

**“Repairing Our Roots”**  
**26 December 2004**  
**Unity Church–Unitarian**

**Worship Leader: Bill Neely**  
**Worship Associate: Jenny Wilson**

**Call to Worship**

We touch this strength, our power, who we are in the world, when we are most fully in touch with one another and with the world. There is no doubt in my mind that, in so doing, we are participants in ongoing incarnation, bringing god to life in the world. For god is nothing other than the externally creative source of our relational power, our common strength, a god whose movement is to empower, bringing us into our own together, a god whose name is history is love...  
-- from *A Passion for Justice*, by Carter Heyward

**Minister’s Prayer**

We think of beginnings and endings, Timeless, Loving One. As we gather at this final Sunday worship service of the year, we think of beginnings and endings, and we know gratitude for our joining in worship with all of those who have worshipped here in the past year:

those living and dead,  
those young and old,  
those members and visitors,  
those healers and hurt ones,  
those who came once and those who never miss a service.

Being blessed for the intersection of our lives and experience,  
We pray in gratitude not just for the bounty that we are for each other;  
but also for the heightened experience of You that we know in religious community.

Because seekers have gathered week after week to be held in worshipful embrace of this church, sometimes unsure of why, only knowing that we need to, may this church always stand to welcome the seekers among us and beyond us.

May we always know in everyone who worships here, whether once or weekly, that in each person comes a piece of the tapestry of the Holy. May we be grateful for the each additional beautiful piece. May we know our place in that timeless work of art.

Amen.

**Reading: Waking – Jane McCafferty**

You child  
in her fat red snowsuit  
takes you by the hand  
in the long white field

nobody around  
but crows  
and some other kid’s  
dirty angel

it is a day  
you had imagined you’d die  
for just one more hour  
of sleep

and now  
your eyes are washed clean  
by the redwing of her voice  
soaring bravely up through bitter air  
to reach you with yet another golden  
question:

*Does God laugh?*

you are waking,  
waking,  
aware there is no end  
to waking

that any good life  
feels brutal  
peels sleep from skin  
until bones creak open  
like door in the night

for the light in the eyes  
of those who need  
you here  
in the winter fields  
laughing as you tell her  
*Yes, yes, God laughs.*

### **Reading: an excerpt of *Women Who Run With The Wolves* – Clarissa Pinkola Estes**

I once heard a story from an old African American man in the mid-south. He came out of an alley as I was sitting amidst the graffiti on an inner-city “park.” Some people would call him crazy, for he spoke to anyone and no one. He shuffled along with one finger held out as though to test the wind’s direction. *Cuentistas* recognize such persons as having been touched by the gods. In our tradition, we’d call such a man, *El Bulto*, The Bundle, for souls such as he carry a certain kind of ware and show it to any who will look, anyone who has the eyes to see it and the sense to shelter it.

This particular kindly *El Bulto* gave me this story. It is about a certain kind of ancestral transmission. He called the story, “One Stick--Two Stick.” “This is the way of the old African Kings,” he whispered.

In the story, an old man is dying, and calls his people to his side. He gives a short, sturdy stick to each of his many offspring, wives and relatives. “Break the stick,” he instructs them. With some effort, they all snap their sticks in half.

“This is how it is when a soul is alone without anyone. They can be easily broken.”

The old man next gives each of his kin another stick, and says, “This is how I would like you to live after I pass. Put your sticks together in bundles of twos and threes. Now, break these bundles in half.”

No one can break the sticks when there are two or more in a bundle. The old man smiles. “We are strong when we stand together with another soul. When we are with each other. We cannot be broken.”

### **Sermon: Repairing Our Roots – Bill Neely**

Against the backdrop of a big, deep, blue lake on a crisp, clear summer morning, the reverend led about 100 kids ages 6 through 16 in Sunday morning worship. The Chapel for our worship was wooden benches positioned outside on a slightly graded hill and surrounded by trees except on the side of that big, deep, blue lake. When our eyes traveled from the reverend to the world around us we saw the rustling of leaves on the trees above and the rippling of waves on the water before us. Birds squawking drew our attention from prayer, and the breaths that we took between the words of the creeds filled our noses with earth and pine, with sun and weeds.

The reverend before us preached his best and all we could do was be distracted, we 100 or so kids, ages 6 through 16, we young Presbyterians away at summer camp. The reverend before us preached his best, he meant what he said and he meant what he prayed and all we could do in the expected and observed silence and stillness of Sunday morning worship was get distracted by the world around us. All we could do was look at the beauty. All we could do was feel part of it.

The reverend preached his best and we heard not a word and in the middle of the sermon he stopped and looked up and out and asked us rhetorically how beautiful God's creation was that morning. And he started singing "For the Beauty of the Earth" and we joined him, singing the same first verse over and over again because we didn't know the rest. And that song became a hymn and that hymn became a prayer and that prayer became a plea to forever know this beauty and to forever know the Creator of it. We raised our hymn of grateful praise higher than the tallest trees that surrounded us and we meant it, and we knew it was heard.

And this reverend had tears in his eyes, this reserved Presbyterian minister, this lover of ritual and formality had tears in his eyes, not because his worship service didn't go as planned, and yet exactly because his worship service didn't go as planned. Because he seceded some of his power to us in the moment when it mattered the most and the result was a deeply religious experience, a draining and exhilarating experience. Because he let go of what he thought we needed and read in us what we craved and allowed us to feel blessed by a love that over and around us lies. Because he valued us so much that he trusted us, and he loved us so much that he led us by letting us lead.

This Reverend of whom I speak is a mentor of mine, tender in my memory and even more tender in my heart. Formative in my teen years, he continues to form me in the many years since I've seen him. The way that he shared the supremely loving and imminent God of his heart seeded my relationship with the divine. The way he looked to experience the holy in this world painted the outline of the empiricism that drives my theology today. The model of how he didn't just work with children, he didn't just tolerate them, but he cherished them, he adored them, he saw in them qualities that they couldn't see in themselves and when he told you he saw them, you believed it-- that model is one that I hope to spend my life trying to duplicate. In the universe of my youth, he modeled universal love. He is, in my experience, the embodiment of one whose soul belongs to God, but whose faith is in children, but whose power is aimed at empowering, and for whom personal joy in life is only as great as the joy felt by the children among him.

Children and love and power are hot topics in liturgical calendars for this time of year. We've just finished celebrating Christmas, when birth and love and redemption are major themes. But in liturgical calendars for some different Christian faiths, this first Sunday after Christmas is one in which the themes of birth and love and redemption are carried over and mixed in with themes of jealousy, suffering, and murder. We're challenged, by these traditions, to hold all these themes in our hearts at once. As in these calendars, and in Unity's calendar, this Sunday's worship service traditionally centers on a story in the book of Matthew that occurs just after the birth of Jesus. It's a story of King Herod's jealousy and his angst over the new Messiah's threat to his power and the power of his family that comes after him, a story about a King who appears strong but is actually politically weak and fears his weakness being capitalized upon.

In the story, King Herod receives word that the Jewish Messiah was born and thus, was a threat to his political power. Herod sends wise men to find the baby Jesus and let him know where the babe and his family are. When the wise men find Mary and Joseph and Jesus they decided to worship, rather than report, him. They give him gifts and go back to their homelands instead of Herod's home, thus avoiding Herod and not reporting Jesus' location. This angers Herod and he orders the murder of all male children under the age of two in the vicinity of Jesus' birth. Since he doesn't know who the Messiah is, he decides to kill every potential Messiah. An angel warns Joseph of this, so Joseph and Mary and Jesus flee to safety in Egypt and remain there until that Herod dies. And, tragically, as they flee, Herod's order is carried out, the children are murdered, and that episode is known as the *Slaughter of the Innocents*.

This episode only appears in the Gospel of Matthew of the four canonical gospels. It is not mentioned in Luke, Mark, or John. And the writer of Matthew finishes this story by stating that in the occurrence of this massacre, an ancient Hebrew prophesy was fulfilled. The author of Matthew writes, "Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." The slaughter was what the writer believed left her never to be consoled.

This sort of explicit link between the life of Jesus and the fulfillment of ancient Hebrew prophesies is common in Matthew. It happens several times leading up to the birth of Jesus alone. It's as though the writer is arguing that the story of Jesus must be true because it fulfills so many ancient prophesies. You can almost hear the writer arguing, "Look

people, these can't be coincidences." With each prophesy fulfilled, the case for belief in the Jesus as the promised, prophesized Jewish Messiah becomes more concrete, and that's really the whole point of most of the Christian canon. This might help us understand why the story is there.

This story of the *Slaughter of the Innocents* also relates to Hebrew Scriptures in another way: by connecting patterns of violence against the innocent or least powerful people in society to that society's redemption. This pattern is clearest in the Book of Judges, but it can be interpreted into the text of many different stories. And let me be clear, that's what's I'm doing here. I'm interpreting this pattern in some Hebrew scriptural accounts and applying it to the *Slaughter*. Others interpret many different things into the *Slaughter* and that's really the heart of biblical exegesis, or the meaning that we make from these texts as we engage them.

In the Book of Judges in the Hebrew Scriptures, the pattern of history looks something like this: there is a time of peace and relative calm as people live good, moral, religious lives. Then they start sinning and fall away from God, which results in oppression and violence eventually ruling their lives at which point and they call out to God for help. God hears their call and appoints a Judge to rule them. The Judge delivers them from their sins, and they live in peace again until they fall away from God and the cycle starts repeat. And the cycle does repeat in the Scriptures.

The most important part of this cycle is that moment, that awareness in the people that their society has fallen so far away from God that there is no way they can redeem themselves without God's direct intervention. This is the moment just before they cry out to God for help. And the question arises, what must things look like for enough people to know that they are at that point, that the whole society cries out to God for help? The most compelling arguments about the nature of that moment when total depravity is recognized comes mainly from feminist Jewish and Christian theologians who are trying to reconcile the abhorrent treatment of women in many bible stories with their faith.

They argue that biblical societies only fully see their own depravity when they start preying on their weakest, least powerful members: that when powerful ones are warring with powerful ones, there's still hope. But when powerful ones start intentionally and systemically oppressing, harming, and neglecting already less-powerful people, society's true depravity is pushed the forefront of everyone's mind to the point when even the powerful are crying out to God for help. And in the Scriptures, the least-powerful members of society were usually women, children, and slaves, so as they increasingly become victims of specific, systemic abuse, these theologians argue that it's a sign to the readers that society has completely fallen away from God, and a redeemer, of some sort, is needed.

Even though the ordering is a little different, the connection of the birth of Jesus, *the redeemer* to the writer of Matthew with the murder of the weakest members of society can be read as an argument that the world was in need of the Jewish Messiah, just then, at that moment. That the murders showed redemption was impossible without God's intervention and when one considers the nature of Jesus' gospel and his consistent concern and advocacy for the marginalized and oppressed in society, the connections seem stronger. Jesus' ministry seemed aimed toward the very people whose oppression would mark the overall human condition of the society.

And it doesn't really matter if Jesus was the Jewish Messiah or not as we consider the implications of ideas. What matters is: as we engage these texts, as we consider these stories, and we try to feel in our hearts what these writers are saying about the human condition, and our relationships to each other and the Holy, we know that we still need redeemers. The world still needs messages of radical love and timeless compassion and true forgiveness. The world still needs those messages, and needs them from different sources. And the world still is sometimes shaken to the awareness of how much we need those messages when our weakest members are mistreated. Sometimes, the slaughter still awakens us to our own need to seek and work for redemption.

This happens. Today. It happened with Matthew Shepherd in Wyoming, when in the aftermath of his murder people came together to call for increased understanding and support for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people. This happened after the tragedy in Columbine, when people in the aftermath fought together for the kind of gun control legislation that would make it harder kids to shoot each other. This happened in the case of Rosa Parks, too, because that day when she refused to move from her seat on the bus, Rosa Parks was thinking about a boy named Emmett Till.

On December 1, 1955, when she refused to give up her seat at the front of a bus for a white person in Montgomery, Alabama, she's said that Emmett Till was on her mind. In the moment of choice for Rosa, the moment of choosing whether to acquiesce to or challenge the de-humanizing oppression of segregation, Emmett flashed in her mind and she choose to challenge it.

Emmett was a teenager who had been brutally murdered and disfigured for being African American in Mississippi about three months earlier and his mother's decision to have an open casket at his funeral so that the world might see what racism can do to innocent children caught many people's attention, including Rosa's. She said that when she was on that bus and told to move, she could see his scars in her mind and decided that she just couldn't do it anymore. That she had to stay where she was, no matter what the cost.

This doesn't really jive with the story of Rosa Parks that I heard in school. I had heard that she was just tired and sat down, and for some reason came to the conclusion that it wasn't fair for her to have to move so that a white person could have her seat. It was as though her gauge of resistance to segregation had finally reach its highest point at that moment when she was tired and didn't want to move and knew that she shouldn't have to. So she didn't. And actually, that story is probably accurate, too, and that's fine. There's tremendous truth and value in it.

But there's that timeless element in her story when we consider the impact that Emmett's murder may have had on her psyche. That slaughter of that innocent teenager shook her conscience and the consciences of countless people, and continues to in this day. It clarified for many the dangers of racism. It showed multitudes of people how far away from peace and equality we were, how unsafe this country was for young people of color. It showed us that the youth among us aren't safe from our sins, and that moral repair is matter of life and death, for them and us.

And the more I begin to see an ancient and a contemporary context for the story of the *Slaughter of the Innocents*, the more tragic becomes the nature of this learning. Because it shouldn't take the suffering of innocents to awaken in us the need for repair, for redemption, but it sometimes does. That victimization should not need to occur before protection is offered, but it does. That we shouldn't have to watch a smaller stick break before we offer our more substantial sticks for their support.

But it's also more than that. It's not just that we should protect the innocents, it's that we should cherish them. That we should put their well being first and foremost in our concerns. That rather than marking the depravity of a society by how it's weakest members are victimized, we should aspire to reach a point when we are measuring the health of a society by how much joy is in the lives of its weakest members. That the strength of the most powerful people in a group is only as strong as the strength of group's most marginalized members. That justice is measured in a community by how well the powerful use their tools to empower. As has been said in this pulpit, that leadership is used to help others lead.

And when I think of Rosa Parks' actions on that bus and her lifetime of work afterward, and when I think of how Emmett Till's mother spent the rest of her life after her son's murder working tirelessly for peace and racial justice, when I think of how I've seen so many people in my life, through all my life, who have the dancing of children in their eyes and their concerns foremost in their hearts, I do believe that day is coming, because I know that there are redeemers all around us. This room is full of redeemers, ready to do – and to continue doing – the holy work of redeeming our society by caring for the weakest among us the most passionately. That we have the capacity and the desire to make the care of our innocents the hallmark of wholeness in our society. That there is a day on the horizon when we as a society will say with confidence, greater than our ability to create a computer the size of a chip, greater than our ability to travel in space, greater than our ability to amass wealth and property, greater than our ability to harness technology for our use, lies the greatest signpost of our humanity which is our devotion to our children.

Greatest is our devotion to loving them all, to feeding them all, to educating them all, to giving health care to them all, to helping each one know the Holy, and to have each one know their value. Greatest is our heightened sense of empathy that tells us when a child starves, that is my child starving. Greatest is our community that knows that when those children are marginalized, those are my children being marginalized. Greatest is our belief that the beauty of the earth is for everyone on the earth, big and small. Greatest is our willingness to devote every part of ourselves that we can to helping every child know that beauty. Greatest, is the pulsing beat of a redeeming heart within us that cries out for the work the holy.

As we stand with the children in our lives, may we commit to stepping aside so that they can see the trees, to kneeling down so that they can see eyes that love them, to holding their hands so they need not walk alone, to laughing long and

liberally with them so they'll know more joy. With our hearts and hands and heads, may our children always know that we see the spark of the holy in them. May we kindle those sparks with everything we have.

Amen.

## **Benediction**

Over and around us lies timeless truth and boundless love. Go in peace, knowing that in you lie those things as well. Nurture them, and share them with the world. Reflect the beauty of the earth in the beauty of you, and reflect the eternal truth in the eternal now. In love, in hope, go in peace. Amen.