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Legends – For Love or Money (Solomon and Sinai)

**First Reading: “Camas Lilies” by Lynn Ungar**

*Consider the lilies of the field,*  
the blue banks of camas opening  
into acres of sky along the road.  
Would the longing to lie down  
and be washed by that beauty  
abate if you knew their usefulness,  
how the natives ground their bulbs  
for flour, how the settlers’ hogs  
uprooted them, grunting in gleeful  
oblivion as the flowers fell?  
And you—what of your rushed  
and useful life? Imagine setting it all down—  
papers, plans, appointments, everything—  
leaving only a note: “Gone  
to the fields to be lovely. Be back  
when I’m through with blooming.”  
Even now, unneeded and uneaten,  
the camas lilies gaze out above the grass  
from their tender blue eyes.  
Even in sleep your life will shine.  
Make no mistake. Of course  
your work will always matter.  
*Yet Solomon in all his glory  
was not arrayed like one of these.*

**Second Reading: Selections from Jeremiah and Matthew**

Our second reading is selections from the book of Jeremiah, in the Hebrew Bible, and the book of Matthew, in the New Testament.

**Jeremiah 9:23-24**

Thus says the Lord: ‘Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight.’

## Matthew 6 (24-34)

In this chapter of Matthew, Jesus says:

‘No one can serve two masters; [you] will either hate the one and love the other... You cannot serve God and wealth.

‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.’

### Sermon: For Love or Money

Make no mistake. Of course  
your work will always matter.  
*Yet Solomon in all his glory  
was not arrayed like one of these.*

Our worship theme this past month was Legends and I thought for our last pass at this topic, I’d do a big picture look at a big picture book. Our sermon this morning will take us on a fifteen hundred year journey from Exodus, to the time of Solomon, to the time of Jeremiah, and finally to the time of Jesus. I get excited just thinking about it because I am a huge religion geek. All the credit for this history and analysis goes to the Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann. Hopefully my enthusiasm can be contagious for people that don’t love history of religion as much as I do.

My reason for doing this is that I think, for people with a bit of an iffy relationship with the Bible, if we view it as a collection of verses it can feel very disjointed and confusing. Some verses seem good, others seem bad and a lot of it is just ugly. But when we approach this book as an incredible work of literature with a fascinating cast of characters, when we try to figure out the context of all these stories, they start to make a little bit more sense. And if they make sense, maybe they can also help us make meaning in our lives.

Many Unitarian Universalists struggle with Jesus and who he was. There are a lot of ways to understand this man, but one way to know him is as a Jewish prophet, one in a long, long line of Jewish prophets. Pretty much every prophet in the Hebrew Bible, from Moses to Jeremiah, was terribly reluctant to become “that guy” at the party, the one that’s always going on about justice and right living. Total buzzkill.

So here is our timeline:

We have Moses leading the Exodus—King Solomon’s reign—the young prophet Jeremiah—and Jesus, and they all lived roughly 400 or 500 years apart.

The book of Exodus is the lens through which the entire rest of the Hebrew Bible can be read. In Exodus, the hard-hearted Pharaoh has enslaved the Israelites. God chooses Moses, a very reluctant prophet, to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, and sends plagues upon the Egyptian people to convince Pharaoh to let them go.

After all the excitement with the plagues, Moses brings his people out of Egypt. That is the big chase scene, when God helps part the Red Sea and the Israelites escape. Things remain dicey for three days when they can't find fresh water, but then God provides some. After that, things are okay for about two weeks. And then, two weeks after being freed from slavery, they find themselves at the edge of wilderness. They arrive at the wilderness in chapter 16, verse 1.

In chapter 16, verse 3—just two verses into the Exodus wilderness story...the Israelites say “Moses, take us back!”

The wilderness is a scary place. Sometimes the evil you know seems better than the evil you don't know.

The book of Exodus tells us that wherever we live, we live in Egypt. None of us live in the promised land, not yet. To reach the promised land, we have to face the wilderness. There is no walking around the wilderness—you have to walk through it.

So they reach the edge of wilderness and immediately start complaining. Moses yells at them to buck up and keep going. In the words of Bob Duncan, he told them to “Pull up their socks.” God meets Moses at Mt. Sinai and gives him the 10 Commandments—and even with that most basic guidebook, they keep making mistakes. But eventually, they find their way out of the wilderness and establish a peaceful home. Now, *how* do they establish true peace in the promised land?

They follow the command from God that is given more times than any other command in the Bible. This commandment says that we should share all we can with the widows, the orphans, and the aliens (or foreigners—or if we are translating for America today, the undocumented). God reminds the people again and again: you too were once poor strangers, slaves in the land of Pharaoh. Pharaoh's heart was hard; God wants our hearts to be soft.

In order to fulfill God's order, the people of Moses engage in a covenantal economy: share and share alike, take care of those who cannot take care of themselves. The God of Sinai delights in “steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth.”

Things seem to be going great. All the Israelites have to do to maintain their peaceful life is to share with all those who are in need, and to place love, justice, and right living above all other priorities. Simple, right?

But by the time God speaks to Jeremiah, 800 years after speaking to Moses on Mt. Sinai, something has gone terribly wrong in this covenantal economy. Along the way, people's hearts hardened. They stopped sharing and started hoarding. So what went wrong between Moses and Jeremiah? Do you remember who was in between?

Turn past Exodus a few books until you reach 1<sup>st</sup> Kings. 1<sup>st</sup> Kings describes the time period about 400 years after Moses and the Exodus, and about 400 years before Jeremiah. At this time, the beloved King David dies, and he names his son Solomon the new king.

This is what Solomon does his first days on the job:

He kills his brothers.

He banishes his brother's priest to a far-away town called Anathoth.

He marries the Pharaoh's daughter—so his father-in-law is the Pharaoh!

He begins acquiring wealth, might, and wisdom.

Solomon was dedicated to accumulating wealth. Riches only made him hunger for more riches. He was dedicated to amassing might. He acquired power as an arms dealer, and he drafted workers into forced labor...something his father-in-law Pharaoh might have done. We remember King Solomon as wise, and he was indeed dedicated to gaining wisdom. He had academics on his payroll. But, he didn't share his wisdom: this was a monopoly of intelligence. It was under Solomon's reign that the temple of worship, once open to all, became closed to the poor working-class—only the very wealthy and elite could enter the innermost rooms.

King Solomon does this all in the name of 'God,' but this is a very different God than the God of Exodus, the God of Moses, the God of Sinai. Solomon's God loves wealth, might, and wisdom. The God of Sinai loves "steadfast love, justice, and righteousness."

From Solomon's reign, about 400 years go by...and we open into the book of Jeremiah.

A little boy, Jeremiah, has been going about his business like a normal kid in the small town of Anathoth. Then all of a sudden, boom. God speaks to Jeremiah. He's terrified out of his mind. God declares to him that he is God's new prophet. Jeremiah begs God to reconsider. He says, "God, I am only a boy!" But God says: "Do not be afraid!" (How comforting.)

Then God proceeds to tell Jeremiah all the terrible, horrible things that will befall the Israelites and Judaeans who have not been keeping God's law and covenant. It's Jeremiah's job to start spreading the word about this upcoming destruction to everyone, which makes him, as you can imagine, a very unpopular person.

Do you remember where Jeremiah is from?

He's a simple villager from the town of Anathoth.

For religion geeks like me this sets off “exegetical alarm bells!”

Anathoth is the town that King Solomon exiled his brother’s priest to. For 400 years, the family of this priest has been getting more and more annoyed about this. This priest was Jeremiah’s ancestor, and so you have “the sinking sense of an ending.”<sup>1</sup>

Jeremiah accepts his role as a prophet. And once he’s started, he can’t be stopped. He’s a poet and a prophet and his words have been brewing for centuries. He’s up against wealth—power—and wisdom. But he has love, justice, and righteousness on his side.

Jeremiah tells the people what God said to him: ‘Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight.’

When Jeremiah says “Do not boast,” he is using the Hebrew word “hallel” which is where we get the word Hallelujah from. In other words, don’t “Hallelujah” for your riches, power, and smarts. Those are not holy gifts.

Wealth, might, and wisdom.  
Love, justice, and righteousness.

I wouldn’t want to make that choice for love or money.  
But can’t seek both.  
This is humankind’s great burden.

Let’s unpack these terms: steadfast love, justice, and righteousness.

Steadfast love comes from the Hebrew word *chesed*. In the same way that the words *affection*, *friendship*, *romance*, etc. convey different types of love, *chesed* conveys unconditional love that causes us to act. It’s hardworking love.

Justice is the Hebrew word *mishpat*. Here it is referring to the highest law of the Hebrew Bible: the command to distribute goods fairly, to the widow, orphan, and stranger.

Righteousness is the Hebrew word *tzedik* (sedekah). One way to translate the word “righteous” in the Hebrew language is “one whose aim is true.” You don’t have to be perfect to be righteous; but you should try to do the right thing. You have to try to “aim true” all the time, even if sometimes your aim is off.

Prophets in the Hebrew Bible speak out for love, justice, and righteousness. And this outspoken, against-the-status-quo, stick-it-to-the-man spirit runs right into the New Testament. About 500 years after Jeremiah, we come to a new Jewish prophet: Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann’s words from his lecture.

Jesus says we cannot serve two masters. “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.”

Solomon is always king. No matter where we live, we live in Egypt. Riches and power are seductive pleasures for everyone.

Who wouldn't want to be like Solomon? The smartest, richest, most powerful guy in the room, he just has to whisper to make things happen. And who wants to be like Jeremiah—or Jesus? The guy yelling on a street-corner about love, of all things. What a choice. It's a constant struggle to act generously, lovingly, *righteously* when all around us is the push to consume and hoard.

Choosing love, justice and righteousness instead of wealth, might, and wisdom is a step into the wilderness. And we know what the Israelites did when they got to the wilderness. As one colleague of mine describes this choice, we are the people we have been waiting for. And...we are the people we have been complaining about.

The wilderness is hard. Who knows how long we will wander, and what we will find? Will we ever reach the promised land?

And what of your rushed  
and useful life? Imagine setting it all down....

Imagine giving it all away. Imagine choosing love and justice. Imagine true generosity. Imagine taking the hands of the people you love, and stepping into the wilderness.

*Consider the lilies of the field  
Make no mistake. Of course  
your work will always matter.  
Yet Solomon in all his glory  
was not arrayed like one of these.*

May we be steadfast in our love  
Just in our actions  
And may our aim be true,  
On this day and all the days to come.  
*Amen.*