

## **What Are We To Do?**

Sermon Text, May 24, 2020

UU Metro Atlanta North - Rev. Dave Dunn

The 1989 movie *Glory*, relates the history of one of the first all African American regiments to fight in the Civil War. The regiment was led by Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, a 25-year-old white man. In one scene, a rebellious young African American private named Trip goes AWOL. He later turns up in camp after a period of time. Upon his return, Col. Shaw assembles the regiment together and then calls for Trip to be brought forward. Colonel Shaw will teach this man a lesson. He will exert his authority. Trip is tied to a post; his shirt ripped from his back, revealing the scars of his whippings as a slave. When it becomes apparent that a whipping will again take place, Trip trains his piercing eyes on Colonel Shaw and stares a hole right through him; wordlessly expressing what no words can fully express, "You're going to do this to me? Do you think you can punish me? Who do you think you are? God? I will feel crack of the whip, but you will be the one to feel the humiliation. Look at yourself. This will be my victory."

In the current state of affairs in which we find ourselves, you can't turn on the TV for very long without seeing a commercial featuring many well-meaning celebrities or sports stars saying, "We'll get through this." Yet I'm not convinced that they, I or anyone fully understand just what "this" is. It is a bit disconcerting.

At the end of Albert Camus' novel *The Plague*, Dr. Rieux, the principal character, watches the townspeople celebrate with cheering and frivolity its victory over "this" *peste* (plague); yet Dr. Rieux knows that this plague never fully goes away, it lingers, lurks, biding its time until it is ready to rise again.

Apocalypse – it's a word that can send shudders up my spine; but the Greek root of the word means to uncover, to reveal. As Unitarian Universalists on a quest in search for truth and meaning, we must look deeply into the apocalypse, the revelation in an effort to make sense of "this" situation.

Although we're still in the thick of it, wearing masks and practicing social distancing, in the future, might our plague, or its mutations, insist on coming and going like the seasons? Might our plague be our rock; our rock that we repeatedly push up the mountain only to have it roll to the bottom...again and again?

In his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus writes "[Yet] if [Sisyphus'] descent [down the mountain] is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy (Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*)."

Joy? Seriously? How could that be? Could he defeat both the gods and the rock? And in joy? How?

Well, it can't be done by remembering the past and waiting for it to again become the future. It can't be done by anticipating the time when things return to "normal"...that would be clinging to the rock while it rolls down the mountain and then continuing to cling to it as it falls through an endless sea, carrying you down with it. That is hell. Clinging to the past; waiting for the yesterday's sun to rise again tomorrow on yesterday is the plague's victory.

Camus says that, "Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks." Though we may not be the ultimate masters of our fate, things happen that are beyond our control, yet we must be masters of our being.

Rather than living in denial, anger or rage...or thinking that there will be a time when we get *through* this, as if we somehow seem to know that there will be a time when this plague is not; it is by our reaction to whatever this brings that we can make the plague our own; we can continue to help one another with this, whatever this ends up being.

The Buddha once asked a student, "If a person is struck by an arrow, is it painful?" The student replied, "It is." The Buddha then asked, "If the person is struck by a second arrow, is that more painful?" The student replied again, "It is." The Buddha then explained, "In life, we cannot always control the first arrow. However, the second arrow is our reaction to the first. And with this second arrow comes the possibility of choice."

We can choose to not let the rock win, the plague win. Choose to not let it win in our hearts...regardless of whatever it does; whatever it is.

Poet Christian Wiman writes,

Faith is not faith in some state beyond change. Faith is faith in change. That this welter of cells entails for us great sorrow and difficulty is true....But there is great joy in this ongoing apocalypse as well...joy in reality's abundance and prodigality...and in the deep, implicit peace whose surest promise of reality is the miraculous capacity we have - in a work of art, a gesture of love - to imagine it.  
(Christian Wiman, My Bright Abyss, 104)

In this ongoing apocalypse, in this unfolding revelation, with what is being uncovered, what are we to do? What will you choose to imagine?