

Bethlehem, Nazareth, Emmanus....

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The moment I was back in the area and began meeting people in shopping centers and grocery stores and similar places, it became clear to me that I would have to write this sermon. Everyone wanted to know what I had done on my sabbatical, and whether I had enjoyed it, and whether I was returning to the church rested and refreshed and renewed. And the more I encountered those questions, the more I realized that people had a right to know how I had spent my time, and what the sabbatical had meant to me. And so, at the risk of sounding like an elementary school student reading his essay on "How I spent my summer," I would like to use this first sermon of the year as a kind of report to you on my odyssey since last January.

Let me begin by thanking you for making the sabbatical possible. After four and a half years of very hard and intensive work with this congregation, I had grown more tired and fragmented than I had realized. The sabbatical allowed me time to stop running in place, to set my own tasks, to approach them at my own pace, and to rediscover some of the things that are important to me. As I have said to a number of you, I return with news, and news is that in a really humane society, every one would be entitled to an occasional sabbatical, and in a world in which there seem to be more people than there are jobs, perhaps this is a matter which should be put on the national agenda.

Where to begin? Perhaps I should start by explaining the title of this sermon. One of my colleagues recently took a sabbatical, and spent part of it in India, at a Buddhist retreat center. Another of my colleagues spent his sabbatical driving his pick-up truck west through the small towns and villages and hamlets of this country, trying to discover the essence of America. Still another went back to school and engaged in a demanding course of study. With these examples before me as I planned my sabbatical, it seemed I should seek out some exotic setting, or some picturesque travel, or some intense concentration as the focus of my time away.

However, my wife, Beverly, spent last year as Interim Minister to the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley. Between August and the time the sabbatical started, we had lived apart, seeing each other on the average of a day a week. And so, in January I moved to Pennsylvania, and spent the bulk of my sabbatical getting to know exotic locales like Bethlehem, Nazareth, Emmaus and Allentown.

It was not a bad place to be, especially, since I could be there with Beverly. I got in touch again with what it is like to be the minister's spouse--especially when you are also a minister, but with no official position in the congregation. It was fun to have meals ready for Bev when she came home from the office; it was lonely some nights at home when

she was off at some meeting that seemed to go on forever; it was frustrating to watch members of the church make dumb decisions, and find it necessary to bite my tongue and say nothing. And sometimes, I am afraid, I may have over-stepped the limits.

I also rediscovered what it means to share this profession with Beverly. As some of you may know, for one seven year period Beverly and I were co-ministers of a church in Virginia. During those years, we shared the position of parish minister for that congregation fully and completely. On this sabbatical, we were able to do some of those things again--presenting Sunday services together, presenting classes and workshops together. And while on sabbatical, I rediscovered how very much we complement each other's strengths, and how very profoundly I miss the opportunity for the two of us to work together on a constant basis as ministers of the same congregation.

However, I did not spend my time exclusively on dusting and cooking and meddling in Beverly's parish. I began the sabbatical with a list of things I wanted to accomplish with the freedom I had been given, and I am glad to report that almost everything on that list was accomplished. For several years members and friends of the congregation have been urging me to prepare some of the things I have written for possible publication. I decided that the sabbatical was the appropriate time to tackle that job. By the time the sabbatical ended, I had completed four manuscripts. The first is entitled *THE EDUCATION OF GOD* and is currently at a publishers where it is under active consideration. Two manuscripts are collections of the poetry I have written over the years. One is entitled *SEASONS OF REVERIES* and the other, *DIFFERENTIATED SUNLIGHT*. I don't know that either of those will ever be published, unless I win the lottery and am able to finance it myself--an unlikely event since I don't play the lottery. And the fourth, entitled *MINOR THEOPHANIES*, is a collection of meditational pieces I have written over the years. I don't know what will become of any of them, but I have done the work and I have the sense that a nagging responsibility has been acquitted.

In addition, I needed to prepare a series of five lectures on the history of Universalism in American, for presentation to the Unitarian Universalist Mid-Atlantic Community last summer. That entailed rereading Universalist history, and renewing my understanding of its relation to Unitarianism, and to the larger religious culture--a most rewarding and successful undertaking. And, I prepared the outline for the course in Unitarian Universalist Polity which I am currently teaching at Drew Theological School. Finally, I set myself the task of reading things I might not otherwise get to in the course of the church year. Some of these were books which some of you gave me as farewell gifts. Some were things I picked up in book stores. Some were books which had been on my shelves for quite some time. Before long, I realized that I had completed a minor study in Evangelical, Fundamentalist and Millennialist thought in the history of American culture. I discovered, to my surprise, how closely that history is intertwined with and mirrors Unitarian Universalist development on this continent. Indeed, Unitarian Universalism might well be understood to be the liberal wing of the evangelical movement--but that is a subject for another time. And, I must confess, I rediscovered my love of cheap paperback science-fiction, fantasy novels, a love I have not allowed myself to indulge for a long time. During the sabbatical, I devoured a small box full of them, and learned anew

that serious insights often emerge when the mind is given license to engage in folly and foolishness.

Given the fact that I was free on Sunday mornings, I received a number of invitations to preach in churches. I visited the congregation in Syracuse which I had served before coming to Summit, to preach in their newly renovated building and see the changes which had been planned before I left. Beverly and I also preached together in Hagerstown, Maryland, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, at Lake Chautauqua in New York, and I spoke at the brand new Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Poconos. We made a trip to Chicago for some work at the library of the Meadville Lombard Theological School and to visit the Oriental Institute, and to Washington, D.C. to visit the Holocaust Museum. Indeed, as I look back on those months, I am surprised at all that was accomplished.

But when I think of the sabbatical, the central memory, the abiding memory will always be of the three weeks at the end of March which we spent in England. As you may know, this was our first venture out of the country, except for a few brief visits to Canada. We left the Monday after the great blizzard of '93, and arrived in England to be greeted by tulips and daffodils and the vibrant green of early spring. Betsy Lewis had arranged reservations for us at the beginning and the end of the trip. The rest of the time, we took our lives in our hands, rented car and drove more than sixteen hundred miles through southern and southwestern England.

People keep asking us if we saw this or that famous sight. Were we in the Lake District? Did we tour Bath? What did we think of the cathedrals? What about the stately homes and the castles? The truth is, we had our own eccentric agenda, and it included few of these things. We were on the trail of the monuments which testify to the pagan religions which predated Christianity in the British Isles. Even when we visited Cathedrals, we were seeking the Green Man, that pagan symbol of fecundity, which was sometimes hidden in high and obscure corners by the sculptors who decorated great cathedrals, like those at Wells and Exeter.

My memories of England include driving over a rise in the road and seeing in the distance before me, nestled between two highways, the sanctuary of Stonehenge--of walking around that ancient monument and suddenly realizing that men and women had worked on that holy site for twenty-five hundred years before it was completed, if, indeed, it was ever completed. My memories include standing on the embankments which enclose the great circles of standing stones at Avebury, or walking into the West Kennet long barrow and realizing that each, in its way, was a graphic, symbolic representation of the Great Goddess, as surely as Cathedrals are intended to represent the Christian God.

My memories include the long walk up the hill through the sheep meadow to see the chalk horse at Uffington, and the even longer walk through lanes and farmers fields to the site of Windmill Hill above Avebury--the center of an ancient culture, predating the surrounding megalithic monuments. My memories include standing in the pasture where

for a few pounds, the farmer who owned the land would permit visitors to share the great stone circles at Stanton Drew with his herd of cattle, and watching as the cattle gathered around the megaliths, and rubbed their backs and sides on the enormous stones which some ancient peoples had erected to symbolize their relation to the sacred.

I remember driving toward Glastonbury and suddenly realizing that the strange hill dominating the landscape was Glastonbury Tor. And standing on the embankment of the hill fort known as Cadbury Castle--a site which some believe to have been Camelot--and suddenly realizing that if one knew where to look and what to look for, one could see Glastonbury Tor fifteen or twenty miles away on the horizon. And things I had read about the sacredness of hill tops and special landscapes suddenly began to make sense.

I remember a special day in Cornwall, when we set out to discover Pleasant Valley. In a book we had picked up on the trip, the author had made mention of some neolithic wall carvings at Pleasant Valley. No other guide books or lists of sites had mentioned those carvings. Being in Cornwall we decided to look for them. Driving between Boscastle and Tintagel, we saw a tiny sign pointing to a path and indicating that Pleasant Valley was that way. We parked the car along the road and headed down the path. We walked past a mill which had been renovated into a combination bed and breakfast and trout farm. We continued along the path, which meandered beside a stream which fell in noisy abandon down the steep declivity to the sea. Some places the path took us up carved rock stairs and then down to the stream bank again. The sky was brilliant blue with white fluffy clouds. The gorse was blooming; the trees were green with spring. English robins and other birds I could not identify were singing and cavorting about the countryside.

After a long walk we came to another mill--a completely ruined structure, devoid of roof or windows or doors--just a stone shell, slowly returning to the earth. It was clear we were now near the place where the small stream would join the ocean. We had seen no wall carvings. I commented to Beverly that perhaps the book was referring to a different "Pleasant Valley," and turned around, preparing to head back to the car. As I turned I saw behind me, on the rock only a few feet from the mill wall, a carving about the size of my hand. It was a circular maze which someone had laboriously etched into the stone--a perfect maze. And there, next to it, a second one, the same size, the same intricate pattern, and a sign, posted by some government agency, simply indicating the date of the neolithic rock carvings. We stood there in silence before this mysterious message from ages past, while the stream poured itself over rocks and raced toward the embrace of the waiting ocean, while the birds sang and cavorted in the spring sunshine and the gorse reflected the glory of the sun. We shook ourselves, and took some pictures, and reluctantly turned back toward the car, climbing up from the sea to the highlands, from the past to the present, from the mysterious to the everyday. Later I would compare our pictures with pictures in books and discover that the mazes we found at Pleasant Valley were exactly like mazes found at ancient Knosis in Crete, only older than their Cretan counterparts. That day remains with me because in some way it symbolizes for me the spiritual journey which was an unvoiced but ever present part of our adventures in England.

I come away from the trip to England with several strong impressions. The first of these is a renewed sense of the sacredness of place. I found in England, as I have found in this country, places which evoke in me a sense of the deep, holy mystery in which existence is rooted. But what was different about those places in England was that for the first time I understood that it was the interaction of people with place which enhanced and enriched the sacred reality of the earth. I found no place in England which did not betray human intervention. The hills in Southern England are virtually denuded of trees--ancient forests long ago transformed into fields and fields into cities. Even in remote areas like Pleasant Valley, the hand of humanity has touched and changed the landscape. Everywhere, stones have been dragged from vast distances and shaped and formed to create Salisbury Cathedral, and the Roman walls at Chichester and the Circles at Avebury and Stonehenge. I found myself remembering that James Lovelock had developed the Gaia Hypothesis as a consequence of his recognition that life on a planet inevitably will change the planet, that everything is part of everything else and always the elements are interacting and continually altering reality. England helped me to see that our task is not to preserve the earth unchanged, but to be alive to the changes we are making and their consequences, and to seek always to change in ways that are life sustaining and life enhancing. The sacredness of place is a consequence of human interaction with the world which supports and sustains the human venture.

And the second thing I came away with was a strong sense of the continuity through time of practices which honor the earth, even though we may not always understand why we do what we do. I remember a morning on Penwith Moor. Beverly and I had parked the car and walked in from the road for half an hour or forty-five minutes, looking for the Men-An-Tol, an ancient stone monument. The sky was blue with white clouds, the moor was covered with blooming gorse. The path was a track used by cattle and horses. We walked with care.

When we arrived at the ancient stones, we were surprised to discover we were not alone. Two elderly women had preceded us. The stones were as we had expected--two standing stones, flanking a circular stone which had a large hole in its middle. The two women were eager to talk with us and explain why they were there. One of them said that before she retired, she had been a physical therapist, working for the national health service. They had come out to the moor this chilly, windy spring morning because her arthritis had been particularly bad of late, and the ancient tradition was that such afflictions might be eased if one crawled through the holed stone at the Men-An-Tol. She smiled, as if she knew that there was an inherent contradiction here between her persona as a health professional and the act she had performed just before we arrived, crawling through the ancient stone there on Penwith moor, but neither was she prepared to apologize for following an ancient custom.

And I found myself remembering that on occasion, when I go out to gather some flowers, or pick some berries from the raspberry bushes which grow in my backyard, I sometimes find myself talking to the plants, explaining that I intend them no harm, but have need of their flowers or their fruit to enrich my life. I have been known to talk to bees, seeking to coax them away from my face, or out of the car. It is a strange habit, one I cannot justify

in any logical way. I suspect it persists because underlying it is a conviction that all life is of a single order, and that the world, this living earth, is more mysterious than we know.

What did I learn in England? I am not sure I can tell you in words. Let me describe a scene: Standing in a field in Cornwall, on the crest of a ridge, is a circle of stones called the Merry Maids. Tradition has it that a group of young lasses, caught dancing on Sunday, were transformed to stone by an angry Christian saint, but clearly the stones are much older than Christianity. For a long time I stood and looked at the stones silhouetted against the gray and lowering sky of a morning which promised rain. Then, impelled by a urge I could not explain or resist, I walked up the ridge and into the center of the stone circle. There, in the very center of the circle I found that someone had carefully woven a garland of blossoms and had placed that spring-time offering in the center of the ancient circle. Perhaps it resulted from the same urge which prompts me to beg forgiveness of the rose bush and the raspberry bush and impels me to reason with the bees.

Whatever was in the mind of the giver of that gift, I found myself thinking, "This is what we are called to do: to remember our rootedness in earth, to remember our relationship to the generations who have preceded us, to see in this present moment and in this very place the sacredness of our existence and to seek, in words and deeds, to transmit that sense of the sacred to the generations who must follow us."

That may not be much to have learned in the time you gave me to be myself but it is important to me. I suspect that as the months go by I will discover that I have learned other things during that time, but I suspect also that the important learnings will be related this central truth. Again, I thank you for your gift of time, I thank you for the diligence with which you attended to the affairs of this congregation in my absence, and am grateful for the opportunity we now share to discover together, in this place, in each other and the world which nurtures us, the sacred and holy dimensions of our existence.