

Let My People Go

Victoria Ingram
August 26, 2007

When I was younger and starting to question the beliefs of my childhood, I developed an aversion to the Bible. Something like a vampire's reaction to a cross or garlic, perhaps, but I got to the point that if the Bible was mentioned, I pulled back and disengaged from the conversation. If the conversation turned to the Bible, I was out of there.

Perhaps I feared that I might be damaged by having to defend myself in discussions with those who use the words of the Bible as a litmus test of belief. Maybe it was because I find it impossible to reconcile the Bible with a modern understanding of science and rationality. I know that the time came when I didn't want to have anything to do with the Bible - not the lesson, not the history, not the Commandments, not the characters. I truly hoped not to have to deal with "that book" again.

Sometimes I remember the Bible lessons taught in my childhood church, and I remember the poetry of the language in the King James Version. I also remember that that language could be so archaic and convoluted to my modern mind that I sometimes had no idea what the Bible's authors were trying to convey. Worse, the language became an obstacle to my wanting to make an effort to understand the stories before me. I just put my Bible back on the shelf and walked away. In seminary, I discovered more modern translations of the text, which were easier to read and comprehend.

This ancient book continues to be a best seller, and I suspect that it is a book most people would say that they have read and understand, even if they haven't or they don't. I counted the other day and we have at least 10 Bibles in our home, only two of them as a result of my entering seminary. I'm willing to bet that most of you also have a Bible or two somewhere in your house, occupying space on your bookshelves.

But, I'm betting that you haven't opened your Bible and read it in awhile. From my experience, many UUs share similar forms of my earlier aversion to the Bible. This tends to be truer of West Coast UUs; our Eastern congregations, on the whole, tend to be more embracing of our Christian roots. In our UU writing and in our worship, we are often more comfortable quoting the sacred texts and words of wisdom of other religions and cultures than we are the stories and lessons of the book that has so greatly influenced our own culture. Perhaps they are easier for us to hear; less "charged," in some way, than Bible references. Despite our UU heritage in the Judeo-Christian tradition, we seldom, if ever, preach from the Bible or use the words of Jesus as instructive in our worship services. I can tell you, that while I've developed a different relationship with the Bible over the years, as your minister, I won't be a Bible-based preacher, either.

How did I come to see the Bible differently? Experience and engagement with a larger world have shown me I can't avoid it. Western culture, and especially our American society, swims in the water of Biblical references, drawn from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Our cultural standards of morality, and our criminal justice codes, for example, have been influenced by the tenets contained in its pages. Our political structures and parties have moved, especially in the last few years, toward a larger embrace of Christianity in its more fundamental and literal forms.

Our language is filled with expressions taken from the “Good Book.” In the book of Matthew, for instance, is the time-honored reference to “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” In the Psalms, we learn what it means to be “at wit’s end” and in Isaiah, it’s about “a drop in the bucket.” “As old as the hills,” “woe is me,” “the blind leading the blind,” “no rest for the wicked” – “My cup runneth over!” Yup, that’s in there, too, in Psalms.

To believe that we can “avoid” the Bible is naïve, at best, and dangerous, at worst, not that we may not wish to have it be so. I actually think that those of us who describe ourselves as religious liberals need to invest more time in the Bible, as opposed to less. The literal interpretation of the Bible has regained standing, and evangelical churches are the fastest growing churches in the United States. By allowing the meaning of the stories of the Bible, and especially the words of Jesus, to be high jacked by conservative Christians and used for political determinism, is, in my estimation, a sin. If we can’t or won’t understand this culturally significant text, others will be happy to interpret the Bible for us. And we may not like the results.

I believe we have an obligation to continue to engage the text and stories, to continue to look for the revelation and applicability of the words in today’s world. UU Minister John Buehrens, former president of the UUA and author of “Understanding the Bible: An Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers, and Religious Liberals,” puts it this way:

“The Bible is our culture’s most basic religious and spiritual classic. And the very definition of a classic is a work that is not exhausted by a single reading or interpretation. We know that religious truth did not appear all in the past. As (Ralph Waldo) Emerson said, ‘God speaketh, not spake.’”

We are the spiritual beneficiaries and descendents of the Renaissance humanists who insisted that the Bible is human literature about the divine, not divine literature about the human. We are the spiritual beneficiaries and descendents of radical reformers who insisted that the scriptures should be available to everyone, so that all might claim their powers of interpretation and understanding.”

So, if we haven’t delved into the Bible in awhile, how do we now come to understand it in its historical and cultural context? How do we engage it and decide how it might inform our day-to-day spiritual practice?

That, to me, is one of the functions of a religious community, this group of fellow travelers we call a Fellowship. This is the place to engage in study and dialogue. It is in our search for truth and meaning that we can examine the Bible for its impact on our lives today. I’m considering the offerings we might include as we revitalize our Adult Religious Education program. I’m curious about what you’d like to see offered, and if a series on the Bible might be of interest.

For now, let me help you start that process by sharing these insights from Karen Armstrong, in her book “The Battle for God.” She explains how our understanding of the Bible’s meaning has changed and shifted over the millennia. She says that “in premodern times, people had a different view of history. They were less interested than we are in what actually happened, but more concerned with the meaning of an event.” They approached their thinking and speaking of events from two perspectives, the mythos and the logos, which they regarded as complementary approaches to the “truth.”

Myth was regarded as a primary avenue to understanding, concerned with that thought to be timeless and constant in our existence. Not concerned with practical matters, myth was about making meaning of day-to-day life and explaining the origins and foundations of culture. Mythological stories were not, for these people, to be taken literally, but as insights into the deepest realms of human existence and the unconscious.

Logos was equally important, and concerned the practical – the pragmatic, scientific, and rational aspects of life that allowed people to function in the world. Logos had to exactly correlate to facts and correspond to external realities in order to allow people to make things happen and get things done. Logos doesn't look back and try to explain the past; rather, it looks forward and tries to find the new and possible, in order to create order and control the environment. Logos is concerned with innovation and discovery in the practical, rational realms of life.

In those times, people understood both mythos and logos as holders of equally valid and important clues to the full understanding and mastery of life. Armstrong points to the shift of Western culture to a preference of logos over mythos. We have become a scientific people, concerned with absolute "truth" and searching for proof. In Western society, we've moved away from understanding and explaining life through myth and story, and almost exclusively privileged the "truth" of reason and scientific rationalism.

Knowing this distinction, and the perspective of the ancients in approaching the telling of stories and the sharing of insight, was an "a-ha" moment in my regard for the Bible. Armed with the distinctions of mythos and logos, I could see the Bible in the context of its time and appreciate more fully how the original stories provided insights and understanding for the people who lived in the times when the stories took shape.

And, I could start to find my own relationship with the text, as well. Finally, I came to realize that I didn't need to accept the Bible as literally TRUE; it's not, it's mythos, and it wasn't intended to be taken as literal truth, even in its time.

But it does contain a great deal of TRUTH. In many of its stories, we find poignantly familiar descriptions of human nature, providing insights into the challenges and triumphs experienced by people throughout the ages. In the Bible's stories, we learn about what it means to be a human, to experience emotions from anger to exaltation, despair to joyfulness. From the Bible's stories, we can learn about jealousy and service, compassion and greed. For me, this perspective allows me to engage again with the Bible text.

I'll admit, I'm not always sure if I find in this new relationship the "good news" or some version of disappointing. Here's a written text that is nearly 2000 years old capturing stories going back many years before that in the oral tradition. Much of what we have inherited in the Bible seems archaic and irrelevant by today's standards and understanding. Much of it probably is. But, much of the presentation of human nature rings remarkably familiar, even all of these years later.

If you read the Bible's stories, can't you find resonances with the descriptions of anger or fear? How much progress have we made in harnessing our impulses or keeping the not-so-pretty aspects of our human nature in check? Haven't we learned anything about the price of conflict and the pain of war? Have we not embraced Jesus' command to "love one another?" Apparently not, at least not fully.

On the other hand, we also haven't lost our very human ability to feel joy, or the sacred connection to the wonder of life. We continue to dance and sing and go to

weddings and celebrate the birth of children, even as our ancestors did in days distant past. Despite the passage of time, we remain fully human, in all of our various despicable, and glorious, aspects.

There are so many stories, so many perspectives contained within this amazing text. But, today, I want to focus on one particular part of one specific story, because I think it contains some truths that can inform us, here and now, in this Fellowship, as we move forward on our journey together.

Many of you are familiar with the story of Moses, patriarch of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He's reputed to be the author of the first five books of the Old Testament, the Pentateuch in Jewish terms. Revered as the deliverer of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, he went on to be a leader of his band of followers as they reportedly "wandered" the desert for 40 years in anticipation of settling in the holy land of Canaan, promised to them by the God of Abraham.

If you haven't read the Biblical account of the miraculous escape from Egypt, you've probably at least seen the Cecil B. De Mille film, "The Ten Commandments," and you have a pretty good idea of the havoc Moses was able to muster in order to convince Pharaoh to "let my people go." Probably the most visually compelling part of the story are where the sea parts, forming a wall of water on their right and their left, and the fleeing Hebrew slaves escape across the Red Sea.

However, it isn't that amazing aspect of the Exodus story that I want to focus on today. I want to join this band of travelers at the point where they're in the desert. Initially delighted to find themselves successfully freed from slavery in Egypt, Moses' followers dance and sing and celebrate their liberation. As the days pass, and no Promised Land comes into sight, the crowd recovers from their immediate elation. They begin to question the wisdom of their flight from slavery in Egypt. They start to doubt Moses' leadership. They get tired. They complain and they get angry with God, too.

Let me read about this phase of their journey from the Revised Standard Edition:

Exodus 15:22-24

Then Moses ordered Israel to set out from the Red Sea and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Mar'ah, they could not drink the water of Mar'ah because it was bitter. And the people complained against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?"

Actually, this is one of the few times when the phrasing of the King James Version is actually more descriptive; it just paints a more human picture, to my mind:

Exodus 15:22-24

So Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water. And when they came to Mar'ah, they could not drink of the waters, for they were bitter. And the people murmured against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?"

Ever been around a group of people experiencing change? If so, you know EXACTLY what that “murmuring” sounds like!

The Israelites adventures in the wilderness continue, with periods of hope and rejoicing interspersed with times of trial and tribulation. It is during this time in the desert that the Hebrews engage in a covenant with God, as well as a covenant of community, adopting the laws and commandments that will govern their life together. They live in hope of a bright and promising future for their community, in a Promised Land of milk and honey, where their life as the beloved community of the one God will be truly blessed.

After some 40 years in the desert, wandering and unsure of the future, the Hebrews are ready to enter the long-awaited Promised Land, where they will live together in their covenanted community according to the laws of their God. Moses is informed by God that, while he was the best leader for the desert years, he is not God’s choice to lead the people into Canaan. Life in the Promised Land requires a new kind of leadership, a new perspective that Moses cannot provide. For the Israelites, things are about to change again.

And what does this have to do with us, you ask? Here’s how I see the metaphor of this Bible story represented in the life of UUFLG:

You, too, have engaged in a mighty endeavor for the last few years, preparing to call a settled minister. Now, far be it from me to look back at your history and identify any of the various challenges as a “plague of Biblical proportions,” but, you all know there have been some dicey moments. There have been times when, like the Hebrews, it was hard for this community to see the way forward. Along the way, in addition to happy times and successful moments, there were times of confusion and setback. Once in awhile, there may have even been “murmuring among the people.”

And, I don’t know if there’s a person or persons during this Fellowship’s process that one might identify in the “Moses” role, but there have certainly been many of you have stepped up and taken leadership, in a variety of ways, striving to make the dreams of this Fellowship a reality. That leadership helped you through the wilderness of uncertainty. I also want to be perfectly clear, here, so let me just categorically state that I am not seeking to put myself in the Moses role, either. I’m no one’s saint or prophet.

But, that aside, follow along with me in this metaphor a bit further. As a congregation, you’ve crossed a threshold, you’ve parted the waters and made the at times seemingly impossible a reality. You have held together as a community because you hoped for a dream and you came together to make it happen. I stand before you today, your called minister, the representation of one of those dreams made flesh, so to speak. Your dreams for this community have been supported by a covenant, a set of agreements that helped define how you wanted to be together. While I don’t know if you’ve seen it or actively used it in awhile, I ran across a copy of your congregational covenant as I was going through things in my new office this week. This covenant speaks to your desire to be a compassionate intergenerational community; a Fellowship that celebrates, is courageous, and seeks to nurture each other on your spiritual paths as you create your desired future. It’s a wonderful summary of your desire to be of support to each other in this community, of your commitment to being there for each other as you face the joys and sorrows of life. It’s a covenant that speaks to me of your commitment to create your own version of the “Promised Land” right here in this congregation.

You've accomplished a milestone goal – we are here with each other, minister and congregation, for as long as we both shall love (to use a term from another life commitment, the marriage ceremony.) You are justifiably proud of yourselves for making this happen, and I'm thrilled to be here, too. Like our ancient ancestors, we stand on the mountaintop, so to speak, and face the "Promised Land" of this new relationship together. Together, we have dreams about what is possible in this new place. We share a hope that the gifts and talents we hold between us will serve us well. There will be times of joyful celebration, of acknowledging accomplishments and honoring success. There will be times, as well, when someone feels tired, or disheartened. Times when things change, because they need to change to sustain the life of this Fellowship. There even may be moments of "murmuring" among the people. And it's all okay, because what we learn from these Exodus stories is that it's all a part of what it means to be human and in community with one another.

What will sustain us in this endeavor is our covenant with one another, our shared commitment to the hope of this Fellowship, and our anticipation of the bright future that waits as we continue to build this beloved community.

It's no longer a time to say "let my people go" for this congregation. It's time to say, "Let's go, people, let's go!"

May we be blessed. And may we be a blessing to one another.