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**Story** - *Ganesha runs around the world***Reading** *The Tiger & the Leaves*

Once, a hunter, while chasing a deer, wandered into a dense forest and found himself on the banks of river Kolidum, when he heard the growl of a tiger. To protect himself from the beast he climbed up a tree nearby. The tiger pitched itself on the ground below the tree fostering no intention to leave. The hunter stayed up in the tree all night and to keep himself from falling asleep, he gently plucked one leaf after another from the tree and threw it down.

Unbeknownst to the hunter, the tiger was Lord Shiva, the lord of destruction and restoration, and the tree blessedly turned out to be a bilva tree, the chosen tree of Shiva, a healing tree which cures all diseases caused by wind and gives strength to the body.

Unknowingly, the hunter had pleased Shiva with the bilva leaves. At sunrise, the hunter looked down to find the tiger gone, and in its place stood Lord Shiva. He prostrated before the Lord and attained salvation from the cycle of birth and death.

**Sermon**

There are two concepts in Hinduism that I want us to hold onto as we move through our time together this morning. The first is the Hindu concept of Samsara. Samsara is the cycle of birth, life and death that attached us to this world. Everything of this world is Samara. Moksha is the state we attain when we are freed from Samara. The point of Hinduism is to move through Samsara and into Moksha. So let's hold onto those two concepts, because we'll come back to them several times this morning.

When the reality of the earthquake and the tsunami in Japan began to make its way around the world, you could see people trying to make sense of the tragedy. We are, I believe, unique as a species, in that we need to fit everything we see into a larger universal reality. We tend to, as a species, be very uncomfortable with randomness. We need things to make sense. This is why, I believe, so many people are uncomfortable with the idea of evolution, because it basically says that change is random and there is no larger morality to what survives and what doesn't. This kind of randomness is jarring. So when the disaster happened in Japan, it wasn't long before our meaning making selves got to work.

You could see this happening in the comments section of the videos of the tsunami that began appearing on Facebook and YouTube and blogs. One of the most common statements was something along the lines of, "This is unbelievable." A mark of living in the developed world is that we really do believe that we can and should be fully protected from the extremes of the weather and the earth, and the truth is that we can protect ourselves from the power of nature in ways never before seen in the history of the world. What that has created in many of us is a sense of entitlement. We believe it is the natural state of things that we should be protected from the uncertainties of nature. So when an earthquake hits, or a tsunami, or a hurricane, or a tornado, the statement, "Unbelievable!" literally means, "This does not fit in my frame of reality. These kinds of things aren't supposed to happen. This is an abnormality and it's terrible!" In this view of life, natural disasters have an immoral quality to them and they are seen as a betrayal or an injustice. This way of thinking often leads to

looking for the culprit. “Why did this happen? How do we make sure it doesn’t happen again?” This is one way that people made sense of what happened in Japan.

There were other comments that showed a very different reality. One person said, “Guess it’s payback time for Pearl Harbor!” Another said, “God is punishing Japan for its atheism.” Distasteful as these comments are to me, and probably are too many of you, they show another reality, the one where there is a puppet master God pulling the strings. The earthquake and tsunami become righteous agents of punishment for a people who deserve what is happening to them. These acts of nature are purposeful and planned by an all knowing all powerful God who punishes some and rewards others. So in these people’s minds, the earthquake and tsunami had a divine purpose.

Today, we are focusing on the Hindu worldview, and while I want to emphasize that Hinduism is a very diverse religion, with more gods and goddesses than we can count, and different ways of seeing their work in the world, there are some primary themes in Hinduism that give us a different worldview to understand what life brings us.

In our children’s story, we have two gods, Parvati and Shiva, who are a married couple. Parvati is the Goddess of power and purity, the embodiment of the total energy of the universe. Her husband is Shiva, the God of destruction and rejuvenation. Theirs is a marriage of power, purity, destruction, and rejuvenation.

Their son is Ganesha, the God of good fortune, one of the most worshipped Gods in the Hindu tradition. But he has a difficult beginning. When Shiva took one more of his lengthy hunting trips with friends, Parvati became resentful and lonely. To fill her loneliness she created a son out of dust and named him Ganesha. She loved him more than anything and her life was beautifully full. When Shiva came home and saw this stranger in his house, he was enraged and decapitated him! Parvati became wild with grief and anger, and threatened to destroy the whole universe if Shiva did not bring back her son. So Shiva took the head of an elephant and attached it to Ganesha’s body. Ganesha came back to life and became the God of Shiva’s celestial armies. In the Hindu tradition, no new endeavor is started without recognizing Ganesha. The God who was created by his mother, killed by his father, and brought back to life with the head of an elephant, is held up and revered.

In the Hindu tradition, the gods and goddesses are fickle, unpredictable, given to periods of rage and destruction, they are possessive, jealous, competitive and sometimes overbearing. They are a combination of animal and human. They are promiscuous, they are celibate, and they are loyal to a fault. They fall in and out of love. They celebrate, they laugh, and they grieve. They carry everything beautiful and not so beautiful about humanity to the extreme. At the same time, they are each a window into the god that is behind them all, the great god of the universe that is in everything and of everything.

When Shiva and Parvati challenge their sons to race around the world, Ganesha races around them. “You are the world,” he said. “You are the whole universe.” And they laugh and give him the peach, the fruit of life. In Hinduism, nothing is outside of the realm of life. Purity, power, destruction, rebirth. The worst disaster has its place. The greatest love has its place. The small disappointments and the large disappointments have their place. And that is how a little God can run in circles around his parents and circle the entire universe.

So through the lens of Hinduism, a great earthquake and a great tsunami are not punishments. They just are. The world is fickle and undependable. It is filled with paradoxes. You can pray and pray and pray to all the gods and goddesses, follow the rituals perfectly, and still find yourself in the midst of a terrible earthquake that takes away everything you have.

And this is why. The point of Hinduism isn’t to change the gods and goddesses. It isn’t to convince a supernatural power to do this or do that, to change its mind, or to favor you over another person. The point of devotion to whatever gods and goddesses you have taken on as yours, is to change yourself, so that when this unpredictable world throws you a curve ball, which it will, you will be as steady and as ready as you can be.

You should expect this world to throw you not only natural disasters like earthquakes and tsunamis and tornados, but also injustice, betrayal, cruelty, and abandonment. These things are not unbelievable, and they are not divine punishment. They just are. And like Parvati, you may rise up like a grieving mother who has lost her child and desire the destruction of the entire universe because of your tremendous loss and sense of disillusionment, but the truth is that these difficulties are not about you and they are out of your control. They just are.

So the question is not, why are these horrible things happening to you? The question is, what will you do with what has come into your life? The answer in Hinduism is the act of devotion. What you do is devotion. You practice devotion to the gods and goddesses either you have chosen or that were chosen by your family years ago, and in that devotion, you lift yourself out of the chaos of this earth, and perhaps, when you die, you will have reached such a pure level of devotion that you don't need to come back to this earth. Hindus believe in reincarnation, and coming back to earth means that you didn't get it right the last time. You keep coming back into a living form until you have achieved that perfect balance in your devotion, you have accomplished a loving detachment, and then your whole being dissolves and becomes one with the great god of the universe, and your self is gone. This is called Moksha.

This is perhaps the most unique thing about Hinduism and the eastern religions that it has parented. The individual really doesn't ultimately matter. The goal is to dissolve into the greatness of the universal spirit. In the Christian tradition, for instance, which we in the U.S. are surrounded by whether we believe it or not, the point is personal salvation. When my grandmother was on her death bed, she struggled with the question "Am I right with God?" She had a lot of anger, for she had much to be angry about, but in her worldview, she needed to leave with a clean heart because the consequence of not doing that was hell. I don't know how many times she called in the chaplain to sit with her and pray with her, hoping that she could let go of the last vestiges of her anger before she died.

Some Christians don't believe in hell. Unitarian Universalist Christians believe that if God is truly all loving, then he or she has the power to ensure that no one remains un-reconciled when they die. It's a very powerful theology, but very different from Hinduism in how it understands the individual. Whether you're a universalist Christian or a traditional Christian, the assumption remains that when you die, you stay who you are. You keep your uniqueness, your selfhood.

Even for those of us who have left the Christian tradition, we still have that understanding of the self. We can't imagine being anything but who we are now, and we hold onto our selfhood as something holy, sacred, and precious. It is our most prized possession. Our Coming of Age program, where our youth engage in a process of exploring what they believe and what it means to them to be a Unitarian Universalist, is based on the assumption that it is a sacred journey to discern who you are as an individual. We hold up that sacredness by offering every one of our coming of agers the opportunity to present their personal credo from this pulpit. It's really an amazing service, but this would be unheard of in Hinduism. The ultimate goal is not self-actualization. It's the loss of self. It's moksha.

In our reading, a hunter climbs up a tree to escape a tiger, and to keep from falling asleep, he picks the leaves of the bitter bilva tree and drops them one by one on the tiger, who is really Shiva. Shiva is deeply moved, and he shows himself to the hunter. The hunter bows before him and is freed from the cycle of birth, life, and death. He is freed from the cycle of life because he worships it. He worships that life is about destroying and restoring, and in his worship he is ultimately freed from existence itself. But the thing about Hinduism is that it isn't about denying this world. You live fiercely. Hinduism is a colorful religion of Gods and stories and rituals and prayers. It is a deep embracing of and devotion to the fragility and beauty of life so that you can ultimately disappear from it and dissolve into that larger force, the larger God, that is in everything.

The Japanese people have been handed a bitter tree. The scenes of devastation are truly horrifying. We are witnessing the deep power of nature, a power that picks no favorites and has no motive. The shift of the earth's plates wasn't about punishment, and it isn't a betrayal. It just is. But we are faced with the spectre of destroyed lives and dreams. Those 50 men working to prevent the meltdown of a nuclear reactor have captured our hearts. They are, quite possibly, allowing themselves to dissolve into the destruction around them. An entire nation is hoping that they will be able to see the other side of Shiva, the God of restoration. The hunter has been chased up the bilva tree, and its leaves are being picked off one by one, and dropped on the head of the tiger.

It remains to be seen if the Lord Shiva will show himself.