



Reading

"Not somewhere else, but here." Rebecca Ann Parker, president of the Unitarian Universalist seminary, Starr King School for the Ministry

In 1976 I began a cross-country road trip with a friend. We had time, so we decided to take the back roads. One afternoon, the road passed through rural western Pennsylvania.... We came down through hill country into a valley. It had been raining hard, and as we neared a small town, we noticed blinking yellow lights warning off danger. We saw fields covered in standing water and passed several side roads blocked off with signs saying "Road Closed."

... Coming into town, we crossed a bridge over a wide river. The water was high, muddy, flowing fast. Sandbags lined the roadway...

We headed out of town, following a winding country road, captivated by the evidence all around us that there had been a dramatic flood. Then we rounded a bend, and in front of us, a sheet of water covered the roadway. The water was rising fast, like a huge silver balloon being inflated before our eyes.

We started to turn the car around. The water was rising behind us as well. Suddenly we realized the flood hadn't happened yesterday or last week. It was happening here and now. Dry ground was disappearing fast. We hurriedly clambered out of the car and scrambled to higher ground. Soaked to the bone, we huddled under a fir tree. The cold water of the storm poured down on us, baptizing us into the present – a present from which we had been insulated by both our car and our misjudgments about the country we were traveling through.

This is what it is like to be white in America. It is to travel well ensconced in a secure vehicle, to see signs of what is happening in the world outside your compartment and not realize that these signs have any contemporary meaning. It is to midjudge your location and believe you are uninvolved and unaffected by what is happening in the world....

To come of age in America as a white person is to be educated into ignorance. It is to be culturally shaped to not know and not want to know the actual context in which you live.

Sermon

In the Unitarian Universalist tradition we offer our ministers a free pulpit, and ask them to speak from the depths of their conscience, unfettered by creed, doctrine or the demands of the moment. We also believe in the free pew, trusting that those who come to worship have their own minds, and will weigh what they hear in terms of their own conscience. This is one of the covenantal foundations of our liberal religious tradition.

In that spirit, I begin with a scripture reading which opens the door to approach our topic today – race and religion in America, particularly in regards to what has transpired regarding Barack Obama's former



minister Rev. Jeremiah Wright. The scripture reading comes from Isaiah, chapter 1, in which, through the prophet Isaiah, the God of the Hebrew Scriptures addresses the Nation of Israel:

"Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for the Lord has spoken: I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, ... who have despised the Holy One of Israel, who are utterly estranged!

Why do you seek further beatings? Why do you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the ... foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises ... and bleeding wounds; they have not been ... bound up, or softened with oil.

Your country lies desolate, your cities are burned with fire, in your very presence aliens devour your land; it is desolate ... And daughter Zion is left ... like a besieged city ...

Hear the word of the Lord! ... Listen to the teachings of our God!... What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? ... I have had enough of burnt offerings... Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile, incense is an abomination to me.... I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. ... They have become a burden to me... When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."

This scripture is filled with anger, disappointment and despair. Might it be appropriate to say that in this Scripture, God, as speaking through Isaiah, is damning Israel? And what is he damning Israel for? It's quite simple. Israel has forsaken the weakest of its people. There is a direct equation here with being faithful and taking care of the most vulnerable. Israel has failed to do this, and for this, God has damned them. No amount of burnt offerings or prayers are going to make any difference. They can reconcile to God only by caring for those most in need.

The book of Isaiah was written in a difficult time. Israel had been conquered by the Babylonians and its people forced into exile. It was a time of mourning, and it was a time ripe for blaming. Mostly, that blame was externalized towards those the Babylonians. But prophets like Isaiah saw something different. They were unwilling to let Israel settle for the simplicity of victimhood or the comfort of arrogant self-righteous superiority. These would only increase suffering in the long term. The prophets urged reflection, humility, a deepening of compassion, and atonement for how they had failed God, how they had failed each other, which for the prophets was basically the same thing. But more than that, the prophets urged the Israelites to reach out beyond their own pain, and care for the world.

That charge became even more important when the Persians forced out the Babylonians and allowed the Israelites to go home. As the nation rebuilt, once again, the powerful wrapped themselves in religion as they failed to care for those most in need. Isaiah was indignant. "Have you learned nothing from the errors of your ways? Your actions bear witness to your real values. Do not turn from God again or God will turn from you."



Were the prophets and their message welcomed? Absolutely not. The prophets were reviled, taunted, abused, imprisoned, often killed. They dared to speak what no one wanted to admit and so many turned against them. And still, they said, take care of those who are the most vulnerable in your society. Do good. Seek justice.

The interpretation of Scripture which I've just done here is an example of liberation theology, which emerged in Brazil in 1955, spread through South America, Central America and into the United States before crossing into Africa and Asia. The core of liberation theology is that God stands with the oppressed. Liberation theology merged Christianity with a class analysis, and saw God side with the poor. When liberation theology was embraced by feminist theologians, gender was incorporated. When the African American community took up liberation theology, race entered the mix. The gay community added sexual orientation, much to the dismay of some other liberation theology folks, as you can well imagine. As liberation theology continues to develop, it has gained in some places of the world an anti-colonial, anti-western slant making it very appealing to those who experience oppression from the developed world, which includes North America and Western Europe. Liberation theology tends to be embraced by those who experience oppression in their daily lives.

It is not as likely to be embraced by those who do not, by those who experience society as being open and accessible to them. For this reason the white middle class and those aspiring to be middle class have had great difficulty relating to liberation theology. It takes them into that uncomfortable place of having to look at their own privilege. It gets uncomfortable being the one God challenges, and make no mistake about it, when you look at the Bible using liberation theology, anyone with a slice of unexamined privilege is going to get very very uncomfortable. It's like those prophets are yelling at you!

As I watched the coverage of Jeremiah Wright these last weeks, I thought about liberation theology and about the prophets and how hard they were on Israel. They called it as they saw it, no apologies. Prophets like Isaiah damned the nation of Israel repeatedly. And they have been lifted up and revered to the point that their words are enshrined as sacred text in both the Jewish and Christian traditions. No one asks the question, "Was Isaiah a traitor to his people?" Instead, he is seen as a prophet, blessed by God, who loved his people so much he could not remain silent. As I watched coverage of Jeremiah Wright, I found myself thinking, why is this prophetic courage so quick to be damned in a black minister? What is going on here?

I think we have at least two things going on. One, is a nation that, not unlike post-exile Israel, is largely unable to do the kind of soul searching that the prophets urged them to do. Since 9/11, it has been virtually impossible to have a constructive conversation about the relationship between American foreign policy and 9/11. That conversation is shut down very quickly, deemed un-American, unpatriotic, and a threat to national security. It is very common for a person who dares to question to be accused of saying that America deserved 9/11. If you look at the whole sermon in which that sound bite, "America's chickens have come home to roost," you'll see that's not at all what Wright is saying. He's not saying that America deserved 9/11. But he is saying there is a connection between choices and the consequences of those choices. Wright pointed to an elephant in the room that we've been avoiding for a long time. That obsessive avoidance drove us into the arms of a war which we don't know to get out of.



One of the truths I firmly believe is that the stronger the emotional response to a situation, the less likely what you're mad about is what's really going on. And given the excessive response to that sound bites like, "God Damn America" and "America's chickens have come home to roost," I think the reaction has little to do with those phrases, and much more to do with the fact that the majority of Americans have explicitly and implicitly agreed not to ask the deeper questions about American foreign policy. Instead, Americans on a massive scale clung to the religion of national pride, identified their Babylon, and held onto it for dear life. That includes Republicans and Democrats and Independents. The elephant in the room is America's anxiety about its ability to be a moral force for good in the world. Rev. Wright's sermon identified that elephant, and the insecurity around it caused the uproar.

Think about it this way. In dysfunctional families, the person to speak out loud about the dysfunction is usually attacked by the rest of the family, even others who have been abused themselves. Many will go to great lengths to suppress and deny what has come into the open. If they are successful, the dysfunction remains and gets stronger. What happened with Jeremiah Wright, in my opinion, is this kind dynamic on a bigger scale. He named the dysfunction in the family, so he had to be taken down. Critics proclaimed him racist, divisive, an extremist, and misinterpreted him.

But there's more. This minister who touched the fragile complicit silence, was also angry and black, and nothing frightens white America more than an angry black man. White America has been unable to approach the anger that resides in the black experience. It makes most whites, liberal and conservative, deeply uncomfortable. It touches on well-springs of guilt that most don't want to touch. Many of us will do anything to get away from that anger. So, Wright had to be written off, labeled as an extremist who is out of control.

This is what those who leaked those sound bites hoped would happen. They also trusted that the racist dynamic whereby one person of color becomes a spokesperson for their entire race would cast an unerasable blemish on one of the presidential candidates in this election cycle. Those who successfully peeled white southerners away from the Democratic Party, are using the same subtleties of racism to undermine their opponent.

But there's still more. There's something even deeper going on here. Taking Wright down is about the need for moral purity. None of us want to feel implicated in things that are bad, unjust, or evil. Wright showed us a window, and to look into that window meant meeting a prophet and seeing his or her finger pointed at us. Not unlike the Ancient Israelites, we want to be pure, blameless, innocent victims of someone else's evil, and we have seen on a collective scale how afraid most of this nation is to think otherwise. What has saddened me so much in these last weeks is how clearly this country is unable, as of yet, to deal with its dark side in a mature and thoughtful way. We are stuck in a stalemate and the heads of our prophets will continue to roll until enough people are able to walk through their fear and engage in a real and heartfelt way with each other.

A few qualifiers here. I do think Wright got off-track with the National Press Club on Monday. When you are in your minister role, you have to assume that every person you deal with is your parishioner. You are there for **them** even when they are pushing your buttons. On Monday, it was all about him, and that got him off track. Clearly, this prophet is no perfect man. Some of his ideas are offensive. He has a big ego. But, how would you like the whole of your person and your life's work to be defined by your



weaknesses? Aren't you worth much more? We need, as people of faith, always to be going deeper and broader. With our commitment to the free and responsible search for truth and knowledge, our covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and justice, equity and compassion in human relations, the surface is never good enough. Our faith calls us to probe and to question and to relentless in our search for truth and meaning.

Liberation theology asks us to be very aware of power – ours and others. We all have power but we all have it in different ways. Liberation theology asks us to look at how power is held, who has power, how they use it, and then to ask the question, how to we bring justice to this place. We are called as people of faith to do our part to unwind webs of oppression in which we are both oppressed and oppressor. We are called to listen, not run, when that prophetic finger points at us. Most of all, we are called not to turn inward, not to fall prey to the seductive power of externalizing blame, but rather to rise into that place of transforming love so that we are the hands that serve the world.

I close with the words of Isaiah, Chapter 1, vs. 18 and 19 and 26. "Come now, let us argue it out... Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing... you shall eat the good of the land.... I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city." Amen and blessed be.