



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Becoming Self-aware”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

A sermon delivered on October 9, 2016

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

Withdraw into yourself and if you do not like what you see, act as a sculptor. Cut away here, smooth there, make this line lighter, this one purer. Never cease carving until there shines out from you the Godlike sphere of character. Plotinus

It's never too late to be what you might have been. George Eliot

In life, we may set out with the best intentions, but sometimes things don't go as planned, and we must "right the ship" and refocus. Eliezer Zalmanov

Sermon

In Jewish tradition, the Sabbath that occurs during the ten Days of Awe is called the Sabbath of Return. This title echoes a verse in the Book of Hosea, “Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God” (Hosea 14:2). We may not be practicing Jews, but we can make today our Sabbath of Return.

For centuries on this day, rabbis would preach lengthy sermons exhorting the members of their congregations to repent, to return to God's ways. The length of their sermons was a reflection of the frustration the rabbis felt about their inability to get the people to accomplish an inner spiritual change. Rabbi Ezekiel Landau, in the 18th century, confessed to his congregants, “My words have not been successful, nor borne fruit for you have not accepted my ethical instruction. Worse than this: the more I continue to chastise, the more the dissoluteness grows.” (*Jewish Days*, by Francine Klagsbrun, page 32)

I promise no lengthy sermon today because I know I need only share the briefest of words to convince you to repent, to return to your true selves, to be spiritually reborn. Am I right?

The Biblical fable of Jonah I told earlier begins with reluctance. Jonah does not want to do as God asks. Jonah does not want to go to the city of Ninevah to demand the people repent their sinful ways. Jonah is no fool. He knows the Ninevites are enemies of the Hebrew people. He believes the Ninevites won't begin to worship the Hebrew God just because he says they'll die if they don't. He thinks God wants to send him on a fool's errand. So instead Jonah tries to run away from God. Talk about a fool's errand.

But after spending a few days reflecting while in the dark belly of the fish, Jonah decides to follow God's directive. And, lo and behold, the Ninevites listen to Jonah and repent. They turn away from their wicked ways and Jonah's merciful God doesn't destroy Ninevah.

You might expect Jonah to be happy with this result. But he's not. He accuses God of being too compassionate. He wanted God to smite the Ninevites. But God proves to Jonah that all living things are worthy of God's mercy.

Jews tell this story each year because it reminds them that if they repent during this ten-day window before Yom Kippur when God closes the books on the year, they too will receive God's mercy and be given life for another year.

We don't need to be Jewish to find wisdom here. We don't need to believe in a divine judge who keeps track of our good and bad deeds in special books. All we need is a willingness to look within, to go into the belly of *our* beast, and reflect on our behavior during the past year.

Do we like what we see? Do we approve of our behavior? Would the metaphorical or literal God of our hearts approve of our behavior? Are there people we have hurt whom we owe apologies? Are there people who have hurt us whom we owe forgiveness? Are we able to forgive ourselves for falling short of our high ideals?

This tradition of reflection and repentance serves to remind us that we are not perfect, we make mistakes, we run from our responsibilities, but we can make amends. We can turn away from our variously 'wicked' ways and turn towards the God of our hearts, towards our core values, towards love.

In Hebrew, 'holy day' or holiday more accurately refers to an 'appointment.' A holy day is an appointment with God, or that which calls us to be our best selves.

But since we're like Jonah, we run from our appointments. We allow our busy lives to prevent us from examining ourselves, from looking within, from becoming aware of who we are. Jonah was forced by God into a three-day contemplative retreat with no cell phone, television, internet, or 'to-do' list to distract him. You and I don't live in a world where miraculous interventions like that take place, but each year we're given this appointed moment to stop and become self-aware.

I know a wide range of views on God exist in this room. So, when I say the God of your heart, I hope to give you the freedom to fill in the blank in a personally meaningful way. Perhaps that is the still small voice inside. Perhaps that is a moral judge in your head that tells you when you've done something wrong. By whatever name you call that which is ultimate, most of us have a nagging inner voice we can't run from.

It's that voice that tells us when we've hurt someone. It's that voice that tells us to apologize to someone. It's that voice that tells us we're being selfish and unforgiving. It isn't rocket science. But, boy, do we run from it like Jonah.

If we listen to that inner voice, Jews suggest four steps to repent or turn back to the God of our heart. First, *recognize* that what we did was wrong. Second, *regret* that behavior. Third, *resolve* not to repeat the behavior. And fourth, and this is the hardest, *confess* the mistake to the person wronged. And depending on the transgression, confess to God and renew our promise to follow God's ways. If you or I skip any of these steps, we have not truly repented; we have not righted our relationships.

We may also need to right more than our immediate relationships. We make choices every day that impacts people we don't know and even the larger world. We may need to reflect on our

participation in systemic injustice. Or whether we're living in a way that sustains our environment or damages it. If we don't like what we find, we can resolve to change and right this behavior, too.

In closing, I want to return to the Jewish liturgical poem Vivian read earlier. It began, "On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kipper it is sealed." This refers to God's Book of Life and Death. God may write something down on New Year's Day, but it can be changed during the ten Days of Awe or Repentance. Even up to the last possible moment before sunset because God wants to give us life, not death. God wants to save you as God saved Jonah and the Ninevites.

The poem continues by asking questions of life and death. Like God's threat to Ninevah, there's a threat of death for us if we don't return to God before the book is sealed. But I think the bigger message to focus on is the poem's reminder that life is precious.

We don't know how much time we'll have on earth. This holy day period reminds us that we may not be able to control our end, but we can control how we live what time we're given. Let us be kind, compassionate, loving, and generous. Let us return to who we want to be, rather than who we sometimes are. The starting place is within.

May you recommit to living more closely with our Unitarian Universalist values and your high ideals, the God of your heart. And may your name be sealed in the Book of Life.

May it be so.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. Do you intentionally spend time in self-reflection to hear what may be calling you?
2. If repentance means to return to your true and right self, for what might you need to repent?
3. In what ways might annual holidays help you mark passing time? Are they meaningful days?