

## **The Endless End of the World and the Purpose of Human Living**

3<sup>rd</sup> in a sermon series at Unitarian Universalist  
Society of Sacramento

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones

November 17, 2019

### **Announcement**

In our monthly sermon series, Rev. Lucy and I are exploring theologies of our Unitarian Universalist heritage. In Sunday sermons and the Tuesday classes once a month, we are asking: What Unitarian Universalist theological perspectives continue to make sense in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and which ideas need reshaping for these times?

### **Reading**

“The Century’s Decline” was written by a Nobel Prizewinning poet, Wisława Szymborska (pronounced VEES-wah-vah Sheem-BOR-ska). She was born in 1923 in Poland and she died there in 2012. This poem was written in the 1980s.

#### The Century’s Decline

Our twentieth century was going to  
improve on the others.  
It will never prove it now,  
now that its years are numbered,  
its gait is shaky,  
its breath is short.

Too many things have happened  
that weren’t supposed to happen,  
and what was supposed to come about  
has not.

Happiness and spring, among other things,  
were supposed to be getting closer.

Fear was expected to leave the mountains and the  
valleys.

Truth was supposed to hit home  
before a lie.

A couple of problems weren’t going

to come up anymore:  
hunger, for example,  
and war, and so forth.

There was going to be respect  
for helpless people’s helplessness,  
trust, that kind of stuff.

Anyone who planned to enjoy the world  
is now faced  
with a hopeless task.

Stupidity isn’t funny.  
Wisdom isn’t gay.  
Hope  
isn’t that young girl anymore,  
et cetera, alas.

God was finally going to believe  
in a man both good and strong,  
but good and strong  
are still two different men.

“How should we live?”  
someone asked me in a letter.  
I had meant to ask him  
the same question.

Again, and as ever,  
as may be seen above,  
the most pressing questions  
are naïve ones.

### **Introduction to Hymn #120**

In the late 1800s, to many white people in the United States and Western Europe, the signs of human progress fed an idealism about the fulfillment of human possibility and the promise of peace and prosperity. Thanks to technology and industrial growth, progress appeared inevitable. The world community seemed poised to be drawn together. Those illusions were shattered by a global catastrophe which we call the First World War. The war lasted from August 1914 to November 1918. Its toll was 9 million deaths, with 21 million people wounded. To the idealists who were confident about the future of humanity, it was a devastating

and heartbreaking setback. It was humbling, disillusioning.

If you are familiar with the musical *Godspell* may know the song, “Turn Back, O Man, Forswear thy Foolish Ways.” Originally it was written as a hymn in response to the First World War while the war was raging. In 1916, when he was 30, Clifford Bax was asked to write a hymn text by the composer Gustav Holst. It is set to a hymn tune from 1543. Bax wrote it as a Christian hymn. Before his death in 1962, Bax had become a Buddhist. So perhaps he’d be happy that we’ve got his work in our UU hymnal. With gender-neutral words, it appears in the gray hymnal at #120.

## Sermon

In some parts of conservative or Fundamentalist Protestant Christianity, there is a powerful narrative about the end of the world—including the Rapture, the battle of Armageddon, and the Second Coming of Christ. In particular, after the forces of Christ finally prevail over the armies of the Devil, Christ will rule on earth for a reign of 1,000 years. On the Day of Judgment, Christ will raise the dead, retrieve and protect those who believed in him, and fling the non-believers into the fires of hell. Growing up in a Protestant church that was pretty middle-of-the-road, pretty moderate, I didn’t learn this narrative. But I started hearing about it in college in the 1980s.

Brother Max was a regular character on my college campus in southern Indiana. Max was a portly white guy in a shirt and tie who stood outside preaching. He’d pace in a circle on a green patch of grass and over the semester he would have dug out a brown patch of dirt while yelling to students passing by about salvation and warning us of the end of the world. The Bible showed us, he said: the earth was a battle ground between cosmic forces of good and evil. The Soviet Union was the devil’s kingdom and the United States was Christ’s most favored nation. Yet this country was putting the future at risk by our depravity and sinfulness, such as permitting premarital sex, granting access to birth control and abortion services, extending equal rights

to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, and prohibiting public prayer in public schools. Signs of the end times were earthquakes, diseases, trouble in the Middle East, and the growing popularity of the Roman Catholic Pope. The end was coming, and it wouldn’t be pretty—unless you were saved, that is. This was Brother Max’s theology of the end of the world and the purpose of human living. In the battle of good versus evil, you better get on God’s winning side. Max may or may not have known the word *eschatology*, but that’s what he was talking about.



Eschatology is the name of the discipline of theology concerned with the purpose of human living and the end of the world. Many books, movies, musical compositions, poems and video games depict images of the end of the world. Religious movements and personality cults have arisen out of predictions that the end is near.

Such predictions *can be* captivating. Yet they are also distracting. They distract us from seeing the real needs and real suffering of people right now. To be of any use, a statement of the purpose of human living must guide the ways we live now—not pin our hopes and fears on the future.

Let’s consider our UU eschatology. Looking at our history first, our Universalist ancestors emerged in the late 1700s in the northeastern United States. That side of our family began by proclaiming the joyful news that God is love and everybody is worthy of love. This means that hell doesn’t exist. There’s not even hell for those we’d like to send there. Love is *that* powerful, said the Universalists. This idealistic faith made them seek to make the world a better place. They wanted to create a heaven on earth.

After all, they reasoned, if we're all God's children, we better get along. We better be good to one another. Faithfully they served others with generosity, activism, compassion and works of mercy. They weren't perfect but they sincerely tried. They were certain that love would win out in the end.

On the other side of our UU family tree, the American Unitarians also emerged in New England, around 1800. They had as noble and high an opinion about human goodness and human potential as the Universalists had about God's love. One slogan of Unitarianism in the 1800s affirmed faith in "the progress of mankind, onward and upward forever." They had faith in human freedom and a conviction to promote the full flourishing of every human being. This faith motivated them to found libraries, establish experimental schools and build colleges, to work for the abolition of slavery, to pursue prison reform, women's rights, and more humane care of people with mental illness.

Yet in spite of their optimism and their efforts, progress was not onward and upward for very long at all. In this country, the end of slavery was followed by legal segregation and white racial terrorism through most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Around the globe, the evidence of the First World War, the Holocaust, the Second World War, and all the genocides and persecutions made the 20<sup>th</sup> century a murderous, cruel and tragic one. It was not a century of progress, morally speaking. In her poem "The Century's Decline," Polish poet Wisława Szymborska said:

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that weren't supposed to happen,  
and what was supposed to come about  
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...

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In the past century, Unitarians and Universalists have strived, spoken up, given time, donated money, sung and prayed to make the earth fair and all its people one. Borrowing from the Protestant Social Gospel movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, we UUs have claimed the vision of "building the beloved community." That is, we aspire to promote justice, equity and peace in the world. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Martin Luther King Junior grew up and studied in the Social Gospel tradition, and he took its vision into the movement for civil rights and economic justice—"building the beloved community."

History shows that social progress has been achieved not through one final battle, not once and for all, but step by step. Yet when progress takes two steps backward, or worse, how do we make sense of it? When progress is upended by persistent racism, economic exploitation, and environmental destruction, what keeps us going? "How should we live?" the poet asks.

Twenty-five years ago, when I was in seminary, a professor of American religious history gave a lecture about the situation of the world at the time. He recalled words by a mentor of his, from decades earlier. He said: "Things are going to get worse before they get worse."

In other words, no longer can we feel certain that our visions of social justice or peace on earth will succeed once and for all. At the same time, we cannot resign ourselves to injustice and suffering. Resignation or despair is an easy response if we feel disheartened by the state of the world but are not actually, personally threatened by injustice. Both despair and resignation are attitudes which call for little faith and little effort. In her book *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, UU scholar Sharon Welch has written that the people whose lives are threatened by the forces of domination don't have the option of resignation. They don't have the option of despair. They must struggle or they will die, or their children will. They have no choice but to resist. Whether it's resistance by protesting, political activism, civil disobedience, returning violence for violence, or fleeing to an uncertain future in a new country or a refugee camp, they don't have the privilege of despair.

To feel grief at the state of the world is authentic and painful, yet it need not be immobilizing. Grief need not keep us from acting. Indeed, it may be grief that motivates us to resist systems of domination and oppression. Solidarity with suffering people or solidarity with our suffering earth brings heartbreak often and discomfort always. Yet perhaps in these times, our values are calling us to solidarity.

One group after another—secular people as well as religious people—have been making predictions of the end times for generation after generation. The end of the world has been proclaimed over and over, but it hasn't happened. Well, it hasn't happened in the way those groups depicted, yet the world is ending all the time for too many vulnerable people.

The world is ending for those with diseases that are preventable, like infections from the lack of clean water. For those who are trying to flee persecution and violence in Central America and are perishing of thirst and heat while walking across the Arizona desert. As the earth heats up and sea levels rise and weather disasters continue, the world is ending for people who inhabit coastal areas and small islands. It's ending for the creatures in coral reefs and rain forests, and thousands of species of insects, and plants. Some species are dying out before biologists can even identify them. In the face of all this, it seems a waste of time to come up with a story or a vision to have some confidence or comfort about the future. It seems wrong to produce a scenario or a story only to make us feel better about ourselves. It is a distraction from the work our values are calling us to do right now.

This is what a Swedish girl of 16 years of age said to us when she spoke to the United Nations in September. Greta Thunberg talked about the heating-up of the earth's atmosphere and the failure of the adults of the world to lead in stopping the catastrophe which is now evident. This high school student said to them and to us:

You all come to us young people for hope. How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the

beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!"<sup>1</sup>

What can motivate us to keep going? Perhaps it is a sense of solidarity with leaders like her, and solidarity with her generation and all other people whose lives are at risk. In 1956, during the boycott of segregated buses in Montgomery, Alabama, Dr. Martin Luther King said: "The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice." He was paraphrasing Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, from nearly a century earlier in Boston. Parker was a radical reformer and an ardent abolitionist. Of course, looking back over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, you could conclude that there is not a moral arc to the universe. Yet those two leaders were trying to motivate their people and sustain their movement, keep it going. Theodore Parker and Martin Luther King were trying to keep themselves going.

What they didn't mention was that the moral arc bends toward justice only if we bend it with our common efforts. They didn't say it, but they lived it. While bending the arc of justice, Theodore Parker made sparks fly, and he lost the support of his ministerial colleagues and friends. While bending the arc of justice, Martin Luther King generated social heat, and he lost his life.

The poet Wislawa Szymborska writes:  
"How should we live?"

someone asked me in a letter.

I had meant to ask him  
the same question.

Again, and as ever,

...

the most pressing questions  
are naïve ones.

For me, the meaning of theology in general and eschatology in particular comes down to that pressing but naïve question: "How should we live?"

To begin to articulate our own answer to that question, I have a suggestion.

In the coming days, in the coming weeks, let us all take some time apart, some time to reflect and consider: what is it that keeps your heart open? What keeps you going forward in these times?

Perhaps it would be some version, some form, of love. Love could reveal itself to you in feelings of grief at all that has been lost. It could come to you as anger at all that is being destroyed.

What keeps your heart open and keeps you going forward? It could be the values that you hold so deeply which keep you serving and giving, singing and praying, no matter the uncertainty of the outcome. It could be a sense of solidarity with those most at risk, the charge to remember those whose only choice is to struggle against oppression.

If you are one of those who are at risk and in danger or suffering under oppression, this love could be love of yourself and for your own survival, and the survival of your neighbors and their children. This could be how love motivates you.

Or love could emerge as your own idealism for what is possible at our best moments of human courage and human cooperation. It could be the marvels of human existence and human possibility which keep your heart open. Or your inspiration could come from the wonder of life itself. It could show up as your gratitude for this beautiful world. It could be your delight at nature's abundance,

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<sup>1</sup> Transcript: Greta Thunberg's Speech At The U.N. Climate Action Summit, September 23, 2019. National Public Radio website. Accessed November 16, 2019.

resilience, and colorful variety. This could be how love motivates you.

In these times of uncertainty, when we wonder, "How should we live?" let us consider these questions. Let us ask one another: What keeps you going forward? What it is that keeps your heart open? Let us ask, and listen with our hearts.

Unitarian Universalism can't claim an eschatology of certain confidence. We don't have an end-of-the world scenario that looks dazzling on a movie screen. That's never been possible in our tradition or appealing to most of us.

Indeed, our tradition teaches us that this earth is not a battle ground between cosmic forces of good and evil. The earth is a gift. We depend on this earth and we must choose to care for it. Our tradition does not see human beings as pawns on the chess board of God and Satan, it sees human beings as precious and fragile. Every One Worthy... of dignity, compassion and freedom.

We cannot predict that the power of divine love or the power of human love will win out once and for all. We can't be certain of the future. Yet we can keep the faith with love. Love does not let us go. Love does not let us off the hook. So may it be. Amen.

<https://www.npr.org/2019/09/23/763452863/transcript-greta-thunbergs-speech-at-the-u-n-climate-action-summit>