

A New Day: Reprise
Nazareth By The Sea Episcopal Church,
Red Hook, St. Thomas, USVI
August 27, 2017

Sermon by
Rabbi Michael L. Feshbach

Friends: thank you, for the warm welcome extended to me in this community, for the gracious invitation to be with you this day, facilitated by my our shared musician Janice Ballard, and your amazing Corinne Van Rennselaer, who wears so many hats here – and whom I met over a plastic cup of flavorful spicy stuff on a hot day at a West End beach two weeks ago.

And a thank you, as well, to a woman you do not know. I accepted this invitation so eagerly in part because of my time working with my former assistant, Katherine Schnorrenberg, who helped run my previous synagogue and managed my calendar and became a close friend – a woman who plays a similar role to Corinne at St. Peter’s Episcopal in Ellicott City, Maryland, and who, in addition, may, well be on her way to the ministry herself. I so admire and appreciate her that it made me very happy that that my first formal ecumenical engagement on this island...was at a church of the same flavor.

And a thank you to all of you, as well, for this sacred opportunity. In a theme to which I will return shortly, it is only relatively recently, in all the long and twisted history of the interactions of Jews and Christians, that a rabbi and a minister would be able to share thoughts and preach to one another’s congregations. Preach “at,” perhaps, sadly, tragically, but not “to.”

You opened the service, this afternoon, with the singing of a passage from the book of Psalms about unity, and coming together. But you also included a powerful passage from the book of Exodus which spoke of a terrible tension between peoples. It was a setting of fear and oppression, persecution and bondage, murder and resistance. Out of that milieu emerges a hint of hope and a paradigm of redemption. A man, who would save us from slavery and lead us to a different place. But not... not before the intervention, the action... of two very brave women.

Who were those midwives we read about? Shifra and Puah? Unknown except for here, on whose actions all of history turned? This is the very first story of civil disobedience in world literature! Who are these characters? Well, the answer to that question contains... a tale of its own.

Rabbinic tradition – the period of initial interpretation of the Bible in the second through fifth centuries – the early rabbis were deeply uncomfortable with cameo appearances. They did not like figures who appeared in the Bible only once. So they made an assumption: they assert that the midwives Shifra and Puah were none other than... Yocheved and Miriam. The mother and sister of Moses. The midwives to the Hebrews were Hebrew themselves. So this was brave, yes... but it was also... an action taken to save their own sons and siblings.

But I have a problem with that interpretation. Remember: when they saved the Hebrew boys they were hauled in to face Pharaoh. And they stood up to him. I mean, it could be the case – persecuted and oppressed peoples and groups throughout history have learned to survive on grit and wit. But the way they spoke to Pharaoh? Their... familiar, almost in your face tone? It just – look, I have my doubts, as you will hear, about the literal truth of all of this, but even at the level of the story it just doesn't ring true that these would be... that it would have been happened that way. Wouldn't it ring more true – and be a better tale to boot – if these were not Hebrew midwives, but midwives *to* the Hebrews? In other words, wouldn't this be an even more powerful story if these were Egyptian women... acting to save Jewish babies? If this was not merely admittedly brave self-interest... but a profound act of moral courage, in one group saving the lives... of another?

And maybe... maybe it is only in the modern world, in the era we live in now... that we could see the story this way!

Another reading. Another image. This is a passage from the Hebrew Bible, yes, but because of how it has played out in history and in the interpretive hands of subsequent generations, this text may be far more familiar to Christians than to Jews. These are the words from Jeremiah, uttered in the midst of King Josiah's program of religious and political reform, meant, in fact, I am quite sure, *not as a prediction for a distant future yet to*

unfold, but as a commentary for his own place, his own time. In this case, especially, he spoke...I am convinced that he was speaking to his contemporaries, and not with any predictive eye to events centuries hence. Renewal was happening around him, and he meant these words for those who heard them, *at his own time*:

הִנֵּה יָמִים בָּאִים נְאֻם־יְהוָה וְכָרַתִּי אֶת־בְּרִית יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת־בְּרִית יְהוּדָה בְּרִית
 חֲדָשָׁה : לֹא לֹא כִּבְרִית אֲשֶׁר כָּרַתִּי אֶת־אֲבוֹתָם בְּיוֹם הַחֲזִיקִי בְיָדָם
 לְהוֹצִיאֵם מִמִּצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר־הֵמָּה הִפְרוּ אֶת־בְּרִיתִי וְאֲנֹכִי בָעַלְתִּי בָם נְאֻם־
 יְהוָה : לֵב כִּי זֹאת הַבְּרִית אֲשֶׁר אֶכְרַת אֶת־בְּרִית יִשְׂרָאֵל אַחֲרַי הַיָּמִים הָהֵם
 נְאֻם־יְהוָה נִתְּנִי אֶת־תּוֹרַתִּי בְּקִרְבָּם וְעַל־לִבָּם אֶכְתְּבֶנָּה וְהִיִּיתִי לָהֶם לְאֱלֹהִים
 וְהֵמָּה יְהִי־לִי לְעָם : לֵג וְלֹא יִלְמְדוּ עוֹד אִישׁ אֶת־רֵעֵהוּ וְאִישׁ אֶת־אָחִיו לֵאמֹר
 דַּעוּ אֶת־יְהוָה כִּי־כֹלָם יִדְעוּ אוֹתִי לְמִקְטָנָם וְעַד־גְּדוֹלָם נְאֻם־יְהוָה כִּי אֶסְלַח
 לְעוֹנֵם וּלְחַטָּאתָם לֹא אֶזְכְּרֶנּוּ :

Behold, days are coming, declares the Eternal, when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel, and with the House of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors, when I took them by the hand and led them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant which they broke... But such is the covenant I will make with the House of Israel after these days... I will put my Teaching, my Torah into their inmost being, and inscribe it upon their hearts. [Then I will be their God and they shall be My people.] No longer will they need to teach one another and say ‘Hear the Eternal,’ for all of them, from the least of them to the greatest, shall heed Me – declares the Eternal. For I will forgive their iniquities, and remember their sins no more.”

Jeremiah 31:[30-33] 31-34

I have emphasized the degree to which these words emerge out of Jeremiah’s contemporary political and spiritual world for a reason. It is because these words, and, indeed, these phrases, have played an important role in Christian self-understanding and, dare I say, its misunderstanding of Jewish tradition. Indeed, the term *Brit Chadasha*, a “new covenant,” is the

Hebrew term for... the New Testament. And these words have been heard not as the renaissance they were meant to be, not as renewal but replacement. This text has gone from the splitting of hairs and the spilling of ink to the shedding of tears and the spilling of blood.

I share with you today not only the hopeful act of civil disobedience from Exodus, but also this sad story, this text of terror from the prophets. A few weeks ago the Jewish people observed the single saddest day on the Jewish calendar. That day, in mid-July this year, was Tisha B'Av, the Ninth of the Hebrew month of Av. It is that day on which, in our tradition, the first Temple was burnt by the Babylonians, the same day on which, we are told, the second Temple was razed by the Romans, a day so sad that, once it became known to our enemies, more misery and suffering and edicts and expulsions were heaped upon us intentionally on that day, to add to the woe – this is the same day in history, consciously chosen, that brought about the end to over a thousand years of Jewish life on the Iberian Peninsula. In 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue, and on that same day, that very day, Spain kicked out the Jew.

A sad day, I say. Indeed. And yet as we heard, "*Hinei yamim ba'im...* Behold, days are coming." Perhaps, in fact, they have already begun... What was need not always be what will be. The great hope we all share as human beings is that the past need not control the future!

A Jewish tradition, about Tisha B'Av. The Messiah, we are told – and for us it is a figure or an era yet to come – the Messiah is going to have red hair, will be born as a descendant of King David – indeed, in Josiah's line. And the Messiah, legend and folklore assert, will be born... on Tisha B'Av. OK, so for us, that's late July or early August, not December. But the legend speaks loudly, that, even at the peak of sadness we hold out...a hint of hope.

And which one of us, looking around, looking back even at the past half century, cannot but hold somewhere in our hearts that hint of hope?

A memory. I served, for a time, as a rabbi in the remote-feeling city of Erie, Pennsylvania. It was a community – and a congregation – that had welcomed us with open arms, but before we moved to Erie there was only one person my family knew in the entire community: a passionate, activist and intellectual nun named Joan Chittister. As I got to know this powerful woman personally, I invited her to speak, at a Friday night service at our synagogue. As she stood on our bimah, our altar, and began to speak, I was moved by her opening words. She had grown up in Erie, she said, and as a young girl had walked past the synagogue and stood on her tip-toes to try to see inside... looking in, from outside, because, according to the rules of her faith, the choice of her church, she was not allowed – she was actually forbidden from coming inside.

My friends, we have made more progress in Christian-Jewish relations, in both directions, in the past half century, than in the two thousand tortured and tumultuous years before then. Our doors are open, our minds and hearts are open, our homes are open. We are talking to each other – indeed, often marrying each other – in ways simply unthinkable in an earlier era.

Why is this true, and how has it happened? Is it, perhaps, simply an American penchant for the superficial, Jews and Christians getting along better with each other because both and each care less for and feel less connected to the separate communities from which they emerged? Is it simply a secular tonic that makes our breaking bread together so much easier than it was? Sad and scary alike to think that our common humanity might emerge more clearly, the *less* we are invested in our religious tradition.

But I do not believe this to be the case. I believe, instead, that it is a more nuanced view, a deeper take and, yes, a more liberal and less literal view of our traditions, that opens us up to one another. In other words, **I believe being more sophisticated in how we see our own faith... is precisely what allows us to authentically appreciate others now, more than ever before.**

Two stories, both teaching new views about the Bible itself, both ways in which we can take our heritage to heart without tearing each other apart.

The first is this: a number of years ago there was quite a stir, a deep sense of discomfort, when a secular, left-wing anti-religious Israeli kibbutz replaced the traditional blessing over bread, praising God as “*haMotzi lechem min HaAretz*; the One who brings forth bread from the earth,” with words praising *the farmer*, who brings forth bread from the earth. Now, no one would deny the role of human hands and sweat and minds in making food. Indeed, we should all be more in touch with where our food comes from, with how it is produced, with what goes in to it, both in terms of labor and content. And it is true, of course, as the old joke says, that a nosy neighbor, going by the flowering garden of a hard-working woman, once told her that she should thank God for the good garden she has been blessed with, and she replied that she did, every day, but, frankly, one should also have seen what the garden looked like when just God had it! There is a danger, indeed, of understating our own role in shaping the world.

And yet with all that, still, even amongst atheist Israelis there was some sense of discomfort with this move. Because occasionally even the least traditional individuals, even those who are fully aware of the human role in planting and reaping, in sifting and in baking... had some sense that there was something – the power of the sun, the turn of the cycles, the balance of air and water and soil, something here beyond the self and beyond the human hand that borders, indeed, on a miracle. And that an expression of appreciation for that, even using traditional words, was not the end of the world.

One of my teachers, then, made an analogy between the phrase “bread from the earth” and the linguistically similarly-constructed phrase “Torah from the heavens,” used, in our tradition, to assert the sacred sense of Scripture, the divine authorship of the first five books of the Bible. And, this teacher said, perhaps now, even though we think we know the human role in writing and in sorting, in editing and in redacting what came to be known as the Bible, still, then, there is a sense, that there is a yearning here for something beyond, a presence sought and felt, a touch of the Divine emerging into our lives even in the midst of history and politics and power. Thus can the Bible be, for us, holy, even if it is not wholly from the hand of God. Thus can we take out tradition *seriously*, even if we do not take it *literally*.

And, finally, the second story. My favorite story, one which I have already shared once with my new congregation in the short time I have been here. There once was a rabbi in a synagogue fortunate enough to have a pre-school. [Story as told by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner.] Every year, towards the beginning of the year, he takes the kids into the Sanctuary, for a tour of what is in there. And he saves the content of the ark, where the scrolls of the Torah are left, for last. But one year, as rabbis sometimes do, he... well, he talked, for a really long time. And there, in the back of the room, are the teachers, pointing at their watches, saying that the parents are coming, that the rabbi needs to finish. So he decides to end quickly, and he says to the kids: “Okay, boys and girls, next week we will get together again, and I will show you... what’s behind the curtains.”

Well, what he did not know, of course, is that this abrupt ending would spark a big debate amongst the little people. What's behind the curtain? One kid, obviously an aficionado of far too much American consumer culture – his parents let him watch too much TV – said: “When the rabbi opens the curtain next week, behind the curtain will be...a brand new car.” [Unfortunately, in this regard, I am told that this is a true story!] Another child, a pre-school skeptic, a budding nihilist, a future follower of Nietzsche or Dostoevsky, said: “ah, when the rabbi opens the curtains, there will be nothing there.” A third kid had been to Tot Shabbat, a service for very young kids – and she correctly responded that behind the curtains were the scrolls of the Torah. But a fourth child gave what I think was a deep, a profound, a very important answer, speaking to how the Bible speaks to us, how it can live in us and through us. For the fourth child said, in an image I will never forget, that when the rabbi opens the ark next week, behind the curtain will be... a giant mirror.

And it is here, I believe, that the Bible speaks to us, in the fullest force of truth and power. For when we look into its words, we see not them, and then, but “us,” and “now.” When we hear its song, look into its pages, we can, indeed, discover ourselves.

And this... this unites us, despite all our differences... or even, not despite, but with, including, embracing, lifting up... all of our differences. We are taught, we are told – in a text I quoted recently in a message to my congregation, in an article which appeared, here, in the local paper, in these

days of moral abdication at the highest levels of secular public servants, a profound failure to unite us as a country this is a message we must share again and again: “*vayivra Elohim et HaAdam b’tzalmo, b’tzelem Elohim bara otam, zachar u’nekevah baro otam...* We are made in the image of the Highest we Can Imagine, in the Image of God we are made...” In God’s image, all of us, male and female, Jew and gentile, tall and short, gay and straight, thin and... less thin, rich and poor, white and yellow and red and brown, all of us in the image of God. We look backwards and inwards, and we can discover ourselves. We look at one another and there, we can discover God.

It is, as you have said, for you, the 12th Sunday after Pentecost. It is also, for all of us, the second Sunday after Charlottesville. So this theme, this call, this sense of coming together... there, in ancient words, but needed, now, more than ever.

“*Hinei Yamim Ba’im...* Behold, days are coming, declares the Eternal...” For us, for now, it is in our hands and our heart. It is a new day, a new way, to be deep, but also open, to turn this day from sadness to joy, to turn our history from challenge to change, not to tear down but to lift up.

The Messiah, Jewish tradition teaches, is to be born on a very sad day. But we can imagine and envision, we can see work and see our way to a happier day. We, ourselves, you and me, we can be the midwives of a better world. Let us... let us do our part, to pave the way.