



Well, this time in the church year, there are colliding forces, and I don't mean opinions about cabinet appointees. I mean this time of year is a happy time. The baby is coming, get the nursery ready. Get your soul ready. God in the world is born and the other forces are the storms ahead. Everything will change. If last week in Advent was about dreaming, this Advent is about waking up. We are called to wake up to the realities before us. The reading that we read today is read all over the world. John the Baptist foretells the coming of Jesus. And you might ask, why would we listen to him? A deranged vagrant son of Zechariah, probably never happened, declares God is at work in the world.

There are probably really no connections to an actual person in John, but the Bible is rich in metaphor, and that's where we live during this time of year. So we listen to John as he goes around in his furs, covered in honey and locusts and proclaims, "There is thunder in the desert", says one translation of this reading. "There is thunder in the desert. Prepare God's arrival. Make the roads smooth and straight. Every ditch will be filled in. Every bump smoothed out, the detours straightened out, the ruts paid over. Everyone will be there to see the parade of God's salvation." If only those were the words of Dallas City Council Roads Department. Parade of God's salvation. What is this thunder in the desert? God coming. Don't sleep through it. You can't sleep through it.

I mean, it's rich coming from John who fled to the desert for some serenity, I think. He couldn't take the hubbub and distractions of all the people around him who were fussing over the price of olive oil and the Roman tax collectors beating on their doors, and whether they were going to have Netflix service that night. "Wake up", he says. The story says there are important things are happening. Advent is about the uproar of the world, about resetting our spiritual selves to meet these realities. We see the headlines. We see the weather channel. We see the news. There are real things to worry

about, but in the midst of Advent, we are reminded that our spiritual well-being is the answer to the turmoil. "Don't hide from what is real", these texts say. "Face the world, but do it from a place of spiritual strength. Don't hide, don't sedate."

Barbara Brown Taylor, who's a well-known preacher, tells a story about a day in Advent when she was speaking at a Catholic school in San Antonio, and the professor says to her, "Did you hear about the Hallmark explosion?" And she responds, "Oh no. I hope no one was hurt." And he says, "No. The ratings of Hallmark TV, they're exploding." It turned out that during this time of year and these last few years, Hallmark Channel has topped the ratings of cable television, beating out Fox and other stations, beating out the agitation and the suffering and the busyness and the pain of the world with love comes softly. In my dreams and where the heart is. All dramas with happy endings, characters who are doing the right thing. People don't get hurt to get to the solution. Hallmark TV topped CNN and Fox and other news, and the Christmas lineup is just beginning. And I get that.

In my house it's shrinking all the time. The TV show, not people. We're not watching shows that are about hurting one another, we're not watching shows about psychological damage. I get it. I get the need to hide away in those moments. But we live in scary times. Anxiety in society is at an all-time high. Small turns in our conversations become talk about the end of the environment or democracy. Doesn't that happen really quickly these days? Our polarization feels personal. We feel raw, we feel suspicious of the people around us, and some of us are acting on our fears. But when you act on your fears, they only strengthen our position of polarizing identities between us and others.

So what is John saying about all this? A character covered in mud from the first century, calling to us through the pages of a book most of us don't look at much these days. He's saying, "Do not soothe your soul with sedatives or Hallmark TV shows." He said that. That's in the Bible. He says, "The parade of God's salvation is coming." I say amen to that, I like that. But what he's really saying is, "You have to face the truth of this moment. You have to find an inner strength. You have to act from the best self that you can muster for salvation for all."

As a Unitarian and a Universalist, this means that we pay attention to this moment. Jesus is coming, is actually really good news, not because he's a download from God to be sacrificed on the cross for the salvation of believers, but because here is a story of a child born king, born prophet, born challenger of the status quo, born to a pregnant teen surrogate, a set of unlikely heroes in unlikely places showing up to unseat our comfort with challenges. Challenges for us to be more caring, to cut down the hierarchies we create in our lives. Challenges of our perceptions of what is going to happen with real actions in our lives that we can be proud of.

The story is about unlikely heroes that have come to tune our hearts so that we can embrace what is. Not be passive, sedated citizens, but rebels of heart. And if that is salvation, we will take it. A new member of the church a year ago asked me, "Well, what is salvation for Unitarian Universalists?" And I said, "Well, I think it's just that when you come to the end of your life, you did in your life what you could. You lived a life of integrity without regret or fear, having made your life what you could to contribute the best to those around you. Salvation." And I was wrong actually.

That's all right. I'll take it, I'll take it. Because I was actually partly right. Partly right, partially wrong, because I left off something that is salvation that's important, that is making things right with others, that is repair and restoration and repentance, those things that we break in the world need our attention. And these stories are asking us to pay attention to that also. To do that starts with a deep understanding that life is about meaning-making, not accumulation in the building of wealth, but making meaning, and paths straight for others, and making parades of love everywhere we go, rather than parades of destruction.

Meaning-making is a call to pay attention more, to challenge ourselves to make use of the time. We have to ask ourselves what we are called to be in this moment in front of the people we are in front of. Making-meaning starts with understanding what your effect is on others. It begins going through the hurts you've created and the ones you received, and thinking about what is really important right now, here in this moment. Salvation is easing the burdens of others and ourselves to live more purposefully.

You see, I don't believe salvation is as it is classically understood in Christianity, the deliverance of humans from sin and its consequences through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I don't believe that. That makes no sense to me. Jesus didn't die because he was sacrificed by a loving God who wanted to have his son murdered so everyone could be free. If anything, God wanted Jesus to teach humanity about freedom and love. The state killed Jesus because he spoke the truth. And so in our church in Advent where we're starting to hear these stories, this is the beginning of this long story that the church created. Advent is the birth of what is possible. It is the birth of our taking responsibility for the truth and inheriting messages of compassion and justice and putting them into practice.

It isn't about sitting back and saying, "Because Jesus was born and will die and some are saved, the world is going to be fine." That's not who we are. No, for us, no one is saved until we do the work of saving ourselves and each other until we put our efforts into making something better for another person, forgiving someone who hurt us or working for forgiveness from a person that we hurt. No one is saved until we stand for something that helps someone who is marginalized, give to a cause that changes another's life, or we put ourselves in the way or in proximity with someone who is being told they are unworthy. What is salvation? Is living with the comfort of these life's dilemmas and it is leaning into what matters. It is adjusting our lives in the storms of what is and not giving up, but putting our best selves forward.

I heard a TED Talk years ago by a man named Ric Elias. It's called "Lessons I Learned while my Airplane Crashed." It was actually about a plane crashing and what he learned in the few minutes before the plane corrected itself. You can imagine all the things that's going through your head at that moment. He says three things came through his head on that moment. I think it's looking back at the experience, but that's okay. His lessons for us are important. One is, he said, "I am a collector of old wines." He said, "So many things that I hope to do. There are so many things. Wine, I hope to drink someday that I should drink today and not wait. I should do those things that I want to do. I should

mend those things I need to mend, not wait." He said, "I no longer postpone anything in my life. I live with urgency."

Two, he said, "I don't choose to be right, I choose to be happy." He said he wasted a lot of time on people who mattered with being right. Honestly, I know a lot about this. If we need to start a support group, I'm ready to start that. Don't choose to be right, choose to be happy. And three, he said, "have gratitude for what you have." He said, "dying isn't scary, but you have to try to be great." You fill in the blank. A great dad, a great mom, a great friend. I'll add a great parishioner. Whatever it is, that was a joke. A challenge, but a joke. "Whatever it is, it's worth it", he said. "And have gratitude for what you have." What A salvation.

The Christian story is full of plane crashes, clashes of power, clashes of violence, being met with other things like love and compassion. It's full of systems of power in economies that keep us separated, politics that create fear, religion that demonizes and violates the young. And this story that we're celebrating this month at the core, says that someday it will all come tumbling down to make the world safe for all. It says, that story that we're celebrating this month says that there'll be a divine bulldozing coming from a power great that comes from unexpected places. And I say that divine bulldozing comes from a change in each of us to make the roads smooth, not for our own sake, but for others. A parade of God that doesn't just happen to us, but because of us.

You get what I'm saying? This is a core spiritual lessons of this time of year, asking us to listen to the characters that are asking us to tune our hearts one more time. And to do it when times are hard. In a book I keep going back to, which is David Brooks' book, *Second Mountain*, he tells a story. He tells so many stories, but he tells this one story about this man named Kennedy Odede. Kennedy grew up in Kenya and his grandmother died when he was three years old, and she was bitten by a rabid dog, and his drunken stepfather beat him, and his best friend died at age eight from malaria, and so he joined a street gang and took drugs and sniffed petrol and committed crimes, and was nearly killed several times. Then he was rescued by a priest and then he was abused by that same priest.

And Brooks says Odede is one of the most joyful people he knows. Even in the midst of all these difficulties, facing these very difficult realities, he asked him, "How could it be that you're one of the most joyful people I've ever met?" And Odede said, "When she could, my mother poured unconditional love into me." So he pours it into others. He founded an organization called Shining Hope for Communities that combats urban poverty, has a school for girls in the Nairobi slum of Kibera. He says his organization saved his life and helped him remain positive even when the worst happened. He says, "It made me feel not like a passive victim, but like I had agency and power to change what was happening in my community." He said, "I think starting my organization gave me a sense of power, the power of Ubuntu, feeling connected to universal humanity."

"In the cruelty of the slum", he says, "there is a bright shining light." What of salvation friends? Meeting the real moments we're in. Difficult moments, either personal, or national, or global, with a sense of joy and purpose and that sense of joy and purpose that comes from being the best person we can be with the people in front of us. What of salvation? You see, Advent is only worth anything if it

invites us into a deep feeling amidst our restlessness. Advent is not just about the list of things we need to get done before Christmas, it is about really needing us to be present today, to prepare the way for the Lord, which does not mean to get through your to-do list. It means, as the poet said, "To open once again your heart. Quick, quick, quick, quick, the gates are drawn apart."

It is once again the old spiritual lessons that came through so many teachers, but this month comes through the baby Jesus, who is born in a of couple weeks. He will only cry for his milk. He will lead nothing until He can speak true words, those words that will come from the love that he receives from his parents and his community. And those words that He will speak will be, "Do not turn away from evil and all that is. If someone strikes you, turn the other cheek. If another forces you to go a mile, go with them too. Give to those who ask of you. Do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. You have heard what it is said, love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of God."

If we live into these words, even as Unitarians who don't believe any of this happened, there will be salvation, not just for some who say I believe, but for all. We can live through the tumult of our time to see salvation bloom. Amen.