

Singers of Life

Easter Sunday March 31, 2013

Martha's Vineyard UU Church

Rev. Judith Downing

Reading From "The Immense Journey" by Loren Eiseley

.....on the edge of a little glade with one long, crooked branch extending across it, I sat down to rest with my back against a stump. Through accident I was concealed from the glade, although I could see into it perfectly.

The sun was warm there, and the murmurs of forest life blurred softly away into my sleep. When I awoke, dimly aware of some commotion and outcry in the clearing, the light was slanting down through the pines in such a way that the glade was lit like some vast cathedral. I could see the dust motes of wood pollen in the long shaft of light, and there on the extended branch sat an enormous raven with a red and squirming nestling in his beak.

The sound that awoke me was the outraged cries of the nestling's parents, who flew helplessly in circles about the clearing. The sleek black monster was indifferent to them. He gulped, whetted his beak on the dead branch a moment and sat still. Up to that point the little tragedy had followed the usual pattern. But suddenly, out of all that area of woodland, a soft sound of complaint began to rise. Into the glade fluttered small birds of half a dozen varieties drawn by the anguished outcries of the tiny parents.

No one dared to attack the raven. But they cried there in some instinctive common misery, the bereaved and the unbereaved. The glade filled with their soft rustling and their cries. They fluttered as though to point their wings at the murderer. There was a dim intangible ethic he had violated, that they knew. He was a bird of death.

And he, the murderer, the black bird at the heart of life, sat on there, glistening in the common light, formidable, unmoving, unperturbed, untouchable.

The sighing died. It was then I saw the judgment. It was the judgment of life against death. I will never see it again so forcefully presented. I will never hear it again in notes so tragically prolonged. For in the midst of protest they forgot the violence. There, in that clearing, the crystal note of a song sparrow lifted hesitantly in the hush. And finally, after painful fluttering another took the song, and then another, the song passing from one bird to another, doubtfully at first, as though some evil thing were being slowly

forgotten. Till suddenly they took heart and sang from many throats joyously together as birds are known to sing. They sang because life is sweet and sunlight beautiful. They sang under the brooding shadow of the raven. In simple truth they had forgotten the raven, for they were the singers of life, and not of death.

Sermon: Singers of Life

The story goes that there were three churches in a small town -----the Presbyterian church, the Methodist church and the Unitarian Universalist Church and one year each church was overrun with pesky and destructive squirrels.

One day the Presbyterian Church called a meeting to decide what to do about the squirrels. After much prayer and consideration they determined that the squirrels were predestined to be there and they should not interfere with God's divine will.

The Methodist group got together and decided that they were not in a position to harm any of God's creatures. So, they humanely trapped the squirrels and set them free a few miles outside of town. Three days later, the squirrels were back.

It was only the Unitarian Universalists who were able to come up with the best and most effective solution. They welcomed the squirrels to the coffee hour and conversation and helped them sign the membership book. Now they only see them on Christmas and Easter.

And on those holidays I'm sure they were most welcome as are all of you this morning and a Happy Easter to all of you. And I'm sure that at this UU church, unlike some, this old belief about church attendance does not apply, as I know you to be a relatively small, but loyal and active congregation of regular attenders.

On Easter morning----no matter what we believe, or where we may be-----we are all singers of life. Loren Eiseley's birds in the forest clearing sing for life. They are the spirit of life enduring in the face of death. We sing of life----in the aftermath of tragedy or loss or destruction when we find ways to go on, ways to again affirm life and all its goodness and richness. We gather joyously together like the birds of the forest to celebrate the life that was and the life that continues. We do that this morning in Easter celebration and we do it as we gather for memorial services after loved ones have died.

We see this response of the human spirit again and again after the destruction of communities from the countless natural disasters that seem to be increasing on our planet. We see this after the horrific mass killings that occur too often among us. People helping

each other face the tragedy and rallying to rebuild. Victims' families come together to honor lives lost through crime and violence by seeking new ways and new laws to prevent recurrence of such crimes.

Many people young and old from our UU Churches here in the north are still going south to the poor communities of Louisiana wiped out by Katrina almost 8 yrs. ago to help with clean up and reconstruction. The stories they tell on return have been full of the devastation and sadness they've witnessed, but even more they've been full of joy and hope that comes from people working together to restore life. They are singers of life in the aftermath of death. Again this year people have found themselves picking up their lives after Sandy hit the east coast last fall. A compassionate and creative spirit is enabling them to begin again.

We sing of and for life in so many ways in the simple experiences and routines of our lives. During my years in interim ministry I often worked with congregations as they recovered from the endings of both beloved and troubled ministries. Together we would seek out the good and the true that they could carry along with them to a new and stronger future. Once I sat with a ministerial Search Committee as they shared the news that after long and hard work they did not yet have a candidate for the position of settled minister. I knew that the Search Committee at that church had felt very disappointed in the previous couple of days as they came to grips with the reality that their hard work was to produce no fruit. And they were concerned about the reaction that the church leaders would have. But after getting through the actual announcement they began to express the up-side-----how all the work they had done would put them in a better position to be successful next fall into the winter, how they had wanted very much to find just the right minister who fit the needs and desires of the congregation and how, despite this negative outcome, they were willing to continue on as a group if the Board and congregation so desired.

I remember as I sat there with them how they began to sing for life---the singing for life that is the sign of a healthy and vital congregation. Everyone began chiming in with praise for the work done, understanding of the dilemma, recognition that this was a new opportunity, that what they had hoped for was not meant to be at this point in time and that that was all right. Now was the time to rally 'round and sing them selves into the future.

I know that this congregation has struggled through some rough transitions over the years but I think you have a strong voice, a strong spirit that keeps keepin' on, that continues to be positive, hopeful and creative in the service of your liberal faith in this island community.

Don't we always become like cheerleaders after someone we love has suffered a disappointment or a serious setback of some sort? We listen and support them quietly and then we begin to sing out encouragement for what lies ahead, for what good life might come out of this one time failure.

The spirit beyond our knowing also works in quiet, subtler ways that are mysterious and unexplainable. It happens fairly often in congregational life that shortly after the death of an older member of the community a baby will be born or there is a child dedication that has already been scheduled. We are reminded that life is unending. In celebrating the beginning of life in a dedication service we speak words of the precious life of the child and the hope for the future, blossoming in her/his heart and soul. I feel at these services the affirmation of a congregation and family eager to support and sing of this young life-- --life that we so treasure when existence universally seems so at risk these days. When we dedicate our children we are indeed singers of life.

We sing of life, but defining life is a major issue socially and politically in our lives. To many of us the mere beating of a heart is not the only criterion for life, if there is no other sign of active human life or hope for it. The rudimentary formation of a human body in the womb is not the only consideration for life if the life of that developing child or the mother might be compromised physically or socially. Many of us believe that the fate of life in these stages should be in the hands of those closest and most affected. It should be private. We sing of life that is positive and welcomed, that is supported and active-----not life that is suffering, tragic and hopeless.

For Unitarian Universalists the Easter/Passover season is a time to celebrate spring----to bask in the rebirth of this earth home of ours. Every new bud and blossom makes us want to sing with joy. Nature writer, Hal Borland wrote in one of his NY Times nature editorials a few years back----

Winter wears away. Sunlight shifts and strengthens. Spring creeps in day by lengthening day. Roots quicken. Sap rises, and the bud responds. The leaf, the blossom, the tender shoot takes form, incredibly compressed within those thin brown scales. Life, the miracle of life itself, begins to strain at the dark walls of confinement reaching for the light, the glory or renascence. And at last the bud bursts, the miracle is fulfilled. Where there was darkness there is light; where there was only hope there is achievement; where there was restraint there is freedom.

We call it spring, and we celebrate it as Easter and as Passover. It is renewal, rebirth, release from the winter of the soul. It is faith and belief triumphant. And it is written in so

simple a place as a bursting bud.

Eiseley's story, too, is a spring story and an Easter story. It is an Easter story because it tells, in the language and symbolism of nature, of the rebirth, the resurrection and affirmation of ongoing life that is at the heart of the Christian story. Easter is both a celebration of an ancient spring festival and a sacred Christian holy day. Throughout all the legend and scripture is the theme that life goes on and that even in death individual lives remain eternal in the hearts and minds of those who live on. We all make some mark on the lives of others and that is our resurrection when our bodies give up their life. Jesus of Nazareth has lived on through his teachings and the remarkable impact he had on his disciples and all who have followed him through the centuries. That is the real meaning of the Easter story and that power to live on is given to all of us and so is the power to sing over and over of the life that blesses us.

We live in troubled times. Our lives are not always easy. But let us be singers of life, never letting tragedy or death conquer us, never letting disappointment destroy our hope. There is too much good in this life, too much beauty and blessing to sing about to let ourselves be pulled down by the ugly or the evil or to let ourselves give up. The sound of the birds singing in the clearing after the raven's kill must have sounded to Eiseley like all creatures in the universe proclaiming the glory of life. It was the judgment of life over death every bit as clear and resounding as the judgment of life over death in the Easter story.

The human spirit survives and resounds like the bright spirit in nature-----of the surviving birds in the clearing and the spring growth that comes every year as the earth revives. This is what we most celebrate today---the resurrection of the human spirit embodied in the Christian story, the Passover and countless other stories of rebirth and ongoing life. May it be a joyful time for us and may we always find a way to be singers of life.