

Peace among Those Whom He Favors

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This morning is the first Sunday of Advent and the fifth day of Hanukkah. That means that it is the official start to the holiday season. For some of us that is a message of profound joy and excitement, and for others the toll of impending doom. This time of year reminds me of my friend John's experience of a few years ago.

I knew John in Omaha. He was not a member of the church, but an adjunct professor of religion at the local university. This is about four or five years ago I guess. Things were tough in Omaha generally and for John's university in particular. The school's endowment had not been doing particularly well, and that meant that one of the institution's primary sources of income was coming up short. No one knew what that meant precisely, but it could not have been anything good.

This was especially true of the religion department. Religion departments at public universities are something of an anomaly. All of the truly great religion departments are mostly in private or religious universities. The rest of the academic community looks with suspicion

at the religion department. What are they doing over there? They must not be completely committed to our secular world view. Not to mention that in most public universities, religion majors are not the cash cows that the engineering alumni tend to be. Most people wind up in the religion department, after they initially mean to be English or science majors.

For John, the worst part was the not knowing. All of these factors just sort of compounded on top of each other as a knot in John's gut. There was nothing really he could do—he was the low man on the totem pole without tenure. As the holiday season loomed, and the word “cuts” was beginning to be spoken at something above a whisper back at the office, John faced the holidays with that toll of doom feeling. For these problems do not just stay at the office. His marriage to his wife Elizabeth had always been strong, but lately they had started to fight more as the uncertainty of his situation started to tinge every decision the couple made. If only something would happen, then they could deal with it together. But living with this cloud of uncertainty and anxiety crept into their home life. Now John felt as if he had no refuge from the storm.

It was the ad on TV for the new video game system that was the last straw. As soon as John saw it, and he saw it with his two kids who immediately went into a frenzy of excitement, John knew the storm clouds of his life were beginning to gather. He dodged all of his

children's not-so-subtle hints about what they wanted for Christmas that year. He could have been a witness on in a murder trial, his answers were so non-committal. It was when Elizabeth made the suggestion that they get the Wii, I believe it was, that John knew this is it.

They were in the mall doing the clandestine shopping that we are all destined to be doing in the next few weeks. The music was blaring Christmas carols on how wonderful and joy filled the holidays are. This particular year those carols seemed to mock John's real experience of the holidays. Somewhere near the food court his wife brought up the subject of the video game system their kids wanted for Christmas. How could they pay that hefty price with things so up in the air? It would be irresponsible. But we can't put life on hold until the university figures out its finances. Why should our children be crushed on Christmas morning when we don't even know what is going to happen? John felt his side of the argument slipping away from him. He knew he was right, that they shouldn't take such a chunk out of the family finances when things were so up in the air, but as a lot of married people know, being right doesn't always mean you win fights like that. So John found himself pushing their cart toward the electronic store to buy the video game system, muttering to himself the whole time.

His ego bruised, and Andy Williams crooning about how it was the most wonderful time of the year, John just stopped. There in the middle of the electronics store, all of a sudden, this amazing feeling of peace

swept over him. His body felt relaxed, and his mind felt clear. That knot in his stomach that had been there since last quarter's financial reports had been released, suddenly dissipated. Without warning or foreshadowing, he let go of whatever anxiety he had been holding on to in the past couple of months.

As John related the story to me, just then out of the blue he saw the absurdity of his own situation. There was nothing he could do about work other than teach his classes. He can't be responsible for the whole university or even the whole economy. It will be what it will be. If he is not in control of what goes on in his job, then why bring that uncertainty and anxiety home with him to his wife? Might as well let go of that worry there as well. Without worrying about that cloud of uncertainty at home, what is there to fight about? You can let go of having to be right all of the time. Better to be in relationship with people than to be right all of the time. So why should he feel resentful of having to buy this video game system that he can't afford? He could make sacrifices elsewhere in the family budget in order to make this happen for his children on Christmas.

This was John's thinking and feeling in that moment. His entire perspective changed. Note that nothing about his situation was altered in any tangible way other than his own frame of mind. But that change of perspective was huge; it made all of the difference. When he let go, he found peace. That is so terrifically difficult to do isn't it? Our

culture seems to have two contradictory messages about the holidays. It is the most wonderful time of the year, but only if you deliver the goods to your friends and family. The pressure and the stress of those contradictory messages can be overwhelming at times. Peace came to John only when he was able to set aside all of the “shoulds,” and just see what was going on his life. Let it go and find peace.

Not all of John’s problems were solved by his epiphany. He did buy the video game system, and his children had a wonderful Christmas I am sure. But that which he and Elizabeth had feared came to be: John was let go from his teaching position shortly into the new year. He stayed on for a year and half in an administrative job, but he hated it. However, because they faced their situation together, John and Elizabeth found their marriage growing stronger in the face of their common adversity. Eventually John got a new position teaching at a different university in another town. It was scary moving to a new city and relocating his family, but John knew now what it was like to let go at a deep level. It was around the time when he was getting ready for his move, that he told me the story about buying the video game system and his experience of peace in a very unexpected place.

The shepherds in the Christmas story also found the Holy in a very unexpected place. I am not sure if John would call his experience of peace “God” exactly, but it was very similar to the kind of peace of mind that the saints often describe as being in the presence of God. Religion

professors, however, are often too objective to put themselves in the place of their subjects. I don't know what John would think of me comparing his experience to that of the shepherds in the Bible, but I see some interesting parallels. These shepherds are minding their own business, literally minding their sheep at night, so this is the second shift. These are blue collar people who have to work long hours at a tough job for little pay. It is just a normal day at the office, and then BAM and an angel of the Lord appears and starts talking to them. As if that weren't enough a whole choir of angels follow up behind the first angel and start singing. "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors." I wonder if those two things don't go together: peace and God's presence. Perhaps it is the Zen Buddhist in me longing to connect to various parts of the Biblical story, but I like that association. Peace of mind, serenity, letting go of attachments, are all signs of God's presence. Of course those of you for whom God and angels present problems, if those are not symbols, or images, or poetry that speak to you, that is fine. But that experience of feeling profound peace, of letting go, is something that we can all relate to regardless of our theological proclivities. It is certainly something that we can all yearn for during this holiday season.

But since it is the holidays, I will stick with the poetic language of God for a while longer, for our Jewish friends have something to say at this point. There is that dramatic moment when Moses is talking to God

in the burning bush. He says to God, “You have to give me something. I know my people, if I claim to be talking to God, they are going to want to know your name.” Well God doesn’t like to be pinned down like that. Not his style apparently. So he comes up with a rather elusive answer to his name, “I am who I am.” Almost sounds like Popeye doesn’t it? Actually this line plays an important historical role. Plato described God as an unchanged, eternal being. Thus “I am” seemed to fit pretty well with Plato’s ideas about God—a happy coincidence. For a time it was fashionable for educated Greeks to practice Judaism, or at least attempt to do so. Sadly the Jews weren’t looking for converts and the tensions between Hellenistic culture and religious innovation butted heads with Jewish traditionalism. The story of the Maccabean revolt, the background to the Hanukkah story, is a fight against these Hellenistic Greeks.

Unfortunately for the Jews, the Greeks didn’t know Hebrew as well as they thought they did. In nearly every version of the Bible around these days, an alternate translation of “I am who I am” is given. It seems that verb can be translated into the future tense as well as the present tense. Thus God might have said to Moses “I will be who I will be.” Or perhaps “I will be where I will be.” This is an even more elusive answer to Moses’ question. But it makes some sense. “I am an elusive God. You will find me in places that you never expect. Whether it is in an elaborately carved ark carried into battle, in a whirlwind at

Job's bedside, speaking through angels to frightened shepherds on a December night, on a cross in Golgotha, or in aisle six of the electronics department in Omaha Nebraska; I will be where I will be." That seems to be the common consensus of God. He surprises us.

This is what makes Kushner's story of the Hasidic girl's game of hide and seek so interesting. Has this God who calls himself "I will be where I will be" been too good at the hide and seek game? Or have we forgotten how to play? Is that God's fault or ours? Not sure that it matters, but what I do know is that that experience of peace that John experienced, and that the angel chorus sang about, is a very elusive state of mind. Ironically, it is even more elusive in the midst of holiday stress and pressure.

So how do we get there? How do we find the peace among those whom God favors in the swirling torrent of the holiday season, whatever your holiday of choice happens to be? There is no easy answer unfortunately. If I could pin down this ever-elusive God, I would be better than Moses himself. Actually I would probably be one of those televangelists who cheat little old ladies out of their social security checks by peddling a God so small that it easy to swallow him but hardly satisfying. What is known as the so called "prosperity gospel." It feels good, but then again all snake oil does. This speaks to the other part of Kushner's reading this morning: the disillusionment with the all-too-human enterprise of religion. Unitarian Universalists are not perfect

in this endeavor of course. Although I would give us some credit for being honest about the imperfection of religion. Instead of clinging to creeds and desperately dipping some sacred text in infallible concrete, we take as a given that religion is a journey we undertake both collectively and individually. No one has ever done it perfectly. We have some models and some ideas to guide us, but it is an all-too-human growth process toward spiritual maturity.

I think the best we can do is to be open to that experience of peace that is the presence of God, if you will, or simply the letting go of our deepest held anxieties at a soul level. The irony is that when we let go of our desperate search for God, that is precisely when we find him. He or she comes to us. Our job is just to be open, to be mindful, and to be receptive to peace.

I will close with another story about finding the peace of the holiday season in an unexpected time and place. It happened when I was doing my internship in Chapel Hill North Carolina. My internship supervisor, the minister of the church, was a great guy named Charlie. Charlie was a feisty old fellow, very personable, and I learned a lot about ministry from him. It was Christmas Eve day, and North Carolina was having one of its occasional ice storms. There was a forecast of black ice for Christmas Eve, and this was a very dangerous thing in a state that does not plow the roads. Christmas Eve service was of course planned for late in the evening. What is a minister to do?

Indeed, Charlie was sitting in his office that day, contemplating that very question. As he told the story in his Christmas Eve sermon that night, he got a call from a member of the congregation. Later the congregational president confessed to me that it was her. She called him up that afternoon desperate and anxious. He could hear the concern in her voice. “Charlie,” she said, “What are you going to do about the weather?” Put in those terms, the answer became clear to him. There was nothing he could do about the weather. No need to worry; just let it go. And as soon as he did that, he felt the Christmas spirit wash over him, and he was ready for Christmas Eve service.

May you find this holiday season the peace of God or at least some peace of mind. Let go of the things over which you have no control. Hold on to the things that are most important. And as Reinhold Niebuhr wrote in his famous serenity prayer, may we have the wisdom to know the difference. Amen Blessed Be.