

THE SERMON “The Good News of the Year in Religion”
Rev. Victoria Weinstein

I was with my family in Pennsylvania when the news of the tsunamis in Asia got to us in the U.S. It seemed as though we got the news about as fast as the people in the nations that got hit received it. One of the first thoughts that occurred to me was to wonder whether there had been any possible way to warn the coastal communities that were among the worst devastated right after the earthquake hit in Sumatra. I thought, “Wait a minute, if tsunamis were ever headed for the East Coast of the United States after an earthquake in San Francisco, say (which I know is geologically impossible), we would have spared no expense to create an early-warning system.” The tragedy of this event is bad enough when we look at it from a natural perspective. It is hard to accept that Mother Nature occasionally makes such dramatic gestures that wipe out so much life in a matter of moments. We are humbled by it, and awed. We should also be willing to listen to scientists who inform us that our own human habits have an effect on the climate, and on increasing the probability of such cataclysmic events.

Although that bothers me, and I am trying to learn about the effects of global warming and other human influence on these climactic events, I am far more horrified by the fact that money could have saved thousands and thousands of lives in this last scenario. Countries on the Pacific Ocean are connected to an early-warning system that would alert and evacuate coastal cities and towns in the event of a tsunami. Why not those in the Indian Ocean? Because those people – so many of whom live short lives gripped by poverty – are apparently expendable.

(We now know that it costs something like \$27 million dollars to put such a system into effect. Dare we even *begin* to count the cost of this disaster in human and economic terms? It is at least ten times more than twenty-seven million dollars.)

I want to go a little bit deeper into that idea with you in the Sunday after next. It will be Martin Luther King Day on January 15th and therefore a good moment to reflect on our attitudes toward the poorest of the poor, as we remember that Martin Luther King, at the time he was martyred, was extending his activism beyond the civil rights of African-Americans and beginning to take up the torch against poverty in general. We will talk more in a couple of weeks about how we regard those images from South Asia— how we feel kin, or don't feel kin, to those brown faces and those stacks of bodies.

They say there are over 120,000 dead. It is probably beyond our comprehension to imagine such loss. That many dead and lost, and whole local economies destroyed. I know that many of you have made contributions on-line through Oxfam or UNICEF or other relief organizations and you may have made another contribution today. I hope it feels like a good offering – an amount of money that means something to you -- because I know we tend to feel quite helpless in these situations, but short of getting on a plane to deliver aid, our money is a big help to those nations. They will need help for years and years.

I had intended to speak to you today about some of the good news in religion that happened in our world in the past year. I will mention some of the stories briefly in a few minutes. The magnitude of this tsunami disaster has changed my focus, however, as I assume it may have changed your own focus and perspective in past days.

So let me save those stories for a moment and focus on the larger theological question that comes to people's minds when there is a disaster of this magnitude – one I've heard asked a lot in past days -- which is "How can you believe in a God who would do such a thing?" My very short answer is that I don't. I don't believe in a God who personally decides to "do" any such thing.

Someone joked the other day – in fact, a few people made the same joke – that they were looking forward to seeing how the likes of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson would interpret such an event. Perhaps, as has been Falwell and Robertson's tendency in the past, they would blame the tsunami on God's wrath against the Muslims or Hindus or sinning or some other such nonsense. The really problematic thing about having such a personal sense of the Deity, and giving God credit for things like helping you pitch a winning game, is that you are therefore forced to guess at God's reason for committing great acts of destruction.

As I said, when people ask me how I can believe in a God who would do such a thing, I answer that, well, I *don't* believe in such a God. I can read in the Psalms that "God caused an east wind to blow in the heaven: and by his power he brought in the south wind" and I appreciate the tradition that places God in the works of nature, while holding quite a different vision of the relationship between the natural and the holy than did the Psalmist. I do believe that there is an eternal spiritual energy in all of creation, whose origins I have no idea of, and I don't claim to know why creation created itself and continues to create itself again day after day, sometimes violently. I do know, as does everyone who lives on this planet, that it is a volatile organism that occasionally cracks or breaks

open or blows up, and that when it does so, it does so without regard for the scope of destruction to life. It is the way of nature.

However, unlike the author of the psalms, I find nothing personal in such events; I mean, I don't think they happen for any spiritual reason – to punish or to impress us, for example. The planet does what it does. What we do as a species obviously affects the planet.. But when my mother asked me the other day, "How can you keep your faith in such a time?" I was baffled. It truly never occurred to me to connect the force I think of as "God" with this natural phenomenon of an earthquake and a tsunami. My faith is in the eternal nature of love and the perpetual possibility of beauty. It is not contingent on whether or not there is sorrow and suffering in the world, which is an inevitable truth. My faith is contingent on how living beings who suffer share their strength and endure, and continue to love and praise life AND the source of life.

Perhaps this is part of the Good News of the Year in our religion. We don't feel it necessary to interpret great natural occurrences in a way that credits some arbitrary god or set of gods with such disasters. You may choose to, of course, and I would like to hear how you work it out, theologically if you do, because my own theology doesn't work that way. And in my more generous moments lately, I have actually felt sorry for the Jerry Falwells of the world (and there are Jerry Falwells in many different religions, of course), who feel that it's their job to storm around after these huge, devastating occurrences and explain to the rest of us what God means by them. And of course what God means is always something full of judgment and terror against those people and values that Jerry Falwell condemns. It's very convenient, isn't it? I suppose that works very well for such self-assured religious conservatives in terms of giving them a

comforting sense of meaning in these tragedies, but I can't help thinking that this kind of theology does terrible damage to their spirit. I don't believe it does anyone any good.

My own sense of the meaning of these monumental natural disasters is something I get from our own 7th UU principle which affirms "the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." This principle inspires me to think of creation as a wheel, as the American Indian medicine wheel, a web, or a mandala, where all aspects of the wheel are joined in energy and in destiny. What happens to one happens to all: if you cut one finger, the other bleeds. God is the name I tend to give that energy that connects all the parts of the web. God is not a distant Mommy or Daddy that sits on Mount Olympus or anywhere else dictating tidal waves to roll down upon any of the earth's peoples.

The religious meaning in this event for me, then, is in reflecting how the earth works as an organism, how people and other living beings populate it, and how the planet creates and reacts to its own internal changes. The religious meaning for me is how all sentient beings are affected by what our planet does, how we affect our planet, and how we help each other survive nature's occasional explosions, and the losses they inflict upon the human community (I say "the human community," but I imagine there are non-human animals in devastated parts of our globe who do their own version of mourning and grieving. We don't know that the earth herself does not cry or grieve in her own way, having a soul of her own).

We know that this year, as in all years, gave us plenty of opportunities to be aware of how religion can divide and alienate human beings from one

another. There is plenty of evidence for that in your morning papers; you don't need for me to outline it for you. So I wanted to highlight for you three stories that piqued my interest and sense of possibility for how religious beliefs and communities can heal and unite more people.

The first story came in the *Christian Century* in last September's issue. It featured an Alabaman woman named Susan Pace Hamill, who wrote a biblical critique of the Alabama tax code as a paper while on sabbatical from law school. She had noticed that the poor were highly taxed, even at as low an income as \$4600 a year, and her understanding of the gospel was that the poor should not be asked to make this sacrifice when already being crushed by poverty.

"Hamill's arguments caught the attention of Republican Governor Bob Riley, who in 2003 led a movement to make taxes less burdensome for the poor. "

Unfortunately, voters later rejected the referendum by a 2-1 margin (surprise) but the conversation that surrounded the issue fascinated me because it was one of the rare times I had heard of Bible-based, Christian values applied to policy in a way that I feel was really true to the heart of the gospels. This doesn't mean that I believe the Bible should be used to form public policy, but if it is (and it often is – especially in the Bible Belt!) – it's heartening to see that it can be done in a way that focuses on Jesus' concern for the poor rather than on Paul's obsession with taboo forms of sexuality or with the appropriate role of women. So that definitely interested me, even if for mixed reasons.

In Sand Springs, Oklahoma, the location of my second story about good news in religion, signs appeared around town targeting 17-year old Michael Shackelford as a "doomed teenaged fag." The signs were posted by Fred Phelps, the infamous so-called "pastor" of the Westboro Baptist Church, a hatemonger

who shows up in various spots around the U.S. with his sick little flock to scream through a megaphone, picket with hate-messages, and terrorize the population with a perverted message he claims comes from the Bible, but which bears very little resemblance to the actual Scriptures. They came to Sand Springs this time because Michael, and his mother Janice, had been featured in a *Washington Post* article about the struggles of a young gay man living in the Bible Belt. Phelps' band were planning to invade Michael's own congregation, the evangelical Cornerstone Church – where Michael had assumed he would be cast out for coming out as homosexual and was therefore trying to keep a low profile and deal with his religious community slowly and carefully – to protest the church and Michael. During a worship service.

The signs they held up that morning featured hateful, disgusting images and messages. The sign I mentioned earlier was really the least of it, if you can believe it. And Michael's church – who never dreamed they would be asked to meet such a day -- held strong. One of the members said to Michael, "Man, you be who you are," and another woman said, "We got your back," holding up her Bible. The pastor said to the congregation, "Let me hear you say it: God loves us all!" And Michael's own 88-year old grandmother, when her daughter Janice rushed over to tell her what was going on, said, "Janice, I'm a tough old lady. You should have told me."

In nearby Tulsa that same Sunday night, a vigil was held in response to the Phelps demonstrations. It was organized by Tulsa Oklahomans For Human Rights and held at a gay and lesbian community center. About 220 people showed up, and I am happy to be able to tell you that there was a strong Unitarian Universalist representation – a religion Janice Shackelford had never

heard of. □ This is a story how any religious community who thinks they know who they are and what they stand for, might be called to stretch their hearts and minds to truly practice the religion of love they claim to embrace. It is a learning for all of us. Humbling for all of us. Our learnings may be different but our need to be challenged and stretched certainly isn't.

My third story is one that was not really covered by the papers. In July of 2004, in Barcelona, Spain, close to 9,000 representatives from almost 450 religious traditions from 85 countries gathered for the Parliament of World Religions. They talked about peace and disarmament, the environment, debt relief for poor nations, the refugee crisis in many parts of the world, global cooperation and spiritual practices. The delegates shared ideas and conversation, and in my favorite detail about the week, the international Sikh community fed all the participants a huge vegetarian meal every day, a service which meant that they spent their WHOLE week in Barcelona cooking and cleaning up after the meals, foregoing the opportunity to attend any workshops or lectures. They offered this service in honor of the 400th anniversary of the establishment of the Sikh scriptures in India, a scripture which highlights the sacred value of hospitality. That's quite a ham and bean supper, if you think of it in New England terms.

As we continue to seek out the stories of hope in our world in the new year, there are also some things we would very much like to put behind us from the old year. The ushers have given you scraps of paper on which to inscribe those things from which we would seek to unburden ourselves. We now invite you to come to the Burning Bowl and consign them to the purifying flames.

□

(May what you have released here be forever gone from your spirit and cease to trouble you. May you be relieved and renewed, ever mindful that love is always more powerful than fear, and that compassion is the key to freedom from resentment.)

BENEDICTION

I wish for you a troubled heart at times
 As woes of world and friend come close beside
 And keep you sleepless.
 I wish for you the thrill of knowing
 Who you are,
 Where you stand,
 And why.
 Especially why.
 Not prosperity, but dreams I wish for you;
 Not riches, but a sense of your own worth I wish
 For you.
 Not even long life, however proud we'd be to have it so.
 But life that is crammed with living,
 Hour by hour.
 And love I wish for you;
 May you give it frequently.
 I wish for you solitude in the midst of company,
 And a mind full of company within your quiet times.
 Full todays I wish for you, and full tomorrows.

-- Charles Stephen, Jr. from "The Gift of the Ordinary"