



FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF DALLAS
WELCOMES SPECIAL GUEST



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Divine Intervention in a Post-Modern World

Sunday, May 24, 2026

In-person worship at 9:30 and 11 am

Online worship at 9:30 & 11 am and 7 pm CST

I've been in many UU pulpits at this point, but there's something really special about coming back and speaking for the place that raised me. So thank you all for having me here and thank you to Daniel and T.J. So I spent most of my childhood not having committed or not having been committed to a faith tradition. And by the time my teen years arrived, the fundamentalism I was immersed in Texas pushed me strongly towards atheism. I went through said atheistic anti-religious phase where I was reading Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins and other leading atheist thinkers. And ironically, it was my first visit at this congregation in 2006 at the age of 16 where Daniel happened to quote Sam Harris from this very pulpit. That was back when he was the young and hip associate minister. And after being here for that service, I thought perhaps this might be the place for me. I was quickly embraced into YRUU, the youth group here, and discovered I didn't need any concrete belief system to know that I had come home.

And here 20 years later, I am still home. So as is developmentally appropriate, that belief system began to evolve as I looked for answers deeper than this false atheist, theist binary could provide. And then in college, two pivotal experiences would connect me with something greater. It was late 2011. I was 21 in my senior year at Louisiana State University. Go Tigers. And I was in the middle of what clinical psychologists would refer to as a major depressive episode. I was dealing with strife in my immediate family. I had spent my years in college training rigorously for a career in the very practical field of opera. And I reached a point of burnout where I realized my love for the art was not great enough to sustain me through an extremely competitive path that lacked job security in a post-recession world. My confidence had been shaken. I didn't see a future for myself.

I would spend entire days in bed staring at a wall. Even my voice teacher and mentor stopped a lesson and asked me why the light behind my eyes had disappeared. But I kept on at least going through the motions if nothing else. I had to get through that last year to graduation as I had no security net to fall back on. And one of the ways I was supporting myself was as a paid singer at the campus Episcopalian Church, St. Albans. Now, I didn't necessarily connect with the theology at that point, but I did connect with a church and with the community. It was a smaller church, a chapel with furnished wooden pews, beautiful stained-glass windows, red carpets, and a choir loft equipped with a full organ. Our choir was full of singers from the LSU School of Music. And when we sang in the chapel, it was ethereal, especially one Sunday. We were singing the late Renaissance piece, *The Miserere* by Allegri, originally composed for the Vatican.

A setting of Psalm 51, the piece was among Mozart's favorite and it was written for two choirs as a call and response. And immediately before the service began, the building lost power. So the deacons decided we'd do the service by candlelight, with candles lit at the end of each pew. It was as if our little church had been transported back in time to the Renaissance, singing this piece as it had been sung by choirs centuries before us. So one choir was up in the loft and the other was processing out into the chapel and throughout the pews. So singing the cantata part, I was leading the processional first verse in the back of the chapel, the second in the aisles and finally onto the stage in front of the sanctuary. So my fellow singers and I took center stage and I sang the words, "Cast me not away from thy presence. Take not thy Holy Spirit from me."

And at that very moment, as those final words were leaving my lips, the lights in the entire chapel went on. So I wasn't quite sure what the message was, but I was listening. The second experience was later that year during winter break I was still in vicious cycles of mood swings so I decided on a whim to drive from Dallas to Austin to visit my aunt and uncle and I was journaling in their guest bedroom, still living into this existential crisis and suddenly I felt this powerful presence. Talking out loud, I asked this presence, give me a sign something. I feel it. And that's when I felt myself pushed up against the wall of the bed. Something was lifting my gaze up onto the shelf in front of me and suddenly my vision became blurred to where all I could see was this cross on the shelf.

I was simultaneously in awe and terrified gasping for air. So immediately after having this Paul moment as my friend would later put it, I guess you could say it was a type of conversion for me. These were two moments I perceived as divine intervention presented in a uniquely Christian way, but I began to question what conversion even means. I hadn't read the Bible much and what I knew about Christianity was what people told me in Texas and Louisiana. Did I have to accept Jesus Christ as my, quote, unquote, "Lord and Savior"? Did it mean that everything in the Bible was fact inerrant and fallible? Did it mean my own queerness which I was still wrestling with was inherently sinful? So I wanted to know more. So that semester I signed up for a biblical studies course and learned quickly about many other ways that one might read the Bible.

I began getting more comfortable with engaging Christian theology and spirituality while realizing my theological home still resided in Unitarian Universalism, which itself has very strong roots in Judaism and Christianity. The Christian context and Jesus or Jesus is the person, the prophet and the story is

one of many ways I understand the divine to communicate with humanity. We are also instruments for the divine to communicate through us in service to others. Take not thy Holy Spirit from me. This was the beginning of my path to ministry and I was not alone in hearing this call from God. There were plenty of other figures in mythology and history. So my first exposure to the story of Moses parting the waters wasn't in Sunday school, but in the 1998 animated classic, the Prince of Egypt, true millennial and it really is a great story. Clearing a path for the Israelites, Moses himself is this divine instrument. He has no dialogue in this passage.

God is intervening but speaking and acting through Moses to deliver the children of Israel to safety. God is communicating God's presence to both the Israelites and the Egyptians and the Egyptians say, let us flee from the Israelites for God is fighting for them against Egypt. Note that it's the Egyptians who first recognize God in this story. And though it's not the entire point, we can't help but ask ourselves, yeah, but did any of it really happen? While scholars agree that most of Exodus is literary, there are a few historical points we can look to. Egypt did have Hebrew slaves. Mass slave escapes were documented elsewhere in the ancient world. The timeline of the reign of Pharaoh Ramses and his son, Merneptah, who did reference the Israelites is succinct with the first archeological evidence of Jews in Canaan. Later historians in antiquity said this might have happened, but the sea event itself could have simply been the Hebrews having exceptional knowledge of the tides.

But magical parting of the waters aside, the fact that a large group of people putting their trust in God could have gone from slavery to sovereignty in such a way seems just as miraculous. And more importantly, what is this story trying to teach us? Verse 31, "Israel saw the great work that God did against the Egyptians so the people feared God and believed in God and his servant Moses." Initially, I struggled to get past this word feared, a much loaded word for our context full of people who have been scarred by religion. But on translation actually replaced the phrasing feared with held God in awe as that better connotated to the classical Hebrew. A Jewish scholar also notes that faith as represented here and elsewhere in the Torah represents trust rather than an abstract belief in the existence of a God or accent to a doctrine. God is intervening with the Israelites to gain their faith, but we must make note in the ways in which God is doing so.

God doesn't reach out their hand and immediately pick up and deliver the Israelites to the promised land. They still had this long and arduous trek through the desert ahead of them. God, by parting those waters, charts a path. My own so called divine intervention moments didn't give me all the answers, but they did invite me into prayer and meditation and discernment into a dialogue with God that chartered my path toward healing. God uses many tools, human and natural in this story to make God's self known and help the Israelites move forward. So in hindsight, I can't help but wonder, was somebody pulling a stunt with the lights at St. Albans? Was I just having a panic attack and getting tunnel vision in the guest bedroom? Did the Exodus really happen and if so, was Moses just using the tides to his advantage? I'm not sure. But what I do know is standing here today, I haven't had major depression in years. I found a vocation and a ministry that are deeply rewarding to me.

Though it can often be a struggle in a place like Texas and a hostile climate, I'm living more authentically just as I am. I'm happy. I've been liberated from the many constraints which I was

previously bound by and in my life and in my ministry, I make it a focal point to center others who are seeking that deliverance, that liberation, whether it be from mental illness, from poverty, the fallacy of white supremacy, from transphobia, like Moses trying to place my trust in powers greater than myself to be a vessel for that. Take not thy Holy Spirit from me. So divine intervention, coincidence, delusion. I'm inclined to believe the former, but regardless, those experiences got me out of this figurative captivity and where I am today. Is Exodus a complete work of fiction? Maybe, maybe not. But it was also the central text of the civil rights movement. Its promises being made manifest for peoples around the world. That's not fiction.

Carl Yung once said that since we are dealing with invisible and unknowable things, why should we bother about evidence? Even if we did not know by reason our need for salt in our food, we should nonetheless profit from its use. Why then should we deprive ourselves of views that would prove helpful in crises and give meaning to our existence? Paths are being laid out and as that poet Shankar Ramani told us signposts surround us everywhere. We are being invited into a relationship with that which is beyond ourselves. Do we and our little egoic selves who want to constantly remain in control and have all the answers have the audacity to recognize them and like the Israelites, not fear but trust. Faith is trust. This is trust. You are giving me the privilege of ordination here and that's because you've put your trust in me and I've put my trust in you and I look forward to that moment and continuing this journey with you. Thank you and amen.