

Waters, Vines and Fig Trees

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Unitarian Universalist Meeting House
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William Blake described the human condition in writing, “Joy and woe are woven fine.” That comes to mind this Sunday when we have a confluence of occasions both joyous and woeful. On the joyous side we will put our annual ingathering and water ceremony; the Meeting House doesn’t take a vacation in July and August like many UU churches do, but the church and the community are so different during the summer months that it is good to come together in September and reacquaint ourselves with each other and share the waters from our summer. Another joyous occasion is Rosh Hashanah, which marks another year of this adventure we call life, and which we can celebrate whether or not we are Jewish.

But then on the woe side, we have Yom Kippur, the impending Day of Atonement with its call for us to reconcile with those to whom we have given offense over the past year. Now this doesn’t have to stay in the woe column, as we will see in a minute. But it is certainly somber, and this year it occurs in close proximity to a very somber moment in our national life, the anniversary of the terrorist attacks of September 11. And that anniversary, in this bizarre political climate, has gotten all crossed up with the issue of mosque building about which I spoke last week and also the threat of burning the Qu’ran.

And the larger context against which these events take place this year is the resumption of peace talks between Israel and Palestine – talks which, if they could succeed, would go a long way toward alleviating the principal source of that tension between the Muslim and Western worlds which produced the attacks of September 11. Of all the things I’ve mentioned, these peace talks hold the best prospect for fulfilling those oft-cited but seldom realized words of the Prophet Micah:

they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more;
4 but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid.¹”

How do we get from waters to vines and fig trees? Last year at our ingathering, we had a whole service devoted to the properties of water. Water is a principal concern of this community; we are surrounded by the bodies of it on three sides, and keeping it clean and healthy is a goal for which Chatham has committed an enormous amount of resources, thanks to the hard work of some people right here in this church.

Water is also an apt metaphor for the spirit. Water in liquid form has no inherent shape or color; it takes the color of what surrounds it or is dissolved in it, and it takes the shape of whatever vessel holds it. It is essential for life. Our bodies are largely composed of it, yet we go through our days unaware of this fact.

This morning we sang
As tranquil streams that meet and merge
And flow as one to meet the sea,
Our kindred hearts and minds unite
To build a church that shall be free.

Our water communion expresses the idea that we come together to be the church; our church is founded on a covenant among its members, and the confluence, the flowing together of our separate waters symbolizes this.

This covenant, this agreement between us which brings our church into being and sustains it, is one of the factors we can look at in a new year. Rosh Hashana invites us all, Jew and non-Jew, to pause, to take

¹ Micah 4:3-4

stock, to look at the bigger picture. The book of the old year is closed. We have a blank page in front of us. What will we write?

We are not much oriented toward heaven in the sky, but towards building what we call the Beloved Community here on earth in the present and in this place. One of the functions of a church in our liberal tradition is to model the Beloved Community. In the Kabbalah, in Jewish mysticism, there is this idea of *Tikkun Olam*, or repair of the world. The mythology behind this is very involved, but the basic notion is that somewhere in the process of creating the world, a big accident happened, some glass vessels were shattered, and it is our job to pick them up and repair them. As we do this, we are building God, in Kabbalistic thinking.

So Rosh Hashana gives us the opportunity to practice repair of the world, or *tikkun olam*, and we start with our own relations. We start with those whose relationship with us has been ruptured in some way. The ten days between the New Year and the Day of Atonement may be spent in seeking out those people with whom one has fallen out over the year and seek to reconcile. This is often hard work. It may not succeed. It may require some swallowing of pride, some saying I'm sorry. It may require us to admit the possibility that someone else was right and we were wrong. It may be a bitter pill.

Yet it may be that bitter pill that heals us. Atonement is hard work, but it can also be satisfying. I wish I had a dime for every time I've heard a preacher say that the word atone means "at one." For the longest time, I thought they were making this up; it was just one of those things preachers say to make everyone feel better. But then one day I looked it up, and indeed, "at one" is the actual etymological root for the English word "atone," so in seeking atonement with another, we are seeking to be at one. As tranquil streams that meet and merge and flow as one to meet the sea.

And yet in that merger we do not submerge our individual identities. The ancient ideal from Micah is that everyone sits under his own vine and fig tree. We are not in a collective here; each of us has her own. Micah wrote at a time when Assyria was threatening to take over the kingdom of Judah, and his prophecy of peaceful times under a reign of God harked back to a description of the Golden Age of a united Israel under the reign of King Solomon, which we find in the book of Kings:

"During Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beersheba, all of them under their vines and fig trees."²

This is the picture of peace, in other words; each citizen sitting under his or her own vine and fig tree. But the actual history of the Jewish people related in the Hebrew Bible was that such periods of peace were rare, and there were several periods where they were invaded by their neighbors and after the death of Solomon, they split into two kingdoms, and both were overrun within the next two centuries, by the Assyrians and the Babylonians.

That the Israelites could sit under their own vine and fig trees at all in the time of Solomon was due to the fact that they had conquered the Canaanite back in the time of Joshua. The land that God had promised to Moses in the great covenant was inconveniently already occupied by a people sitting under their own vines and fig trees, and it was necessary to oust them in order to fulfill that covenant. The Hebrew Bible does not tell us much about what happened to the Canaanite.

But it seems to be a sad fact of history that one person's peaceful occupation of the land takes place at the cost of displacement of others from that same land. We who are descendants of Europeans occupy the land of America because our ancestors displaced the native peoples who lived here.

For many centuries, the Jews were displaced people. In pre-modern Europe, Jews were forbidden to own land at a time when land was the principle means of wealth, so Jews developed out of necessity an expertise in trade and finance. The holocaust was perhaps the worst but by no means the only persecution inflicted on the Jewish people by the supposedly Christian west. It is understandable that Zionism arose out of the desire of Jews to sit under their own vines and fig trees, and to ensure their right to do so for all succeeding generations.

²I Kings 4:25 (NRSV)

The inconvenient fact, however, was that when the nations of the world were convinced through the bloodbath of the holocaust to carve out for the Jewish people a state, they were already Arabs living in the land of Palestine under their own vines and fig trees. They and their Arab neighbors and other Muslim states such as Iran refused to recognize Israel's right to exist and left Israel in a constant state of military and political tension with its neighbors, a tension that has erupted into bloodshed many times.

Such is the power of this dispute that many of you may have already stopped listening to me because you disagree with some nuance of the facts I recite. This is a sore point in our culture and we are not exempt from it here in America. If we didn't learn at before, we learned it in the attacks of September 11.

Now from what I have read of the mind of Osama Ben Laden, in the demonology of Al Qaeda, Israel is not the only villain, but it plays a large role. Ben Laden is a Saudi. Most radical Islamist movements are aimed at opposing corrupt or tyrannical or secularizing regimes in the Muslim world. Why did Ben Laden take on the West? Because of Israel but more immediately because of American bases in Saudi Arabia which of course is holy ground to Islam because both Mecca and Medina, Islam's holiest places, are located there.

I expect that everyone I am talking to can remember exactly where you were on September 11. It was a clear day, with beautiful blue early-Fall sky. I was in a part-time law practice in Boston, and we had a somber duty that day. A beautiful, vibrant, smart paralegal in our law office, despondent over the breakup of a relationship, had committed suicide, and the lawyers from our office were on our way to a Roman Catholic Church on the South Shore for the memorial service. In the car with me was John, my boss, who had gone to college with the person who headed the Cantor Fitzgerald investment firm; John actually had a New York law office in the Cantor Fitzgerald suite in the World Trade Center, his law partner there was the sister of his college friend. As news of the attack came over the radio, John became frantic to know details and to find out whether his friends were in the building. I watched the anxiety almost consume him, and it was hard to keep focused on the funeral we had come to attend. As it turned out, neither John's friend nor his law partner was in the building at the time of the attacks, though their younger brother was and he died. Cantor Fitzgerald lost a huge number of employees in the attacks.

No one I directly knew perished in the attacks of September 11, but I know a few next of kin. I know enough that to know those who have raised opposition to the location of the Mosque in lower Manhattan do not speak for all the survivors. Two of the people who died in the attacks were folk dancers from the same Morris dance team in western Massachusetts. Chris was on one of the airplanes. Steve was on the first day of his new job as wine sommelier at the posh Windows on the World restaurant on the top floor of the World Trade Center. Within the context of his life, this was a particular tragedy, because it was the first job Steve had held which had the prospect for his own happiness and fulfillment.

Yesterday on Facebook, his widow wrote this in reflection on the ninth anniversary:

"Today I honor Steve and know that it was an essential part of his being to stand for values many of us share. Because Steve believed so strongly in justice and was appalled at the politics of war in the name of freedom, I think more about the need for intelligence and understanding in this country and the world. The idea that any religion has more or less right to be is what caused 9/11 in the first place."

And everyone beneath their vine and fig tree, shall live in peace and unafraid. We are a far distance from that day. And yet the prospect for resolving the Palestine-Israeli dispute that is not the whole but an important part of the tension between the Muslim world and the West took a great step forward with the commencement of peace talks in Washington two weeks ago.

What are the obstacles to peace? They are man and complex. Each leader will be fighting forces in his own side who have a vested interest in continuing the conflict. The threats against a leader who compromises his people's position range from impeachment to assassination.

You may have noticed an upsurge in Muslim issues in the American media in the last two weeks: the so-called Mosque and Ground Zero got swiftly upstages by Pastor Terry Jones and his aborted plan to burn the Koran. You may have wondered how a right-wing minister threatening to do what another right-wing minister has already done in years past not only got on the news but brought the news to a standstill. Did it

have anything to do with the Israel-Palestine peace talks?

We know why conservative politicians leaped on the Ground Zero bandwagon: they think that anti-Muslim sentiment in America is so strong that their stance will get them votes. I can't prove anything more than that, but the possibility exists in my mind that the anti-Muslim hysteria itself is being stirred up to scuttle the peace process by those with a vested interest in a permanent state of war.

But let's return to the fig tree, for I think there is one more story in it.

In the 1980's, my family and I lived in a large, rather boxy house in Charleston, with a long back yard filled with all kinds of trees and shrubs: oleander, pyracantha, sweetgum and palmetto. But if you asked my daughter Sally what her favorite tree was, she would say the fig tree. It grew right outside the kitchen door. The last owner had put up some grey concrete steps to get to the second floor; they were ugly, but they were very useful, because they allowed you to get to almost any spot within the fig tree. That helped the grownups harvest the delicious fruit that ripened there in late June, before the birds could get them, and it helped a little girl climb almost anywhere she wanted within the tree. If you couldn't find Sally anywhere else, she was probably in the fig tree.

In 1989, we were visited by Hurricane Hugo, the largest storm to hit Charleston in many years. Our family evacuated, and when we came back, our back yard was just one big jumble of trees.

In the days following the storm, my brother-in-law and his cousin came from north Georgia with chainsaws and a machine that turned tree limbs into chips. We set up the chipper and for two days we just waded into that tangled mess of limbs and trunks and cut and diced and made them into piles of wood chips.

But at a certain point, we looked around and realized that the fig tree was gone. Worse yet, we were the ones who had destroyed it. It had survived the hurricane, but it was buried under the other trees and we had cut it up by accident. Nothing was left but a stump.

We didn't think about the fig tree until the following spring, when I was walking by the stump one day and noticed a green shoot. I told Sally, "it looks like the fig tree is coming back." It still had its root system, and it grew like topsy from the stump, and in about three years, it had regained almost all of its height and was putting out delicious fruit again.

Hope springs eternal. Now I don't want you to take the lesson from this that you always get back whatever you have lost. Hope doesn't work that way. The fig tree was back, but Sally was now a teenager who wasn't into climbing trees. She moved on. If you hope that every precious thing you've ever lost will come back, you are setting yourself up for unhappiness. If you hope that peace will come without sacrifice on either side, you are being unrealistic. What hope does is to give you something different. Yes, you lost that person or that place or that thing that you held so dear, but life has now given you other precious things, if you will open your eyes and see them. That's what hope is about. It is that thing with wings, and you never know what it's going to bring you next.

As tranquil streams that meet and merge and flow as one to meet the sea, may we hope that a time will come through the efforts of people of good will on all sides when we can beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks, that we can each live under our vine and fig tree and nation shall not make war with nation. Wouldn't the best memorial to the innocent people who lost their lives on 9/11 be a permanent and lasting peace between Israel and Palestine? Happy new year. Amen.

Readings (NRSV)

I Kings 4

20 Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand by the sea; they ate and drank and were happy. 21 Solomon was sovereign over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines, even to the border of Egypt; they brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life.

22 Solomon's provision for one day was thirty cors of choice flour, and sixty cors of meal, 23 ten fat oxen,
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and twenty pasture-fed cattle, one hundred sheep, besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fatted fowl. 24 For he had dominion over all the region west of the Euphrates from Tiphseh to Gaza, over all the kings west of the Euphrates; and he had peace on all sides. 25 During Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beersheba, all of them under their vines and fig trees.

Micah 4

[Micah 4]

The ideal age

1 In days to come

the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised up above the hills.

Peoples shall stream to it,

2 and many nations shall come and say:

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

3 He shall judge between many peoples,

and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more;

4 but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid;
for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.

5 For all the peoples walk,

each in the name of its god,
but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God
forever and ever.