

Hymnal Theology 3: *We'll Build a Land*

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Readings: Isaiah 61:1-4; Amos 5:21-24

Sermon

As you may know, we've been pursuing a series of services exploring some of our favorite Unitarian Universalist hymns. At least they're my favorites. I hope they resonate with some of the rest of you as well. Our hymn for today is *We'll Build a Land*. I think this is probably my number one favorite hymn in our hymnal. Every time I sing it, I feel inspired. Inspired to carry on the struggle for peace and justice in our troubled world. I think that must be true for many of you as well. That is one reason we regularly sing this song at our Annual Freedom Seder each spring, as we gather up our communal inspiration to not just sing, but to act for freedom and justice.

As we sing *We'll Build a Land*, you'll recognize many of the words and phrases that were a part of our readings this morning from the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures. But I'd like to take note of one part of those readings that is not quoted in the song, but which I think is quite important. That's the part where Amos says: "Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen."

Let us take note of those words this morning even as we take our offerings, and sing our songs. But let's take these words not as judgments on our selves and our actions, but as a caution. First of all, yes, we have taken an offering, but not to satisfy God, or to fulfill our obligation to God. Our offering comes from our hearts to help our suffering sisters and brothers. To ease their pain and lay the foundation for them to rebuild their land and their homes.

And yes, we sing our songs, but not as the end of what we can do, but as the beginning. To motivate and inspire ourselves to continue the real work of letting "justice roll down like waters, and righteousness [and peace] like an ever-flowing stream."

This hymn reflects two of the explicitly recognized sources from which our Living Tradition of Unitarian Universalism draws. First, "Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves." The connection here is clear, as the song quotes directly from the Hebrew Bible, which is also a part of the Christian scriptures.

And the portions of those scriptures quoted are found in the words of some of the early Hebrew prophets. As such, they are a part of the "Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love."

Words and deeds. Once again, I emphasize that notion that words, by themselves, are not enough. Their value comes only from their ability to lead us to translate our love and compassion, our yearning for justice, into constructive actions that can build the kind of land we envision.

Last year I did a series of sermons on the prophetic tradition, the tradition of witness and action for justice. We looked at its roots in those very Hebrew scriptures that I quoted in our readings this morning. Those early prophets, speaking for God, denounced what they saw as concrete social and spiritual evils. They challenged not only the personal shortcomings of their

fellow citizens, but also those of the kings and priests who ruled them.

Through passages like the one I mentioned earlier about feasts, offerings and songs, Amos and others called on their people to stop talking the talk and start walking the walk. For me, that's what this song is about.

While the western prophetic tradition has its roots among the early Hebrews some three thousand years ago, it did not end there. Throughout the ages, words and deeds of prophetic women and men have inspired people to be their best selves and to act for justice in an unjust world. From Jesus to Gandhi to Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King - and beyond - there have been those willing to speak the truth to power and to encourage others to do the same.

Our song of the day states over and over again that "We'll build a land." Furthermore, it invites others to join in that effort: "Come, build a land." Because, frankly, we need all the help we can get. There's work enough to go around.

But what kind of land is it that we aim to build? Here, too, there is a long precedent. That first verse says "we'll build a promised land that can be." The Promised Land is another Old Testament concept that has continued to resonate through the ages, sometimes called the Kingdom of God, sometimes the Beloved Community. Originally the phrase referred to the land of Israel and the notion that God had promised it to the Hebrew people.

The aim of the exodus from Egypt was to escape bondage and return to that Promised Land, a land of milk and honey. It was more than simply a piece of land. It was a vision of a secure and prosperous home. In fact the power of that image of the Promised Land has nothing to do with a particular sense of entitlement of a particular people regarding a particular piece of geography.

Its power comes from the ability of the imagination to conjure a vision of a world ruled not by evil but by good. Not by hate but by love. Not by slavery and oppression but by freedom, justice and compassion. That is why the Exodus and the quest for the Promised Land were such powerful images for the Civil Rights movement of the Sixties. And why they are still such powerful images for us as we celebrate our annual Freedom Seder right here each year near the time of Passover.

In his final speech, on April 3, 1968, the day before his death, Dr. Martin Luther King talked about the Promised Land. He said:

As you know, if I were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of general and panoramic view of the whole human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, "Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?"-- I would take my mental flight by Egypt through, or rather across the Red Sea, through the wilderness on toward the promised land. And in spite of its magnificence, I wouldn't stop there.

He then proceeds to speak of moving on through Greece and its philosophers, to Rome and its Empire. He mentions stopping off at the time of Abraham Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation. And then he goes on:

But I wouldn't stop there. Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty, and say, "If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the twentieth century, I will be happy." Now that's a strange statement to make, because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick.

Trouble is in the land. Confusion all around. That's a strange statement. But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough, can you see the stars. And I see God working in this period of the twentieth century in a way that men, in some strange way, are responding--something is happening in our world. The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; Accra, Ghana; New York City; Atlanta, Georgia; Jackson, Mississippi; or Memphis, Tennessee--the cry is always the same--"We want to be free."

And another reason that I'm happy to live in this period is that we have been forced to a point where we're going to have to grapple with the problems that men have been trying to grapple with through history, but the demands didn't force them to do it. Survival demands that we grapple with them. Men, for years now, have been talking about war and peace. But now, no longer can they just talk about it. It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence in this world; it's nonviolence or nonexistence.

Dr. King's words illustrate clearly that the quest for the Promised Land, the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community, is both timeless and timely. And he repeats that crucial message that talk is not enough. And waiting for the Promised Land to fall into our laps is not enough. We must *build* the land of justice where sisters and brothers may then *create* peace.

One of the most difficult aspects of the quest for justice – for the Promised Land – is its seeming futility. Dr. King addressed that as well, by letting go of his own personal fate in the interests of the larger community. He concluded that final speech like this:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

More important than reaching the Promised Land is being able to envision it and sparing no effort in moving in its direction, no matter how small the steps.

Dorothy Day, another great prophet and social activist of our generation, said it like this:

People say, what is the sense of our small effort. They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time.

A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like that.

No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There's too much work to do.

There's too much work to do. It may be binding up the broken and restoring the ruins and devastations in places like Haiti, or New Orleans. It may be working with people trying to build better lives for themselves in places like Puerto Rico. It may be healing the afflictions of those who lack adequate health care, even here in this the richest nation on earth. It may be struggling to slow down the degradation of our physical planet through the ravages of climate change. It may be responding to hatred and bigotry with compassion and love. The list is long, the tasks are great, and no one of us can do it alone. But all of us together, continually taking one more step, laying one more brick, sending out one more ripple – that is another story.

Last night, after this sermon had been put to bed, I happened to be finishing reading a book by historian Howard Zinn: *A Power Governments Cannot Suppress*. In its final chapter, "The Optimism of Uncertainty," I came across a couple of paragraphs that I just couldn't resist adding this morning because they, serendipitously, fit so well. Zinn writes:

I am totally confident not that the world will get better, but that we should not give up the game before all the cards have been played. The metaphor is deliberate; life is a gamble. Not to play is to foreclose any chance of winning. To play, to act, is to create at least the possibility of changing the world. . .

Revolutionary change does not come as one cataclysmic moment (beware of such moments!) but as an endless succession of surprises, moving zigzag toward a more decent society. We don't have to engage in grand, heroic actions to participate in the process of change. Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can quietly become a power no government can suppress, a power that can transform the world.

And then Zinn closes the book with this simple, yet profound statement: "[T]o live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory."

So may it be.