

Revelation Is Not Sealed
Sunday, March 11, 2018

The title of the sermon says it all: “Revelation is not sealed.” The rest is commentary. So... let’s sing the hymn.... You’re looking a little blank – maybe we need a little more commentary!

The line is taken from a poem by Samuel Longfellow. Longfellow was a Unitarian minister, a Transcendentalist, and the younger brother of the much more famous poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Unlike his brother’s poems which were read and recited throughout the English-speaking world, Samuel Longfellow’s poems had a more limited scope – they were written to be sung by Unitarians. Longfellow wrote the lyrics to many of the hymns which he compiled into our first official hymnal, *Hymns of the Spirit*, published in 1864. We still have a lot of his hymns in our current hymnal – look in the index of composers, authors, and sources at the back to see them all – including #190, the one that line comes from. We’ll sing it at the end of today’s service, but here’s the verse, unaltered from Longfellow’s language:

*Revelation is not sealed;
Answering unto man’s endeavor
Truth and Right are still revealed.
That which came to ancient sages,
Greek Barbarian, Roman, Jew
Written in the heart’s deep pages,
Shines today, forever new!*

The language is a little dated, so it can be hard to hear just how radical those words were even for their time – even for our time.

First of all, the fact that we even had a hymnal with words from contemporary poets is itself a sign of the truth of his line, “revelation is not sealed.” Before then, in this sanctuary and in others of Puritan descent, all our hymns would have been versions of the Psalms. In 1719 Isaac Watts, an English Puritan minister, theologian, and logician, rewrote all the psalms, putting them into sing-able meters. Before that there would have been no singing in our churches. That’s hard to imagine now, when music is such an important part of our worship, but our Puritan ancestors thought music was frivolous. Their focus was the word – the reading of the Bible and then the preacher’s explanation of it. That, with spoken prayers, would have been the whole service. But with Isaac Watts’ version of the psalms, they could add singing, because they were singing the Bible. And we still sing Watt’s words: “O God, Our Help in Ages Past,” #290 in our grey hymnal, is a version of Psalm 90; while “Joy to the World,” #245, paraphrases Psalm 98. It actually had nothing to do with Christmas in Watt’s view, and the Puritans didn’t celebrate the holiday anyway because of its pagan roots.

So by the mid-1700's our First Parish ancestors were singing in church, but only words from the Bible. Because in their view, revelation **was** sealed. In their view, the writers of the Bible had received revelations of truth from God and that was it. God was done revealing truth. The Bible held all the information one needed to understand life and what was of utmost importance. Now this doesn't make them fundamentalists as we understand that term today. They did not believe that each word of the Bible was literally true and unalterable. Nor did they believe that the Bible was a work of science – that understanding is only a little over 100 years old. The Bible, to our ancestors, contained **only** the truths of **religion**. But it contained **all** the truths of religion. So no other truths were coming. And no other religions held truth – not the more ancient traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, or Judaism, even though Christianity had co-opted the Hebrew Scriptures in their Bible, nor the more modern Islam.

But because the Puritans weren't fundamentalists, they wanted to bring all the skills of reason and intelligence to understanding the writings of the Bible. They didn't just read them – they thought about them. Their ministers learned Greek and Hebrew so that they could read the words in the original languages without the distortion of translation. Harvard College for instance was founded because the New World Puritans needed to train young men to take up this learned ministry here without having to send them back to the Cambridge in England. It was this study and independence of thought which led to the birth of Unitarianism here – reading in the light of John Locke and other Enlightenment writers, our spiritual ancestors questioned the Puritan doctrines of inherent sinfulness and predestination. These doctrines held that humankind was born in a state of sin which they were unable to do anything about. But thanks to the sacrifice of Jesus, God offers salvation to some who were chosen before time for this honor. There was nothing anyone could do to influence that decision, but by living properly, you might receive a vision from God that you had been granted salvation and so be spared the torment of spending your whole life fearing you were going to hell. Not very attractive, is it? But fear is a strong prod.

The early Unitarians, though, through their reading of the scriptures, came to a different understanding. They saw humankind as created good – after all in the opening chapters of Genesis, everything God creates, including humankind, is declared “good.” But clearly we don't stay good throughout our lives. So they came to the understanding that humankind has the capacity to choose good or evil. We have power over our destiny. So no predestination. Jesus' role now wasn't to be a blood sacrifice to assuage an angry deity, but to offer a model for life. Jesus showed

us how to keep choosing the paths of goodness, of peace, and of justice, over the paths of evil, of selfishness, greed, and fear. They found all this in their Bible, and that still today is how Unitarian Universalists read the Bible.

It took the second generation of Unitarians, the ones who began the Transcendentalist movement, to see sources of truth beyond the Bible. If the Bible was a human document written by inspired men and women of ages past, why was it more true or inspired than other writings? And if Jesus wasn't a unique savior, but a model of how to live, why must he be the only model? And if God had spoken for the thousands of years which spanned the authors of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, why would God have suddenly decided to stop speaking? As Emerson wrote in his essay *Nature*:

Our age is retrospective. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? ... The sun shines to-day also. ... There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.

"Why should we not also enjoy an original relation to the universe?" Why not! And so they did. The Transcendentalists studied the Hindu *Vedantas*, which were just being translated into German. They wrote the English translations. Thoreau, for instance, took Emerson's copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* with him to Walden Pond and wrote in his book about that time, "In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gita* in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial."

So revelation was not sealed. For the Transcendentalists it spoke through prophets of other lands and languages and time. And it still spoke. If each of us enjoys an original relation to the universe, then each of us receives unique insight into truth. And that insight today lies at the core of our good news: each of us must cultivate that insight, that inner voice, that communion with sheer silence, that relationship with God – whatever word you use. The name doesn't matter. What matters is that truth not be limited or shut off because we didn't hear it, didn't understand it, or didn't communicate it. Truth speaks through us.

But our individual truth is not the whole of truth. Nor is our modern perspective the whole of truth. We draw truth and deepen our sense of meaning

from the past too. Truth spoke through the writers of Genesis, through the writer of the Bhagavad Gita, through the writers of the Gospels; truth spoke through Emerson, Longfellow, and Thoreau. Truth spoke through Rumi, and Thomas Merton, and Mary Oliver, whose poems are offered for *lectio divina* in our prayer time.

And that too differentiates us from other traditions. *Lectio divina* means “divine reading.” Usually the practice involves reading a passage from the Bible – that’s divine reading in most traditions. Only in our churches could the writings of a Sufi mystic, a Trappist monk, and a nature poet be offered as equally inspired, equally of regard as the writings of Isaiah, Luke, or Paul. Revelation is not sealed.

But that openness comes with responsibility. If inspiration lies all around us, not just in one book, each of us needs to keep reading, studying, and thinking whatever we choose as our sources of wisdom. The Bible is not our only source but so are the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Quran*, the Gnostic Gospels of Thomas and Mary Magdalene, the prayers of Margery of Kempe, the visions of Julian of Norwich; the poetry of Hafez, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Mirabai, Gerard Manley Hopkins, May Sarton, and Zelda; the essays of Emerson, Thoreau, Annie Dillard, Wendell Berry. These are some of my scriptures, my sources of inspiration. What are yours? And how do you use them?

Now here’s a challenge – after the service, please share the name of one of these sources with someone else – not someone in your family and not me – and have a conversation about your different sources. Maybe this week go check out a new source. Because that’s the other responsibility when revelation is not sealed – we each need to share our revelations, those which come to us directly in our moments of insight and those which flash upon us from the insights of others.

As the UU minister Forrest Church wrote in his introduction to Unitarian Universalism, *A Chosen Faith* – which I strongly recommend, especially for newcomers – and I have copies to lend! – anyway, Forrest wrote, “In a Unitarian Universalist church, revelation is an ongoing process; each of us is a potential harbinger of meaning.”

Revelation is not sealed. It is an ongoing process with each of us as a potential harbinger of meaning. What revelations have come to you? What meaning do you have to offer to illuminate your own life, our church, and this world?

- Pamela M. Barz