

Reflections on Passover and Easter

by Reverend. Kit Ketcham, April 16, 2006

Today we celebrate, as do Unitarian Universalist congregations the world over, the conjunction of three important religious seasons. Though we will focus on Passover and Easter, it is important to recognize that, at the foundation of each of these traditions, lies a deeper source than Judaism or Christianity: the yearly rebirth of the earth in the season we call Spring, marked by the vernal equinox.

Each season is a celebration of hope, and it is hope that underlines our search for meaning at this time of the year. We hope for the flimsiest of blessings – a sunbreak on a rainy day, a tulip unfurling its tight bud, a smile from the tax preparer.

And we hope for more profound blessings as well: a sense of satisfaction with our life's work, relationships that grow and blossom, a happy and maturing child, connections with something larger than ourselves.

During the Passover season, Jews celebrate their hard-won freedom from bondage. To refresh your memory, let me offer a synopsis of the Passover event.

In the ancient account given in the Bible book of Exodus, the children of Israel are enslaved in Egypt. The Pharaoh becomes alarmed at the rapid increase in numbers of Israelites and he declares that all newborn males should be killed, which he believes will end the propagation of the Israelites.

One woman hides her new baby boy in a small waterproof cradle and sets it in the waters of the Nile. When Pharaoh's daughter comes to bathe in the river, she sees the baby and takes him home to raise as her own. She names him "Moses", which means drawn from the water.

Eventually Moses discovers his true origin and returns to his people. One day, he sees a burning bush, from which God speaks to him and tells him that he must demand from Pharaoh that the Israelites be released from slavery.

Moses obeys and repeatedly asks Pharaoh for freedom for the Israelites, but the Pharaoh refuses again and again, despite terrible plagues which God sends to Egypt, plagues like rivers of blood, swarms of frogs, disease, boils, devastating weather, locusts, and darkness.

Pharaoh is almost convinced once or twice but always reneges. Finally God tells Moses that the tenth plague will be that all the firstborn children in Egypt will die.

So that their firstborn children will be spared, the Israelites are instructed to bring an offering to God. A lamb or baby goat is to be slaughtered and its blood sprinkled on the doorposts and lintel of every Israelite home, so that the angel of God would pass over these homes when he comes to kill the Egyptian firstborn.

The death of his firstborn child finally convinces Pharaoh, and the children of Israel leave Egypt hurriedly, too hastily to let their bread rise and the only provisions they take along are unleavened loaves.

But Pharaoh changes his mind again and comes after the Israelites. In the ancient legend, the sea parts to let the children of Israel pass through and then closes over the pursuing Egyptians.

In their story of liberation from slavery in Egypt, every spring for thousands of years, the Jewish people have paused to gather for a combined meal and worship service known as the Seder, to recall the story of a people who were finally led to freedom.

This is THE central story of the Jewish people, but Passover is also a universal story that is meaningful to us all. For it is a story of moving on through times and conditions that are scary, dangerous, divisive, of going to the mat for freedom.

Passover means thankfulness for survival and commitment to others' survival. Passover reminds us of the tenacity of human beings, of the will to live through horrendous times, of the desire to help others win freedom as well.

Passover also reminds us of how cruel human beings can be to one another, in the pursuit of power and possessions. For this characteristic of human nature is common to our species. We can be creative and loving. We can also be destructive and hateful.

For the hundreds of generations from Moses' time through the Crusades, the slave centuries in the New World, the American Civil War, the Holocaust, the division of Korea, Vietnam, Ireland, and the Holy Land, the Passover story has been told while neighbor battles neighbor.

The story of Passover is a story of freedom and responsibility. Passover reminds us that as we struggle for OUR freedom, we must also struggle for justice for others.

Right now, we are tense and frustrated over the situation in Iraq and the potential for war in Iran as well, where freedom has also meant death for many civilians and soldiers, where meeting a threat from other nations also means possible destruction of those nations and their innocent people. We are also aware that in Israel itself, the battles between religious and political factions have caused blood to flow unabated for many decades.

And yet we celebrate Passover in honor of people whose journey toward freedom is about to begin. The bread of Passover represents the journey toward freedom of the Jews and of all of us who hope for peace. For winning freedom is dangerous and sometimes destructive; in winning freedom, we also shoulder the responsibility of freedom and we must not misuse it.

We UU's have mixed feelings about the Easter story, I think. We see Jesus, the hero of the Easter story, as a teacher, a prophet, a visionary whose rethinking of Jewish purity codes brought him many disciples and who caused religious thinking to make a major shift. Yet the story of the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the subsequent teachings of the Christian hierarchy are troubling to many of us.

We do resonate strongly, however, to the message of Jesus---that, as I told the kids a few minutes ago in a very simplified story of Easter, that love and kindness are more important than the rules. And we admire Jesus because he was courageous and resolute and did not back down.

Though we may not go for the miracle part, we see that Easter is a season of hope. And though we may not resonate to the idea of resurrection from the dead, we do embrace the idea of rebirth, of transformation, of hope for freedom from injustice and violence.

Huston Smith, the wellknown expositor of the world's religions, tells us that if a religious practice or experience does not lead to increased compassion and empathy for others, it is false and not to be trusted.

Sometimes we have to dig deep to find truth in popular religion. We may see the great damage and destruction of religious fanaticism which does not lead to increased compassion and empathy.

We may see hypocrisy in traditions which seem unnecessarily narcissistic or showy. We may wonder about customs and practices which enforce bondage of belief, rather than freedom and responsibility.

And yet, if we examine the story of a man who brought new ideas and interpretations of old laws to a hungry people, only to be murdered because he was seen as dangerous, we may catch a glimpse of how that story brings an opportunity for transformation, for freedom from injustice and violence.

We can see that peace and justice have a high cost. The stakes are very high. When we act in pursuit of peace and justice, we may risk everything. When we begin to see suffering---to really see it---we open ourselves to pain and suffering of our own. To hold a friend or loved one through pain, to be there unflinchingly, we offer ourselves as bearers of that pain; we are moved and transformed by that experience.

And, amazingly, what we discover is our own ability to learn from pain, to deepen our sense of connection with the universe and with each other, to become stronger and more vital, to open ourselves to life in ways that we could not, unless we were willing to risk death. And we discover that we are not alone. In the resurrection story, two of Jesus' disciples meet a third person on the road. As they walk along together, speaking of the tragic events of the recent past, they discover a comradeship that seems deeper, more intimate, more important than others they have known. The story says it is because they realize that the third person who has joined them is Jesus, resurrected.

But I say that it is because they have been together through pain, in an effort to bring justice and peace out of violence and injustice, that the third person in the story is a spirit of compassion and love for others, wisdom gained from human experience in community.

This is the Easter story for me, that a good man offered his life for an ideal, that his life was so strikingly good and purposeful that, despite the ugliness of his death, his spirit lived on and inspired all those who were his friends, and even some of his enemies.

Although the Easter story has become infused with miracle and doctrine and has sometimes led Christians into behaviors that are incompatible with the life of Jesus, when we strip away the doctrine and miracle, we find a life of inspiration and courage, a life that any of us might live, if we had the strength and commitment.

Easter is a time to think about how we might live that kind of life and a time to commit ourselves to doing that very thing in some small way. Let us, as does the earth each year at this time, awake again to renewed hope.

We're going to participate now in an ancient Easter ritual of North America, the Easter parade. The tradition of wearing new clothes on Easter could be dated to first-century Christians. Baptisms of these early Christians took place once a year and people dressed in new white robes for the occasion. Those who had already been baptized wore new clothes to indicate that inwardly they had risen to a new life.

Like many other Easter symbols, the new clothes represent new life offered through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Easter promenades of people in new clothes have become a longstanding tradition; some promenades are led by a person holding a cross or Easter candle.

In New York City, thousands stroll in the Easter Parade down Fifth Avenue to show off their new clothes following Easter services. And today we are going to stroll the aisles of this room in our Easter bonnets, while singing the words which Irving Berlin wrote. You'll find them in your order of service.

Joann and I will lead the parade, which will end with our benediction.

BENEDICTION

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, with renewed energy for the work of peace and justice, with renewed compassion and empathy for others, and with renewed appreciation of the great beauty of this world. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.