

FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH – Scripture & Sermon
15th January 2023 – 2nd Sunday After The Epiphany

WORSHIP FOCUS: Soul

If Brahman an infinite ocean, then Atma a wave within be,
Ocean not different from its waves, the waves as ocean be;
They are but one and the same very similar in actuality,
So Brahman and Atma are one and the same in reality.

~ Munindra Misra, Goals of Life

1st LESSON: Isaiah 49:1-7 (NRSV)

Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away!

The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away.

And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

But I said, "**I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;** yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God."

And now the LORD says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength - he says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

2nd LESSON: John 1:29-34 (NRSV)

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared:

"Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel."

And John testified:

"I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."

REFLECTION: "The Delicate Thread"

There is a gospel hymn I like, written in 1876 that starts off with the words:

*When peace like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to know
It is well, it is well, with my soul.*

*It is well, (it is well),
With my soul, (with my soul)
It is well, it is well, with my soul.*

This hymn lifts up the idea that we have souls, a sacred something in each of us, that whatever our lot in life or the situation we find ourselves in, remains indestructible. Our bodies may perish, but something remains. And, it is this something – this soul – that is the real thing we should always be considering – not our financial woes, our family dramas, our standing in the community, how smart and clever we are – but our souls.

This idea is perhaps best found in scripture in Mark's gospel when Jesus is tempted by the adversary, and offered all worldly power. Jesus responds with the famous words: "For what shall it profit us, if we shall gain the whole world, and lose our soul?"

The early church father, Origen, was one of the first to write about the soul. He wrote:

"... The soul, having a substance and life of its own, shall after its departure from the world, be rewarded according to its deserts, being destined to obtain either an inheritance of eternal life and blessedness, if its actions shall have procured this for it, or to be delivered up to eternal fire and punishments, if the guilt of its crimes shall have brought it down to this ..."

In other words, underlying Jesus' and Origen's thought about the soul, is the idea that our souls have a power that is well-nigh indestructible. We need our souls. They are amazingly strong and resilient. They have the power to survive bodily death. And yet, they have one weakness – a kind of spiritual kryptonite. Something called sin, which we do not talk too much about in the United Church, can "kill a soul." Sin and an embrace of evil can mar or clog our souls. And if we do not attend to our souls when this happens, we can lose them.

*It is well, (it is well),
With my soul, (with my soul)
It is well, it is well, with my soul.*

How are things with your soul? How are things with the world's soul? Do you ever worry about your soul? Does your soul need some restoring, some reviving? Is it choked by shame? Burdened by worry? Full of spleen and anger and jealousy? Do you need to be led to still waters and green pastures? Do you need to drink some living water? How refreshed do you feel? How aware of your soul, are you? Do you know that it shines and sparkles and bubbles forth in all that you do?

Is it well with your soul? Could it be better?

The prophet Isaiah certainly thinks that his soul could be in better shape. In our reading today, he recognizes that God formed him in his mother's womb to be a servant of God, and to speak the words of God. His purpose – his soul – his divine spark, was the ability to be like an arrow – to speak truth to power like a sharp sword. And yet, although he knows that he bears this image of God, and is called to spread it, Isaiah admits that his soul needs work. As he tries to give an account of the state of his soul to God, Isaiah realizes that he hasn't done a very good job. He says: "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God."

In other words, in worrying about the vanities of worldly life, Isaiah has forgotten the greater thing – his soul and the way it is wrapped up with the Lord. He has forgotten the power of his soul, and let it languish. And, in our reading, he commits to doing better – not just for his own soul, but for the soul of the world. He realizes

that God is calling him to save his soul, by lifting of the soul of the world. “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel,” says God, pointing out that this kind of worldly, tribal power is not what is important. It leads to war and territorialism and division. It refuses to see the face of God in others, and ends up marring our own faces. No, says God, “instead I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

I have, as many of you know, been ill, for almost a month. I had a lot of time to sit around feeling crappy, and thinking and pondering. And, one of the temptations I fell into as I suffered, was thinking that because my body felt like it was wasting away to nothing, and perishing – that it was my body that was the most important thing. Sometimes, I even decided that my sickness was a punishment from God. I was sure that this was a sign that I was going to hell. And, I know that many of you sometimes wonder the same thing. But the more I got trapped in that feedback loop, the lower my spirits sank, the more dim and feeble I allowed my soul to become. I forgot my soul. I abandoned it, in my quest for health.

But those who loved me would not let that happen. And the phone calls and the cards, and the well-wishes and the understanding of others, their patience with me, when I no longer had patience, restored my soul, and helped me come back to myself. And, when I was able to turn and come back to where I ought to be, and I saw the face of God in others, my soul revived, my spirits lifted, and my body – this time – followed my soul’s lead.

Beloved. We are living in a time when many people have forgotten their souls. Many have forgotten that God’s spirit shines within them. Many are careless of this great gift. Many don’t even know that they have a soul – so materialistic and consumer oriented, and beauty and body-centered are they.

And the zeitgeist – the world soul – it is weary, it is heavy-laden, it needs reviving.

*It is well, (it is well),
With my soul, (with my soul)
It is well, it is well, with my soul.*

Beloved. It is time for us to remember our souls. Not just for salvation or the selfish desire for a place in heaven. But because when our souls are healthy, life is better.

Tenderly. . . .
From the walls of the powerful, fortress’d house,
From the clasp of the knitted locks
From the keep of the well-closed doors,
Let our souls be wafted.
Let us glide noiselessly forth;
With the key of softness unlock the locks
With a whisper, set ope’ the doors, O Soul
Tenderly. . . .

May the dove come back to us and the world this year with an olive branch of hope and joy and faith and love, in the midst of so much that is soul-sucking. In this spiritual wilderness that we find ourselves in. In spite of all the temptations to deny it.

Jesus encountered a similar dove when he was baptized, after his temptations. And John the Baptist saw it. “He saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.” And John realizes that that

same opportunity is offered to all now that he has seen the Spirit descend on Jesus. Because Jesus revives us. Jesus restores our souls. Jesus makes us aware of that great glistening treasure that is more than our bodies and our minds. He offers living water that refreshes us and restores our souls. He feeds us bread of life that makes them strong and indestructible.

*If Brahman an infinite ocean, then Atma a wave within be,
Ocean not different from its waves, the waves as ocean be;
They are but one and the same very similar in actuality,
So Brahman and Atma are one and the same in reality.*

We have souls. Each like a wave in a great infinite sea of souls. Joining us together. Shining with the reflection of the same sunlight.

When we remember our souls, when we commit to them, everything starts to fall into place. Suddenly. . . .

*It is well, (it is well),
With my soul, (with my soul)
It is well, it is well, with my soul.*

This year – 2023 – may it be well with our souls. May the world remember that it has a great soul. May this be a year, in which we recognize again as a people, that mysterious golden thread that binds us together. That allows us to see God in ourselves and in others.

Blessed be these words to our understanding.