succeed at preventing countless ordinary citizens from exercising their right to vote. In other states with this kind of law, it's affecting older people, college students, lower-income people who don't have driver's licenses – such citizens are experiencing hardships and out-of-pocket expenses that prevent them from exercising a right guaranteed by the U.S. constitution. It's heartbreaking. It's a stripping of the authority that all citizens of a democracy should have. And it's heading toward Minnesota. (You can learn more about this issue during Wellspring Wednesday on January 11.)

And of course, 2012 will bring us the vote on that other amendment, the one I call the marriage discrimination amendment, which would enshrine in our state constitution the idea that only a man and a woman are worthy of the legal benefits of civil marriage. The rights of a small minority are being put up for a vote, a tragic use of democracy. I'm

proud that this congregation is taking a leading position against this measure. May the vast majority of our fellow Minnesotans use their authority to reject this amendment and send a message to the nation and the world about where we stand on justice and love.

And so we stand peering into the unknown on this first morning of this new year, this newborn year that is crying out for us to guide it. New Year's does not have to be the death of all things Christmas. The New Year can be about love and togetherness and gifts and hope. And much of that hope comes from our authority – our authority to question power, our authority to evaluate our scriptures and our saints, our authority to determine who will govern us and how we will be governed. 2012 is a year for our authority. May we make the most of it so that, a year from now, at our year-end bonfire, we do not hear the crackle of the things we didn't do, but we instead feel a holy joy, like a kid on Christmas. May it be so, and amen.