

Spring Awakening 2013 Tu B'Shevat, Setsubun, Imbolc

Trees, Bonfires, and Devils Out!

Worship Service at UCV

February 3, 2013

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In the beginning was the tree...
In the desert was a well
Late in winter in the belly
There is life fire reawakening.

Groundhog climbed out into day
Brooms sweep last year's gloom away
Happiness in and Devils out!
Are now the words we gladly shout!

This is one of those worship services where we're going to try to make things happen on different levels at the same time. Hopefully, everyone in the room will have some fun, feel welcome here, and have something worthwhile to take away as we approach noontime and the end of the service. But before the fun, I'm going to say something for the grownups, though you kids can eavesdrop—secretly listen in—if you want to. Are you ready? Goes like this: Each human culture and time is unique; that's true enough. And yet, there's a lot we humans share across time and space—our bodies are basically the same and so are their needs and functions. We're all born into communities and try to figure out how to get along. As well, the sun rises and sets, the seasons come and go; one year follows another; children are born; we age in time and experience and then comes a time and we let go of life and die. These kinds of things humans share no matter where and when we've lived.

And we all love to tell and hear stories. While it's true that there are just about as many stories as there are people, yet it also seems that when we get down to it, according to Christopher Booker, it appears that human storytelling revolves around "Seven Basic Plots":

Overcoming the Monster, Rags to Riches, The Quest, Voyage and Return, Comedy—the unexpected ending, Tragedy—the fatal flaw, and Rebirth. I’ve even read that plots can be boiled down to one essential theme: and that’s the notion of a contract, or an agreement, in all narratives, since the story is set into motion by the breaking of a contract. Between the acceptance of a contract and its resolution lies a struggle in which the hero must pass a series of tests. Mozart’s opera *The Magic Flute*, which the Vancouver Opera will be performing in March, is an excellent example of this idea. And so are the many of the stories that have emerged around the world to celebrate this special weekend.

(On contracts and narrative, see reference to AJ Greimas, in “Structuralism,” *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, p.552. Also see Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots*, Continuum, 2004. Other lists of basic plots include: a) Love, Money, Power, Revenge, Survival, Glory and Self-awareness; and b) 1. Cinderella - or unrecognised virtue at last recognized, 2. Achilles - the Fatal Flaw, 3. Faust - the Debt that Must be Paid, 4. Tristan - that standard triangular plot, 5. Circe - the Spider and the Fly, 6. Romeo and Juliet, boy meets girl, etc., 7. Orpheus - The Gift taken Away and 8. The Hero Who Cannot Be Kept Down. Georges Polti, in his famous book, *The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations* classified these not by legendary/mythological tales of archetypes or personalities (Faust, Circe, etc.) but by the situation itself, e.g., no. 10, 'Abduction'; no. 25, 'Adultery'; no. 3, 'Crime Pursued by Vengeance', etc. See “Notes and Queries,” *The Guardian*,” It is a much quoted maxim that there are only seven stories in fiction and that all others are based on them. Is it true, and what might these seven stories be?”)

Last thing before some stories and fun: a week ago, I said that religion is all about our search for the meaning of existence—something we do in community with the aid of beliefs, history, practices and institutions. Well, I also think it has a lot to do with our ages-long encounter with nature and its rhythms and our attempt to work and thrive in harmony with them. When we’re out of whack with nature, we know it, and we try to put things right. When the harmony is achieved and our care and stewardship are blessed with bounty, we feel a kind of humble pride, reverence and gratitude—trying to get things right with nature and responding to it with reverence and thanks, that, too is religion; and come to think of it, it may have something to do with an implicit human contract with the source of all things, and the abiding need to keep up our end of the agreement. Enough of that.

OK. Students and scholars: you out there? Here’s a question for you, it’s a long one: What does a fat groundhog named Phil who lives in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, Jewish

families planting trees in Israel and elsewhere, pagans lighting bonfires and weaving Brigid's crosses, Christians processing into church with candles, French families cooking crepes while holding a coin in their hands, the T & T market in Vancouver's Chinatown filled with festive packages of cookies and treats of all kinds, and Japanese families tying sardines to holly trees and kids tossing soy beans at red and blue demons while shouting: *ONI WA SOTO; FUKU WA UCHI? DEVILS OUT, HAPPINESS IN!*—what do groundhogs, tree planting, people, sardines, special foods, house cleaning and demons all have in common? This weekend, in places all around the world? What's going on that's so special?

On our northern half of the planet, this weekend, we are at the exact mid-point between winter and spring. It's the time in the natural calendar of the year when we begin to leave winter behind and rejoice and look forward to the coming of spring. The earth is reawakening—time for new beginnings, things yet to be born: plants waiting to bud, animals to bear lambs and calves and be nurtured with the milk of life. It's not that spring has sprung just yet...it's that we hope that winter is coming to an end and the promise of spring is swelling up even as the days grow longer. I know Hanno Pinder's already out in her garden—how many gardeners do we have out there? (*Gardeners wave your hands!*)

This weekend is Groundhog Day, Tu B'Shevat—the festival of tree planting; it's the advent of the lunar new year and Chinese families are getting ready to feast; it's Imbolc—the pagan first festival of spring—time for lighting bonfires and candles; it's St Brigid's Day and Candlemas in Christendom, and in Japan, it's Setsubun—where families clean out the house and go to Shinto Shrines to welcome the new year and toss soy beans at demons while shouting out: *ONI WA SOTO; FUKU WA UCHI! DEVILS OUT, HAPPINESS IN!*

To celebrate this important weekend, we have three stories to tell and our tree up here to decorate with advent springtime prayers and wishes.

The first story comes from the Jewish tradition; it's connected with the celebration of Tu B'Shevat, the festival of tree planting, a kind of Arbor Day in the Jewish world. The trees begin to awaken

just a little this time of year, enough to begin the flow of sap from roots to branches. As we watch the trees awaken, it brings to mind the Jewish mystical name for God: Etz Chayyim—the Tree of Life. “She is a tree of life,” it says in the Book of Proverbs. We have learned how the well-being of trees is intimately connected to the well-being of all creation. And as the saying goes from a Midrash: “If not for the trees, human life could not exist.” (Midrash Sifre to Dt. 20:19) May we feel the coursing of the life of the world deeply at this time of year.

So here’s our first story: ***“Honi and the Carob Tree.”***

Honi lived a long time ago in Palestine, about the same time as Jesus. He was also known as Honi the Circle Maker. By drawing a circle and stepping inside of it, he would recite special prayers for rain, sometimes even argue with God during a drought, and the rains would come. As wise as he was though, Honi sometimes saw things that puzzled him.

One day, Honi the Circle Maker was walking on the road and saw an old man planting a carob tree. His grandchild was helping him. Honi laughed and asked, “How long will it take for this tree to bear fruit?”

The man replied, “Seventy years.”

Honi then said to the grandfather, “Don’t you know you’ll never live to eat the fruits of this tree?”

“I know that,” said the man, “but my grandchild will. As my grandfather planted for me, so shall I plant for her.”

Honi was not satisfied with the reply. And he grew tired, laid upon the ground and fell asleep. He slept and slept for many years, and when he awoke, he had a long white beard. He was amazed. Well, he looked about and saw an old woman picking fruit from a tree nearby to give to a young child with her.

“Is that your fruit tree?” Honi asked.

“It is mine because my grandfather planted it for me,” she said. “I tend it so that my grandson can have it also. We have already taken seeds from this tree to plant another one.”

It was then that Honi remembered what the old man had said to him long ago. He understood that he was being given a lesson in planting not only for oneself but for generations to come.

(from www.punktorah.org, “Planting, Seders and Psalms: Practices for Shevat”)

And now here's the second story called "The Well and the Flame": this one celebrates the pagan festival of Imbolc—a time of anticipation and celebration of the possibilities for good things and blessings in the year to come.

Once upon a time there was a sister and brother named Brigit and Alex. They lived where winter brought deep snow and cold. They loved the snow and wintertime, but every year, they waited eagerly for Imbolc to come around for they knew the days would grow longer and that spring would come.

"How long will winter last," they asked their mother.

"Well," she said, "light a candle, look into the flame with an open heart, and wait—maybe the goddess Brigit will come and tell you."

And so they did. They lit a candle and looked deep into the flame; its little tongue of fire grew and grew until it filled the room with a glorious light, and then a woman appeared.

"Why have you called me," she said.

"We want to ask you—how long will winter last?"

"Until clean water rises in the sacred well and bright flames burn in every fireplace and window," she said and then she disappeared.

The next morning, Brigit and Alex went from house to house in their village to see that each home-fire burned and that candles blazed in every window. And so they did. But they looked and looked and couldn't find the sacred well anywhere.

Now there was one house outside of town where Old Man Maddog lived. Nobody like him. He didn't bathe; he was cranky and strange. No smoke came from his chimney, no candle in his window. No light at all. Brigit and Alex gathered their courage, walked up to the shack, and looked inside. There they saw old Man Maddog lying in bed moaning and shivering.

"Maybe he's sick," Brigit said, "we better go and see." It was freezing cold inside, and dirty as could be. The old man had a fever and couldn't move. And though he told them to go away and leave him be, Brigit and Alex kindled a fire, lit a candle and placed it in the window, made a soup, and cleaned the house and swept the floor.

"Pesky children," Old Maddog said. "Still, I suppose I should thank you."

“That would be polite,” said Brigit. “But now, can you tell us, have you seen a holy well around here?”

“Holy well, jingle bell,” said the old hermit—“no holy well around here. Just a water hole out back in the woods and it’s full of garbage.”

Garbage,! that doesn’t sound holy, they thought, but it’s the only well anyone had told them about and so they walked through the woods. And there they found a ring of stones encircling a puddle of frozen mud all choked with leaves and litter—sodden papers, plastic bottles, even an old bicycle. They stooped down and set to work: out came the leaves, the bottles, the soaked paper, and they heaved and heaved and finally, out came the bike gooey with mud.

And then guess what happened? Clear, clean water began to rise and glimmer and glisten in the well. Little snowbell flowers rose from the ground and began to bloom. And the air around the children filled with light.

“You’ve done well,” said the bright lady who appeared at their side. “You’ve begun the work, and that is all that anyone can do. People forgot to tend this well and keep it clean, forgotten too the law of kindness to strangers. Old Man Maddog, even now grows stronger in his shack that you made tidy and filled with warmth. With the warmth of loving kindness, the days will grow warm again. You have lit my fire and cleaned my well. And now I will tell you a secret. Inside the heart of every girl and boy is a holy well, full of waters of love and joy and new ideas—keep it clean and bright. And inside you is a fire you must tend and feed and keep burning—and then you will grow strong and wise and brave. Will you do that,” the goddess asked.

“We’ll do our best,” Brigit the sister said.

“And now will spring come,” asked Alex.

“Spring will come,” the lady promised, and then she winked at them. “Spring will come—as soon as winter is over.”

And it did. (“The Well and the Flame,” by Starhawk, from http://www.angelfire.com/wa3/angelline/the_well_and_the_flame.htm)

Now we have heard two stories about growth, renewal and hope—a celebration of the coming spring that’s on its way to warm the earth and bring back life again. One more story and our tales from different lands and people celebrating this weekend—that here we are exactly midway between winter solstice and the spring equinox—one more story and our service comes

to an end. This story is called “The Farmer, His Daughter and the Demon,” it’s from long ago in Japan. It tells how the festival of Setsubun might have begun. Setsubun means “the division of seasons,” and what it celebrates is the ending of the old year and winter and the beginning of the new and the coming of spring. Families sweep and clean their houses, and then they gather at shrines and temples to drive away misfortune and pray for happiness to come in the new year. They do it in a strange way—well it might look strange to us. Bright red demons, called oni, dance about and roar and try to frighten everybody. But guess what? Children and parents have special protection—they drive away the oni by tying sardines to holly trees—it’s like garlic and vampires—the demons can’t stand the smell; and children and adults toss soya beans at the demons and cry out: *Oni wa Soto; Fuku wa Uchi! Devils out! Happiness IN!* And the devils run away for another year.

So here’s the story about the first Setsubun: ***Once upon a time***, there was a farmer who had a beautiful daughter ready to start a family of her own. Many young men wanted to marry her, but the farmer said, “If any can lift this huge stone with bare hands, then I’ll agree to let her leave my home.” But no one could lift it. It was too big, too heavy.

Then one day an oni—a demon—came to the farmer’s house.

“Is it true,” said the oni, “if I can pick up this stone, you will give your daughter?”

What could the farmer say? He was stuck. If he said no, he’d break his word and the oni would be mad and go on a rampage. Sadly, he had to say “yes.”

So the oni wrapped his arms around the stone, gave a great roar, and lifted it over his head. “Now you must give me your daughter, said the oni. And with that he put her on his shoulders and ran off into the mountains.

The farmer was shocked and worried for his daughter. So he followed the oni and his daughter deep into the forests and mountains until he came to a cave. There was the farmer's daughter sitting next to the young demon, and other onis gathered around a fire. Although the farmer was scared he stayed close to watch and listen.

Soon the onis began to drink and sing: "Yaa, yaa, yareyo: sardines stink, and holly stings. Yaa, yaa, yareyo." The demons clapped in time to the beat. The farmer listened very closely.

Next, the young oni told his new bride to sing a song; and so she did: it was a lullaby. And here are the words she sang:

"Now it's time for mice to sleep. Cows and horses too. Dear red demons it's your turn, sweet dreams coming soon." The demons listened utterly charmed and one by one they fell deeply asleep.

The young woman looked up, saw her father nearby, and said: "Hurry, let's run away." And so they did, and soon arrived safely back to their village.

Now, do you think that's the end of the story? Nooo.

All the villagers were frightened: "what if the demon comes back," they said. "We saw how he lifted that stone—just think what he'll do! He'll pull down our houses and stomp on our fields."

It was then the farmer and his daughter told them: "Don't worry; we know what the oni is afraid of. Quick get a holly leaf, stick a sardine on top, and hang it outside over the doorway. And then a grandmother added, "Let's get some soya beans too. People say they ward off evil. Before long the villagers could hear footsteps: DOKA DOKA GARA GARA. The demon was on his way back to get revenge and take the young woman back to his cave.

“Give me back my wife,” he yelled, “or I’ll pull your houses down and muck up your fields.”

But then all of a sudden, he saw the sardine and the holly.

“Pooh, what stink! Ouch, holly leaves, they got me in the eye. I can’t breathe, I can’t see.”

“Now it’s our turn,” said the farmer, the young woman and all the villagers. They started to toss beans at the demon. And shouted out *ONI WAS SOTO; FUKU WA UCHI! DEVILS OUT, HAPPINESS IN!*

“Ouch!” cried the oni. “Oh no, not soya beans. I’m no match for the beans! Run away run away!”

And so, crying and screaming the demon fled, leaving the village alone. And the farmer much wiser. “From now on,” he said, “I’ll let my daughter choose who she wants to be with.” And for that whole year, they lived in peace and happiness.

Those are the stories this Tu B’Shevat, Imbolc and Setsubun Day—we have gathered at the midpoint between winter and spring. And what did we learn?: from “Honi and the Carob Tree”—a call to us to plant and care for trees and living things; for we plant not only for ourselves, but for generations to come. From the story of “The Well and the Flame,”—we learned to care for the good things inside us and the world all around—to keep our water clean and the flame within us burning bright. And finally, the Setsubun story of “The Farmer, His Daughter and the Oni”—it takes a village and some wisdom to drive away evil, to welcome the new year, and know when the right time comes to let young people make their own choices.

Many stories, a lot of wisdom about the agreements we make and how we can make things right when broken contracts make the world go astray. May we be the heroes of our own

stories—tree planters, candle lighters, water masters, victors over the red demons in our lives.

Happy Ground Hog, Tu B'Shevat, Imbolc and Setsubun Day to us all.

And now let's join in singing our closing mash-up song singing words printed in the order of service to the tune of Joni Mitchell's "The Circle Game."