

**“The Bible as a Liberal Library”**

**8 August 2004**

**Unity Church–Unitarian**

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**STORY: A Retelling of the Story of Ruth, in the Tanakh (Hebrew Scriptures)**

*[not written out by Rev. Belletini but told as a story]*

**PRAYER:**

Life is hard, the biblical poet Ekklesiastes reminded me.  
Life is suffering, echoed the Buddha,  
and a thousand other prophets and poets, wise all.  
True enough, I suppose.  
God knows I am not unacquainted  
with brokenness and pain.  
But I am remiss in my calling as a human being  
if I neglect to sing praise for the saving mercies  
tucked by their thousands  
into the intricate folds of hurt and loss.  
Summer roses for one.  
Purple cosmos.  
Brick red chrysanthemums.  
Budding oak branches against a silver sky.  
The shadow of a maple against a white wooden wall.  
Fresh grapes from a backyard vine.  
A loaf of bread.  
A phone call from my godson.  
A crackling run of laughter between friends.  
An embrace.  
A glass of water with lemon in it.  
A deep kiss.  
Fresh resolve.  
The sight of a child, amazed at a pill bug.  
A surprising moment of self-forgiveness.  
A familiar song on the radio,  
or a Kyrie of Mozart’s playing in the car.  
News of slow, but hopeful political progress  
in Tbilisi in the Asian Georgia.  
The green of grass.  
The gift of tears in the shower.  
A proper sense of horror when we hear of Hiroshima in 1945  
or read of Sudan today.  
And each and every single breath we take.  
A thousand mercies.  
Mercy looks a lot like love, I guess,  
and for all these mercies poured on our joys and sorrows both,

my praise, my thanks, and my hallelujah amen.

## **READING:**

*The First Reading comes from the influential Women's Bible, written by Susan B. Anthony's closest friend, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and some other friends, back in 1898. In it she mentions several women, famous and lesser known, from the western scriptures.*

Look at Deborah!

We never hear sermons pointing women to the heroic virtues of Deborah as worthy of their imitation. Nothing is said in the pulpit to rouse them from the apathy of ages to inspire them to do and dare great things, to intellectual and spiritual achievements, in real communion with the Great Spirit of the Universe.

Women as queenly, as noble and as self-sacrificing as was Esther, as self-respecting and as brave as was Vashti, are hampered in their creative office by the unjust statues of men...

Look at Huldah and Vashti!

Huldah and Vashti added new glory to their day and generation – one by her learning, and the other by her disobedience; for Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God.

## **READING:**

*The Second Reading comes from two sources: The Hebrew Torah, namely, the book of Shemoth, which we call Exodus in most English translations; I have used the Hebrew names of the characters in this translation. And the second source is an authentic quotation from Jesus of Galilee inserted into a context created later in the gospel of Mark. The gospel was written c.71, and the Torah passage about 500 years before that.*

A.

Now Moshe was tending the flocks of his father-in-law, Yitro. He drove the flocks into the high chaparral, and came into the shadow of the great mountain range called Wasteland (Heb.: Horeb) There, a messenger from the Eternal appeared to him in a blazing fire rising out of a thorn-bush. Moshe stared at the fire...it blazed in the entire thorn-bush, but the branches of the bush were not burnt up by the flame. So Moshe said to himself, "I must turn off the beaten path and find out why the bush is not turning to ash." As soon as he had left his path, the Eternal spoke to Moshe, "Come no closer. And take off your sandals, for this earth is sacred. I am the One your ancestors called God."

At this, Moshe hid his face behind his hands, afraid to look any further.

The messenger continued:

I have felt keenly the plight of my people in bondage.  
I have heard their outrage, I have known their sufferings.  
So I am here to bring them out of the land of slavery.

And I am sending you to do this.”

Moshe said, “And who am I, that I should go up to the king of Egypt and tell him to free the people?”

“I will be with you,” said the Eternal.

“That in itself should be a sufficient sign that I am the one who is sending you.”

“But listen, what shall I say to the people?

I can’t just go up to them and say

‘The God of your ancestors sent me to you!’ now can I?

Why not tell me your actual name so I can tell the people who it really is who is sending me?”

“I am becoming that which I am becoming,”

whispered the voice. “Tell them ‘I am becoming’ is sending you.”

“But what if they still don’t believe me?

What if they say, “No one appeared to you in fire?”

“And what is that in your hand?” said the Eternal.

“My cane,” said Moshe.

“Throw it on the earth.”

And he did and immediately it turned into a frightful serpent.

Moshe recoiled.

‘Now, pick it up by the tail.’

And Moshe did so and picked up what proved to be his cane.”

“But now listen,” cried Moshe, “this is all fine and good, but

you know very well that I have never been a man of words.

After all. I d-d-don’t speak very w-w-well.”

“I will be with you as you speak. And your brother Aharon is near by.

He speaks very well, no?

You can ask him to do all the elegant phrases, if you wish.”

“No, please, please, just listen. You need to send someone else to be your agent.”

But then the Eternal grew angry at Moshe,

and so Moshe fled the spot.

And so he returned to his father-in-law’s place, and finally said,

“Let me have some time off

so your daughter and I can go back to Egypt

and check on all my relatives there.”

And Yitro said, “You have my blessing. Shalom.”

B.

*from Jesus:*

The Sabbath was made to serve human beings.

Human beings were *not* made to serve the Sabbath.

## SERMON: The Bible as a Liberal Library – Mark Belletini

The present world is a difficult place, isn't it? Between the tinderbox of the Mid East, both in Jerusalem and Baghdad, and the horrors of Sudan, my heart breaks, and I cry out Mercy, Mercy! And here in the United States, in the political mudslinging between religious and political conservatives and just about everyone else, and even between various candidates up for election, I find enough heartache to bend me to my knees as I cry out, "Mercy, Mercy, I just can't take it any more." And so now I need to accept the mercy that is surely coming my way. This I do by speaking out on a subject dear to me. One of the principle heartaches for me during these last twenty years is the death of the word "liberal." The political and religious right in this nation have succeeded in turning it into a curse word, into a condemnation. Say you are a "liberal," and you are dismissed with a hearty laugh by the Rush Limbaugh's and Sean Hannity's on the political side, and the Dr. Kennedy's and Pat Robertson's on the religious side. Today, the most wide-open claim you can make for yourself and still manage to live without contemptuous mockery is to say, "Oh, I am a Moderate."

And even then you get accused of being wishy-washy. Or, even worse now, unpatriotic and irreligious.

No, I have slowly come to see that *certitude* and *security* are the two *official* bywords of our strange era. Absolute unchanging truth has replaced the noble philosophical concept of ever-emerging truth. Absolute and dictated morality has replaced the concept of situational ethics rising out of complex human realities. And good and evil, once theological words, have now become the vocabulary of presidents and radio show hosts – radio pundit Rush Limbaugh, for example, says that there is a "war between conservatives and liberals," and that this war is "the war between good and evil."

Historically, Unitarians and Universalists proudly claimed the liberal attitude. "Liberal religion" is a phrase found throughout our literature for hundreds of years. But to Rush Limbaugh and his ilk, any Unitarian Universalists in this room are all evil. *Absolutely* evil.

A local conservative evangelical physician who spoke recently at a forum at the church I serve in Columbus, Ohio, claimed before all of us that he was good because he believed in the Bible, and that only those who believe the Bible – all of it, "without picking and choosing passages" – are the only really moral, and really good people on this earth. The rest of us are simply wrong and hell-bound, he said, with absolute clarity.

Now I don't have to tell you that this man actually speaks for many in our nation these days.

And because of that, I can certainly understand why many liberal religious folks are suspicious of the Bible so lifted up by these preachers. I understand why they might flinch when it is quoted or get nervous when its metaphors are trotted out in the pulpit. They are well aware that, for religious "true-believers" in this country, the Bible has ceased to be a library of many books written over a thousand year period by a variety of human beings, for differing. In their hands, it has become a unified platform dictated by the almighty before which they bend the knee. And thus, in their hands it has become a hammer, a bludgeon, a poison-pen letter, a jail key, and a kangaroo court.

I see none of these when I look at the Bible held in the hand by a True Believer trying to convert me. I see instead the modern form of that ancient image, a biblical image, in fact, namely, the Golden Calf, a mere idol in the form of a book. After all, a book is a mere thing made of paper pulp and ink, not the word of God, which, Elias Hicks, the Quaker, used to say, is not mere printers ink, but something that has to be written first in the heart before it can even be seen on paper.

Or, more coarsely I suppose, I find myself agreeing with the projection theories of the Rev. William Sloan Coffin, the late and beloved pastor of Riverside Church in New York City.

He wrote the following great line: “The Bible is like a mirror. You cannot be an ass, look into that mirror, and expect an apostle to peer back out at you.”

I for one am disgusted when biblical idolatry disguises itself as a religion, a “faith” which links itself, without shame, to reactionary politics and punishing social agendas.

But more importantly, I am peeved that religious and political liberals have *both* given up on their own liberalism, and have given over this extraordinary cultural treasure, the Bible, to bloodthirsty braggarts who dangle their own precious children over the fires of their sick and imaginary hellfire.

And the reason that this gets me so riled is that I well know after teaching the thing for twenty-five years, that you can *clearly* just as easily read the Biblical books and find liberalism all through them. Unvarnished, good, old-fashioned liberalism, too.

You know. Liberalism. Generosity of welcome. Generosity of spirit. Generosity period. Look in the thesaurus with me: *Liberal: Lavish, impartial, humanitarian, unstinting, open-minded, open-handed, freethinking, bounteous, tolerant, flexible, open to reason, unsparing, magnanimous*. And I say the Bible is crammed with all of this liberalism.

For example — the Book of Ruth, the story of which I told earlier this morning. It’s not history, strictly. It’s a reflective novella, written around the year 400 BCE. The unknown author was dealing with issues of immigration, a controversial subject in those days, as it is in ours, both in the United State and in Europe. People were asking then as now: is there such a thing as a pure? Don’t immigrants arriving thin the blood of the native? Especially those fool Moavites, the Book of Ruth says. (*And here you can read any immigrant group you want...my own Italian ancestors were accused of thinning the blood of Real Americans and debasing American culture by no less than the venerable New York Times back in the 1920s. And what do modern Americans say now about immigrants from south of the border or from Muslim countries or Africa?*) The Book of Ruth takes the liberal attitude, and says, “All people are welcome, and all people make a nation. The idea of a pure people is wrong to begin with. In fact, we are telling you that our greatest chieftain, King David, was the grandchild of Ruth, an immigrant woman and a local man.”

I say we still don’t have the liberalism of the Book of Ruth in our own American history textbooks. Our Revolutionary War wasn’t fought by just white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant men, as our conservative think tanks like to tell you, but also by some 350,000 German immigrants who were already here, aided by Jewish regiments, and Yoruban Africans, and Catholic Italians, and Poles, and Spaniards and Slovenians, and French atheists. Immigration from all parts of the world has been shaping the American people *from the beginning*, as it shaped the Hebrew people *from the beginning*. It’s not like our distorted history says: we started out white Protestants and were “invaded” by all of these immigrants later.

Or take Genesis, the book the wild-eyed Creationists like to say they take literally. In this book, the sun and the moon are called “lamps.” In every other culture in the world at that time, the sun and the moon were called god or goddess. By observing that the sun and the moon were things, like lamps, the book of Genesis establishes the process of scientific observation. If you worship the sun and moon, you can’t subject them to scientific observation. So in the much criticized book of Genesis, I find the beginning, not the antithesis, of the scientific method, an approach, of course, beloved of liberals.

Scholars of language can read the scriptural books in their original. Thus, they can tell from the language that some books were written earlier or later than others. This is not really all that difficult or amazing if you think about it. If I showed any of you in this room, without naming the author, some English from Shakespeare’s time, some English from Chaucer’s time, some English from Dickens’ time, and some English from our present

day Mary Oliver, I dare say you could easily decide which English phrases predated the others, even if I shuffled them up good.

So, using such an approach, what are the two oldest texts in the whole Bible, as we now have it? The *Song of Deborah* and the *Lament of David over Saul and Jonathan*. Both of these ancient texts were placed in later contexts (*the books of Judges and Samuel respectively*), but they are easily recognized as being of the oldest strata in the whole collection.

And what is the *Song of Deborah* about? It's the prayer of a **woman general** who helps defeat a marauding army. And how does the *Lament of David for Jonathan* end? I quote: "Thy love, O Jonathan, was more wonderful to me than the love of any woman." In other words, the two earliest writings in the scriptures deal with a "woman in authority," and the love, *the same-sex love*, between two men. Are not such issues liberal concerns?

No wonder the great feminist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, demands that we look at Deborah! As well as Vashti, who told her husband to go to hell, when he wanted to parade her around like a trophy bride before all of his leering men friends. Or Huldah, the wise prophet. Or Esther (Hadassah) the clever strategist. All these women sound like they are shaped in the liberal spirit to me.

At a recent memorial service for a beloved colleague, a friend offered the following verses from the 58<sup>th</sup> chapter of Yisayahu, or Isaiah. It reads like this:

*"To be sure, people today say they seek me daily.  
They say they are eager to learn my ways, and have the whole nation become like them.  
They want to be intimate with me.  
They tell me they have fasted,  
and done all the proper rituals to convince me  
that I should be close to them.*

*But on the same day they do claim their faith,  
they are oppressing workers...  
and fill rooms with strife and contention.  
They strike out at all with a violent fist.*

*No, no, no. If you really want to 'fast'  
so as to come close to me, this is how you do it.  
First, unlock the fetters of injustice.  
Second, untie the cords of the yokes you put on people.  
Three, let the oppressed find their freedom.  
Four, share your bread with the hungry.  
Five, help the wretched poor find homes no different than your own.  
Six. Clothe the beggars dressed in rags.  
Seven. Pay attention to your own family needs.  
If you 'fast' like that, then shall the light dawn,  
and then you shall be like a watered garden, a  
and then you shall be like an unfailing spring."*

This sounds like liberalism to me. Or how about Jesus' famous dictum: "*The Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath...*" Is this not a humanistic approach to life, a humanitarian attitude toward religion, similar to Isaiah's? Religion is not ritual for its own sake, it's to help strengthen people to get out there and organize justice work. All of this is liberalism as far as I am concerned. And I find myself wondering what True Believers make of Luke 12:57 where you find these words put on the lips of Jesus: "*And why is it that you do not decide for yourselves what is right?*"

And if you are looking for liberal *theology*, you have it heaped high in the story of Moshe (Moses) and the burning thorn-bush. The story is filled with wisdom, as far as I am concerned. First, in order to hear the voice of the Eternal, Moshe has to leave his well-worn and familiar path and go off the beaten track. This is a liberal message, since liberals preach that freedom precedes faith, and only freedom enables a person to truly grow and deepen in spirit. There can be no coercion in either religion or politics. To underscore this, the author says that Moshe finds that this bush calling him off the path is burning in a mountain range called Wasteland, which is all that Horeb means in Hebrew. Liberals insist that there is no proper place or time for religious depth. You don't have to find your religion in a 5000-seat auditorium with a rock band and a plexiglass pulpit, or in a basilica glowing with mosaics. You can find your deepest values even in an empty wilderness.

Second, what Moshe finds when he gets off the trail is clearly a paradox. A bush on fire that does not burn up. It makes no sense. This paradox clearly is a liberal warning to theologians to be *cautious* in their theological language. It warns them not to find fixed or unchanging metaphors for the divine, or the most deep. It tells them that there is indeed meaning and substance in the idea of divinity, but that it's always moving like fire, and cannot be pictured, described, or captured, or treated as an object. It's basically saying that the question as to whether God *is or is not* is basically meaningless, since the word "is" refers only to objects or things, and God is no thing, no idol, no finality, and certainly no dictated Book. This is and has always been the basic liberal attitude in theology.

Third, when the voice from the bush speaks to Moshe, and Moshe tries to figure out what the voice really is, he gets two answers. The first answer is that "I am that which desires an end to all slavery. What is my name, you ask? My name is 'I hate slavery and desire freedom.'"

The second answer, after the nervous Moshe pushes further to see if he can find an escape from this demand, is a wisecrack and another warning. "My name is 'I am becoming what I am becoming.'" *Ehyeh asher ehyeh* in the Hebrew, which could also be translated I suppose as "I will be what I will be" – but never "I am that I am" – the very bizarre King James translation. The Sublime is that which moves and becomes, not that which is fixed and never changes, contrary to assertive, but completely flippant, fundamentalist thinking.

Thus, this too is a *liberal* approach. And note that the Eternal is not going to do anything *without* the human being, Moshe. "I have come down to help the Egyptians, but YOU are going to do it." Divinity is empty without humanity's agency. And this Moshe is a pretty fallible guy too. He killed someone once, runs away like a coward at the first chance, and has a hard time speaking clearly, hardly the best choice for a great prophet. But that's the point of the story – *anyone* can have access to hatred of injustice and action to end it. You don't have to be a superhero to be religious in a liberal way – the call to change the world by helping people get out of the enslaved conditions, their ruts, their habits, their excuses, their self-made limits, their comfort with privilege – this is a call that goes out to *everyone*. Universally. And this too is the liberal attitude in theology, which we often call Universalism.

I could go on and on. All I am saying is that the Bible can be read liberally even more easily than it can be read in support of the hurtful and vicious values people often wrest from the thing. Not every book, not every chapter, of course. But what else could be expected in a book that is not *a* single book, but a library of many books, written at different times for different reasons?

And liberals would never just read the thing without consulting scholars, wisdom teachers and contextual writers to help them, since: (1) that would just be lazy; and (2) that would be to treat the Bible as a singular authority with plain meaning equal from word to word, a senseless and idolatrous assertion; and (3) (and worst of all) it would be to admit that we liberals are letting fundamentalists *dictate to us* the meaning of the thing. It would be to admit that we liberals are on the defensive, and that all we can do is sit here and wring

our hands while the shouting Savonarolas of our time take over the culture and remake it after their own Golden Calf image. I for one don't count such a weak attitude as liberal, just cowardly and foolish.

I for one won't ever debate a fundamentalist, although I am often asked to do so. I refuse to send quotations volleying back and forth to try and convert them to my view. But then again, conversion is their thing, not mine, and trading proof-texts is a fundamentalist form of argument, not a liberal one which is holistic and carefully reasoned and very slow.

In any case, I assure you, that despite what our radio pundits drool from their mouths, no one in this room is evil. And despite what Pat Robertson says every single day on television, no one in this room is a festering pit of sin. No one in this room makes God mad, or disappoints the Holy.

But there are plenty of people in this room who wish to unfetter the yokes holding people down, to feed the hungry, clothe the bedraggled, and create shelter for the shelter-less. And I say, whether you actually read or care for the Bible or not, you are a fine example of the biblical model of liberalism.

So keep up the good work. Remember, there is nothing "moderate" about it. It's out and out liberalism.

And look, can't you see the burning bush is blazing for you, too?