

Egypt or Eden?

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Egypt or Eden? They are two pivotal settings in the Old Testament. So much so, in fact, that I believe they take on a symbolic life of their own. Eden and Egypt are not merely places where significant events of the Jewish and Christian story occur, but they are also meant to be states of mind. When you get right down to it, much of the Bible is really a collection of poetry and metaphors. These images may or may not move your soul or inform your spiritual life in a significant way. But I think we miss something important when we take the Bible at face value.

Thus I invite you to consider Eden, the lush garden where the world began, not as some literal place, but as a state of being. It is the center of abundance. Everything in the world is possible, every need accounted for. It is bursting with life. God walks in the Garden of Eden with the same familiarity and proximity that you or I might stroll the grounds at Longwood.

In contrast to that lush abundance is the dry scarcity of Egypt. In the Old Testament, and even in the New Testament in places, Egypt symbolizes everything Israel is not. Here Pharaoh rules instead of God. Instead of leisure there is toil; bondage instead of freedom. In many ways the difference between Eden and Egypt is the difference between a rainforest and desert. Here, for the first time, someone says “We do not have enough. We must get more, and we must ration what we have.” It should be noted that this is not factually wrong. It is a true statement. That is how you adapt to living in the desert. Pharaoh’s dream that there would be a famine in the land actually came to be. But while this is factually true, it is spiritually deadening, for fear and anxiety reign in Egypt. Fear and anxiety are the real Pharaohs that keep us in bondage even today. To free ourselves we must try to move out of a culture or world view that sees only scarcity, the dry desert of Egypt, and sees just as clearly the vibrant green of abundant Eden.

Brueggemann, in a later section of our reading today, turns to the New Testament for an example of finding abundance in the midst of scarcity. He finds it in the miracle of the loaves and fishes. The only one of Jesus’ miracles that is described in all four gospel stories, the story is probably familiar to you. Jesus and the disciples are preaching and teaching to a crowd, and it is growing late. The audience is getting restless. People are hungry, but there is almost nothing to eat, just a couple of fish and a few loaves of bread. Jesus blesses the bread, and

they begin distributing the food to the crowd. Amazingly, in perhaps a nod to the Hanukkah story, the miracle is that there is enough for everyone with some left over. What was a little turned out to be enough. Brueggemann writes:

“The feeding of the multitudes is an example of the new world coming into being through God. When the disciples, charged with feeding the hungry crowd, found a child with five loaves and two fishes, Jesus took, blessed, broke, and gave the bread. These are the four decisive verbs of our sacramental existence. Jesus conducted a Eucharist, or a gratitude. He demonstrated that the world is filled with abundance and freighted with generosity. If bread is broken and shared, there is enough for all. Jesus is engaged in the sacramental, subversive reordering of public reality....Jesus reaffirms Genesis 1.”

This may sound a bit odd to some of us. Sacraments are not usually something we get into a whole lot, whereas many other churches do. A sacrament is simply an acknowledgement of the presence of the Holy in our midst. In many Christian churches these sacraments are done by mimicking the actions of Jesus in the biblical stories. Unitarian Universalism has typically taken a much broader view of such things.

For us anything, any action, any ritual, could be a sacrament. If the Holy is always present, always connected to us through that interdependent web of existence, then when are we *not* engaged in a sacrament? Why be so stingy with them, I say. Catholics name seven sacraments; Protestants only two. For Unitarian Universalists, every moment of our lives we are swimming in the Holy whether we recognize it or not. Sacraments abound.

That is the Unitarian Universalist message of abundance. Like the prophet Jesus, our story of abundance is a subversive one in our culture. As Brueggemann puts it, the Nike story is the far more dominant narrative. It is a story whose basic message is not that you are loved nor is the sacred is nearby. Rather this is the scarcity story of Egypt. You do not have enough, you are not good enough, you need more stuff, and if you have to go into debt to get it, then you better get it. It is interesting that he chose Nike; he could have chosen just about any company that induces in us fear and anxiety which keeps us in bondage. But with Nike I can never forget the rash of inner city shootings that happened in the eighties and nineties over Nike tennis shoes. Back then Michael Jordan's shoes sold for a tremendous amount of money, and were highly prized. Wearing them in some neighborhoods was flaunting a luxury item in the face of those who had very little. Jealousy and envy are the twin children of Egypt. They are born of the scarcity worldview that sees only what I don't have and does not appreciate what I do have.

This grew so extreme that people were able to kill each other over the shoes they wore.

And it isn't just some group of kids long ago and far away. It is us right now too. Sure we probably won't kill anyone over it, but consumerism is a mentality that invades us all—myself included. It invades our children. Watch a commercial for McDonalds some time. It is not geared to the adults with the money. It is geared toward children who nag the adults into buying the hamburgers and the toys. It is the anti-gospel of scarcity.

So what do we do about it? How do we make an exodus from that state of our soul that lives in Egypt and sees the world as both scary and scarce, to reimagining a place of abundance, safety and peace; a return to Eden? Well, like Walter Brueggemann, I believe it is all in the stories we tell, the stories we hear, and the stories we buy into. If all we hear is Nike's story of consumerism, and we do not imagine a new way of being in the world, then there is little hope. But if we can articulate a story that is more compelling, more inspiring and hope-filled than the scarcity of Egypt, then we have a real chance at making a difference in this world.

There was such a story that made the rounds among UU churches about ten years ago. I would not be surprised if many of you have heard it before. If so I beg your patience and your indulgence as I venture to

tell it again this morning. Its origin and author are unknown to me; perhaps some of you will inform me later. But it goes a little something like this.

There was a young man who was very serious about religion and his spiritual practice. One of the things that troubled him in life was a fear of the afterlife; would he go to heaven or would he sink down into the depths of hell. The latter fear consumed him and his practice. He dreaded his worst nightmares of demons and pitchforks and eternal fire. One day he went to visit his master, his spiritual teacher, and asked him if he could put his mind at ease concerning the afterlife. The master smiled and said, "Of course. Would you like to see hell?" Frightened by the prospect, the young man tentatively agreed.

Using his mystical powers, the master induces a vision in his young apprentice. The young man sees a vast dining hall with all kinds of delicious food covering the tables. Yet sitting in the chairs around this great feast are people who look gaunt and frail. They are rather snippy with each other, arguing with one another to get out of their way. For as the meal begins the young man notices why this is hell. The utensils, the forks and knives and spoons, are all ten feet long. Ah, the Rod Serling-like twist is made known. Every time someone goes to pick up a piece of the delicious food, they cannot balance it on the long utensils. Or as they swing these long forks to their mouths, they hit one of their neighbors and start a fight or an argument. Those few who

manage to avoid those obstacles still cannot get the food to their mouths. This vast feast of abundant goodies sits right before them, and yet it is so far away. That closeness of what we desire and yet cannot have, is the real torture of hell.

“And now,” the master says, “I will show you heaven.” Instantly the young man sees a vast dining room, very similar but just short of identical to the last one. Here again there are vast amounts of delicious food weighing down this table. The table appears about ready to buckle under from the weight. What is different here is the people sitting around the table. They are well-fed, even jolly. They laugh, and joke with one another, obviously enjoying each other’s company. When the meal begins, the young man is surprised to see that in heaven they too have utensils that are ten feet long. However as the meal begins, he sees the real difference between heaven and hell. In heaven they use their ten foot long forks to feed each other. Instead of selfishly trying to consume for themselves at the expense of their neighbors, the people around the table in heaven trust that those sitting next to them will bring them the delicious food before them, just as they do so themselves.

For those of you who sat patiently, or perhaps through gritted teeth, as I talked about Egypt and Eden a moment ago, I hope this story serves you better. I understand that for some the metaphors and myths of the Old and New Testament do not have the impact that they have on some others of us. That is fine. At any rate, here we see another

example of scarcity or abundance. Heaven and hell have the exact same set up. They are identical. The difference is not the in the physical surroundings, it is not in which place has more or better food. The difference between heaven and hell is how the people in each place react to their circumstances. The people in hell are looking out for themselves. They are compelled by hunger; the need to consume. They do not care about their neighbor other than perhaps to be jealous of how close they are to the roast turkey as opposed to me.

Heaven on the other hand, is a place where there is real community. People trust their neighbors to help them, and they in turn are willing to help as well. They look at that table and they see abundance, not only of food, but abundance of friendship and fellowship. Their concern is primarily for others. I can imagine them thinking, “What does that fellow sitting across from me like?” Or “What are her favorite foods? What does she need that I can give her right now?” Whereas fear of not having enough dominates the thinking in hell, here in heaven it is all about loving the people next to you. Knowing them, loving them, and being willing to jump in and be of service to them. In essence, it is the beloved community that we mention in our unison every Sunday. In this story, heaven is that hoped for ideal of beloved community made into reality.

I believe this is our subversive story, our prophetic parable, against the dominant culture of consumerism. For I believe that right now this

morning, all of us are sitting around a vast table filled with goodies, and the waiters are bringing out the long utensils they keep in the supply closet. And it now comes down to all of us. Do we make of our church hell by attempting to feed only ourselves and thereby ultimately failing, or do we trust the brothers and sisters sitting around us to feed us what we need. I imagine in heaven that sometimes that person sitting next to you may try to select your favorite food and presents it to you on the long fork before your mouth, and you realize it is spinach or broccoli. I bet in heaven they eat it anyway, and thank their neighbor, and forgive their neighbor. That is part of heaven too—forgiving and letting go.

Which will we be? It all depends on what state our souls are in: the scarce desert of Egypt or the lush Garden of Eden. For I have a Rod Serling, Twilight Zone-esque, twist of my own for you. Unbeknownst to all of you here right now, you have been listening to my second sermon on the amount. As you may know, last Sunday we passed a budget that did not balance to the tune of 26 thousand and change. Today we are formally kicking off a supplemental pledge drive for next year. That means that those of you who have turned in your pledge, we are asking that you consider increasing that gift to help us achieve this new goal. Sharon and I are increasing our pledge by 10%, and if a lot of us make even a modest increase of our initial pledge, then that 26 thousand will evaporate. If not, then difficult cuts will need to be made. It is that simple.

Believe it or not, I am an optimist when it comes to this budget. Maybe the last of the optimists. But my optimism is not blind. It is based on being your minister for the past two years and seeing first hand how First Unitarian Church really is a beloved community. Rev. Barbara and I were very intentional when we wrote that unison affirmation that we say every Sunday. I have seen tremendous generosity of time and money pour out of people committed to our church and its mission in the world. I have spoken to visitors and newcomers who are drawn here not just by the message and music they hear at worship, but by the feeling of welcome they get at coffee hour, the community of learning their children get in their classes, and the connections they build in small groups. This is what a beloved community looks like and feels like. You are it. Now is the time to pick up one of those long forks, and feed your neighbor. It may be that your pledge makes possible a new youth or family program that welcomes a new person or sustains someone's faith journey. You may fund a new social action initiative that transforms not only our church but also our community. You may bring into being an inspiring musical service that uplifts our collective hearts and souls much as we heard last Sunday. For at the same time your gift is feeding someone else, it is also the case that they are feeding you in the same way. May there be no limits on our generosity. For when we feed each other around that table, we make Eden a reality in our midst. Amen Blessed Be.