

Sermon: Resilience and Religious Freedom

Delivered January 15, 2017 at Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Church (Shoreline, WA)

In 1964 the annual conference of Reform Rabbi's was interrupted by an urgent telegram from the Rev Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He needed them in St Augustine, Florida, the battle to end segregation was being lost and he called for their solidarity. Why was a black Baptist minister from Georgia calling up to a New Jersey gathering of Reform Jews? And why did 16 of those Jews head immediately to Florida, to be spit on, arrested, acid poured into a pool where they were swimming with black activists in protest of pool segregation, shocked by a cattle prod, cut with broken bottles, the target of bricks careening through the air. Why did Martin call and why did the Rabbis respond?

The Civil Rights activists felt isolated, felt all alone, like no one even noticed their dangerous work. So many black homes were bombed in Birmingham people called it Bombingham. Mayors and even governors were openly opposed to desegregation. It's hard to imagine staying in a fight that asked activists to give up their very safety, even their lives, yet seemed impossible to win. So they called for backup. They called Rabbis and Unitarian Universalists and Catholics and even the freedom activists in South Africa and India. They reached out to every connection and said "I need you." Because when they were out of resilience they called on their allies.

And the people came. Rabbi Jerald Goldstein went to Sgt. Augustine even though there was a sniper waiting in the trees. Even though he had a newborn baby. Why? "We came as Jews who remember the millions of faceless people who stood quietly, watching the smoke rise from

Hitler's crematoria. We came because we know that, second only to silence, the greatest danger to man is loss of faith in man's capacity to act."

The theological trenches were deep between Rev Martin and Rabbi Jerald- but they united because, second only to silence, the greatest danger to us is our loss of faith in our capacity to act. Hopelessness is the cancer of our time- and like cancer, it isn't your fault if you've got it, but you've got to do everything in your power to fight it. Hopelessness, if left untreated, is deadly. So how do we get through this horrible period in our precious nation? Where can we find resilience? How did Martin and Jerald slice out the tumor of fear and hate and survive the Civil Rights movement?

When the Jewish contingent arrived in St Augustine, Martin said 'The people of Moses have arrived!' The Jews, the people of Moses, who had been to the mountaintop, the mountaintop that Martin referenced in his I Have A Dream speech. Moses was called by God to the mountaintop, after he led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. They wandered, bored, impatient, exhausted, without a home in the desert for forty years, and just when it seemed the promised land was a myth God called Moses to the top of Mount Nebo. From that mountaintop Moses could see the dusty desert from which they had come, forty years wandering in circles. But he could also look out over the beauty of the Promised Land, the fertile plains and protective mountains, the blue lakes gleaming in the sunlight. His first glimpse at a land he would never inhabit, but that he dedicated his life to finding for his tribe. I bet he could picture their life there, the children of his camp growing tall in freedom and good health. Barley waving in the breeze, homes dotted between farms, sheep lazing in a sweet-smelling

pasture. Schools and a temple. A nation flourishing.

What did Martin see from the Mountaintop? There were over 500 lynchings in Mississippi alone during the movement. He saw white officials bearing down with bully clubs, tear gas blinding peaceful black and white marchers in Alabama. His family's home was bombed. He'd been stabbed. In Birmingham he'd been called upon to eulogize four little black girls, blown up while playing in their own church. The leaders of his land, US Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson promised and then failed to support legislated integration.

And from the mountaintop he could see current joys- schools across the south newly integrated, black people sitting with white people at soda counters and in restaurants. He recalled his Nobel Peace prize and being Time Magazine's Man of the Year, the 1965's enactment of the Voting Rights Bill. But most importantly I think Martin saw the future from that mountaintop- President Obama standing with Michelle, Sasha, and Malia, taking the Oath of Office on that cold but glorious winter day in our capitol. Perhaps he saw Neil deGrasse Tyson charmingly explaining astrophysics to a spell-bound nation on TV every week. Maybe he even saw Misty Copeland dance the lead in Swan Lake as the first black principle ballerina at the American Ballet Theatre. Watching hundreds of school children marching on Martin Luther King Day in our city, holding their signs declaring that Black Lives Matter.

The view from the mountaintop is sustaining. Even knowing they wouldn't get there personally, envisioning the future, that sweetest dream becoming a reality, got them through the violence and hopelessness of the immediate moment. What is another arrest when you know freedom is on the horizon? What difference is a legislative let-down when you can see the promised land

up ahead?

When I was in Transylvania last year I climbed a mountain. Or rather, I took a tram up the side of a mountain in Deva, a beautiful, historic city with a gorgeous Unitarian church. The tram took us up a steep incline, 160 meters, to base of an old fortress. The castle-turned-prison was destroyed in the 1600s but about a third of the stone walls are still intact, and five flights of rickety stairs along the cliff edge took us to the prison cell of Francis David. Francis David was the court preacher to King John Sigismund. King John was converted to the Unitarian faith, at the time a very small group of people who believed that the Bible did not state that Jesus was the son of God, but a great example of an enlightened humanitarian. Unitarians said we should live like Jesus, not worship him. They also coined our famous phrase Deeds not Creeds, meaning that living your life in an ethical way is much more important than whatever religious creed you subscribe to.

King John became a Unitarian, and in that time period it was typical for the king to decree that everyone convert to his choice of church. King John was ready to force conversion to Unitarianism when Francis David had a more inclusive idea- what if people were free to worship however they chose? King John was inspired to enact the first-ever declaration of religious toleration- the Edict of Torda, which was the inspiration for the religious portion of our Declaration of Independence. Once the Edict was enacted thousands were inspired to convert to Unitarianism, and today it remains one of the most popular faiths in Romania and Hungary. In the shorter term, however, King John died just a few years after the Edict, and was replaced by a Catholic relative who had Francis David jailed for heresy at Deva, where he eventually died of exposure. Transylvania legend tells us that David never gave up his hope of wide-spread

religious toleration, and as he prayed in his mountaintop cell he said that the human spirit should be as free to explore as the birds that careened around outside his rock dungeon, riding the wind, exploring without limitation.

Francis David had been to the mountaintop of his faith. He knew that he would die before religious freedom was restored in Transylvania, but his heart was light- he saw the promised land, even if he wouldn't ever inhabit it. Perhaps Francis saw our congregation in its faith-filled glory, inspired by Buddhist meditation and Christian justice-making and Jewish resilience, free to find holiness in science and reason and religion. Maybe from that cold cave cell, barred from freedom but able to watch the birds swoop over the valley, he delighted in our UU children learning factual information about their bodies and human sexuality, he thrilled at our activism, maybe he saw his own optimism reflected in the eyes of our brilliant youth.

I know you feel the gut punch that was our election. I know it feels like we can't wake up from a nightmare that gets more and more surreal, as our Congress, 92% of whom claim to be good Christians, tear medical care away from children, the elderly, the poor, and the disabled- all the people Jesus said over and over that we should care for the most. I wish I could tell you that next week, or next month, or even next year things would be better. But I can't tell you that. Things may get a lot worse before they get any better. But I do believe that reason and compassion will bend the arc of the universe toward justice. I believe that this step back will not prevent giant leap forward, as all the rage and sorrow we are carrying in our bodies is organized into a wave of justice making that will make the 1960's look like a pre-season scrimmage.

Moses, Martin Luther King and Francis David had been to the mountaintop- they saw much

farther than I can see. Past their own lifetimes. No wonder they were such joyful men, they weren't measuring success by what happens today or tomorrow, but in the next 100 years. In the next two hundred. Today we have to accept that we will lose many of the battles we will wage over the next four (fingers crossed) years. We have to grow our faith until we can see the view from the mountaintop. The promised land of equality, of fair immigration, of queer rights. In the promised land I see well-funded schools where trans kids are embraced. I see compassionate care people experiencing mental illness, and a deep commitment to turning back climate change. From my mountaintop I see elected officials who are responsive to voters, not lobbyists, and more low-income housing than high-end condos in our County. Free contraception and abortion for women who don't want to be parents and affordable preschool and family leave for people who do want to be parents. I see a comprehensive system of public transportation and neighbors chatting on the light rail instead of sequestered in cars in traffic. That is my dream.

We will get there, my friends, I promise you we will get there. Maybe not this year, or even this decade, but for the sake of today's children's children, we will continue to dream. Our resilience, our theme for January, depends on us clambering up to the mountain so we can take the long view. Can you see it? It's so real I can nearly touch it. Can you see it? What do you see from your mountain top?