

**THE ANGELS OF OUR BETTER NATURE
GENESIS 12:1-3; REVELATION 22:1-5
MARCH 15, 2009 – LENT THREE
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Elizabeth Bishop says although the Prodigal Son lived in absolute squalor when the sunrise sometimes glazed the barnyard mud with red, he thought he might almost endure his exile another year. It took him a long time to decide to go home.ⁱ

Have you ever been in a situation like that—isolated and alone but unable to rally the strength or resources to leave and return to your true self?

We are all from time to time prodigals squandering something precious then because of pride or habit or fear find it hard to turn from our ways.

I'd like to propose today that the human family is like that Prodigal Son. We throw precious things away – the environment, the peace, our God-given birthright of abundant life. Greed for power or material gain or vengeance offer their rewards. We find ourselves mired in global warming or war or fiscal crisis.

And so it has been the prophets who have raised their lone voices out of the rubble and destruction to call us home again.

Holocaust survivor Paul Celan says these voices are like letters in a bottle thrown out to sea with the hope that they may somehow wash up somewhere, perhaps on the shoreline of the heart. These messages in bottles are 'en route,' says Celan, toward something open, something inhabitable, something approachable...en route toward our better selves.ⁱⁱ

Tonight we will hear the prophetic voice of Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Dona Nobis Pacem* composed in 1936 during Hitler's rise to power--at the very same time Picasso was painting his famous *Guernica* denouncing the Nazi bombing of that small village in Spain.

We will hear the prophetic voices of Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson and Abraham Lincoln – each referring to the terrible destruction of the Civil War and calling us, as a nation, home again.

And this morning we heard the bible first in Genesis, then in Revelation announce then fulfill its promise that the human family will one day be like that prodigal returned home, reunited with God and one another; our life of waste and destruction over forever.

The Genesis account of God's call to Abraham, father of our three faith traditions – Islam, Judaism, and Christianity – is inspired by this promise of human community.

One day all the families of the earth will dwell peacefully together because of that original blessing bestowed upon Abraham.

Already, at the very inception of God's people the wide mercy and irrevocable generosity of God proclaims itself; it becomes for our three faith traditions the vision that prevents us from turning in upon ourselves.

These promises of God keep us from despair or self-importance not because their outcome is guaranteed or because they are theologically eloquent but because they are words spoken by God that belong to God.

Muslims, Christians and Jews have refused to give up on these words because we have experienced God's fullness in our own lives and cannot hoard but are compelled to share this blessing, this wholeness with others. God's sole intention for bringing the human family into being in the first place:

was to make us in God's image and destine us to be a blessing to our neighbor; who is, in turn, destined to be a blessing to her neighbor until all the families of the earth are blessed with the gift and fullness of life.

God blesses God's people that they might be a blessing to others. After 9/11 God's call to Abraham to be a blessing to others was extended through Temple Beth Zion's invitation to us to join together in Mitzvah Day – a day of service and caring in our community.

A year later, through Temple Beth Zion and Westminster God's call to Abraham was extended by asking our friends in the Muslim community to expand this annual day of caring and service by joining us.

This year on May 17th we will meet again to give witness and testimony to this ancient call to Abraham. Our service in soup kitchens, nursing homes, and city parks and streets will not end the fighting in our world but like a message in a bottle it may wash up on the shores of the hearts of people in Western New York and bring hope.

I've been reading a book by Gustav Niebuhr, a fellow board member at Auburn Theological Seminary and grandson of H. Richard Niebuhr and grandnephew of Reinhold Niebuhr. Gus was religion editor for the *New York Times* and now teaches journalism at Syracuse University.

His book, "Beyond Tolerance: Searching for Interfaith Understanding in America," should be read by every serious church, synagogue, and mosque-goer.

His aim in writing the book is to counter the simplistic reducing of religion to a militant force in the world while making secularism alone stand for the freedoms and ways of life we hold dear.

You see, Gus Niebuhr tells another story. A story that does not attract all the attention religious violence and extremism does. He calls attention to a quiet, growing countertrend among people of diverse religious backgrounds who are building networks that exist solely to cross boundaries when such differences are so explosive.

We often forget but such figures as Dorothy Day, Mahatmas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Pope John Paul II; the Dalai Lama; Nelson Mandela; and Malcolm X were among the most influential people of our time because they deliberately crossed *religious* lines when it was unpopular or unthinkable to do so.

Their example inspires us to continue to cross religious lines. If some prominent person declares that Judaism equals Zionism equals racism; or says that Islam is evil or labels Christians bloodthirsty "Crusaders" the negative effect will be greater among those who know no Jews or Muslims or Christians.ⁱⁱⁱ This work could not be more relevant to our time.

The wonderful paradox embedded in Sharing Sabbaths and Mitzvah Day, in our annual Understanding Islam series, and in Rabbi Rosenfeld's and my upcoming multi-faith conversations and trip to Israel is that religious differences rather than inspiring hatred can be used to forge peace.

One rabbi said, "This is not about meeting in the middle." If you are a Christian, you do not deal authentically with other religious people by hiding your affirmation of Jesus' divinity; or a Muslim who wants to speak as such with Christians and Jews cannot be expected to declare Muhammad just another prophet.

One Catholic theologian put it succinctly, "Can we admit our differences without being adversarial? Now, that's a radical idea: that you are not me, and I am not you; and that that does not carry a threat."^{iv}

Amazing as it sounds this approach is radical because it cuts directly against tribalism, an impulse to which most of us are prey – not just members of the Taliban or Al Qaeda.

Maybe the question is something like this: does Jesus' unique saving ability or Muhammad's prophetic finality or the Torah's all encompassing view of life mean that the divine is utterly lacking or even obscured in others' beliefs?

Some will answer yes. But those who see absolute darkness outside their own religious faith are a minority. The fact is there are more religious moderates than extremists in the world. As far back as 1944 Reinhold Niebuhr said an irreplaceable awareness among people of faith in today's world is the recognition that even when I profess adherence to my own religious truth, I still do not fully know the mind of God.^v

I like what a prominent American Buddhist said a few years ago at a conference of Christians and Buddhists.

She said, "We met each other as spiritually serious individuals. And what we experienced was not conversion to another faith but something richer, 'conversion to another person.'"^{vi}

On the one hand this isn't rocket science nor is it even very sexy but the bible says that when that happens – when we are 'converted to another person' — there is a sense of holy wonder.

Jacob reaching out to Esau; Joseph regent of Egypt standing among the brothers who'd betrayed him years before; Ruth a Moabite pledging her loyalty to her Jewish mother-in-law Naomi; the Apostle Peter entering the house of the pagan Cornelius; the Samaritan woman meeting Jesus at the well sharing her spiritual thirst – occasions of holy wonder.

A month ago Carol and I had dinner at a Pakistani restaurant with representatives of our Adult Education planning team and their Muslim counterparts.

Over tea, the conversation turned to the 30 year war between India and Kashmir. Kahlid Qazi who is from Kashmir explained the history from 1948 to the present that has led to the fighting. We didn't solve any international problems but I felt a new awareness, a deeper understanding of a problem that has seemed to me intractable and unwarranted.

It is that kind of awareness of each other's points of view and beliefs and passions that comes from deciding to talk and leads ultimately not to war but to peace.

Our new president is trying to do just that – trying to talk to those long considered our enemies because not talking to them has resulted only in violence. Another president after whom our current president models himself said in his First Inaugural Address, after South Carolina seceded from the Union, “we are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection.”

Then Lincoln concluded his address saying the nation, like a prodigal, would find its way and become whole again when “the better angels of our nature” were touched by remembering our true selves.

If it sounds biblical and prophetic it was. It was not popular. And although Lincoln was a lone voice his words continue to wash upon the shores of our hearts and bring hope.

Perhaps you saw the headline on the front page of yesterday's *New York Times* reporting the funeral proceedings for Constable Steven Carroll. Officer Carroll and two British soldiers were killed last week by extremists in Northern Ireland hoping to reignite bloodshed between Protestants and Catholics.

But what ignited instead of violence were huge peace rallies across Ireland and attendance by former enemies at the funeral mass and burial. Protestants and Catholics, nationalists and unionists stood side by side as the funeral procession led by a lone bagpiper passed by.^{vii}

That's the vision Genesis and prophets of every generation hold out before us. Could there be anything more full of wonder than former enemies, than followers of different religious truths, than two human beings encountering—not one another's stereotypes—but one another's hopes and dreams?

That is the journey God sets before us in the call to Abraham.

It leads from self-absorbed isolation and despair to human encounters that forge real community and lasting peace.

Friday evening in the muted light of the chapel at Temple Beth Zion the cantor led a gathering of Muslims, Christians and Jews at Shabbat singing, “God of our Mothers, God of our Fathers, hear our prayer.”

These are the holy glimpses of what the Book of Revelation says comes a day when, “the leaves of the tree of life will be for the healing of the nations. No more shall anything be accursed....they shall see his face...for the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign for ever and ever.”

That's what we are invited to become: healing leaves from the tree of life; or, as the Holocaust survivor said, messages of hope in a bottle cast into the restless sea of our troubled times, to be discovered on the shores of human hearts. Amen.

ⁱ Elizabeth Bishop, “The Prodigal,” *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984) 71.

ⁱⁱ Paul Celan, "Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen," from *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, translated by John Felstiner, (New York, W.W. Norton, 2001) 395.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gustav Niebuhr, *Beyond Tolerance: Searching for Interfaith Understanding in America*, (New York: Penguin, 2008) xx.

^{iv} Niebuhr, xxiv.

^v Niebuhr, xxvi.

^{vi} Niebuhr, xxx.

^{vii} John F. Burns, "Intended to Incite, Irish Killings Show Unity of Former Enemies," *The New York Times*, Saturday, March 14, 2009, page A1.