

“I Am Because We Are”

January 3, 2010

Rev. Thomas G. Anastasi

CALL TO WORSHIP — “We Live By the Sun” by Stephanie Kaza

We live by the sun
We feel by the moon
We move by the stars

We live in all things
All things live in us

We eat from the earth
We drink from the rain
We breathe of the air

We live in all things
All things live in us

We call to each other
We listen to each other
Our hearts deepen with love and compassion

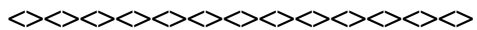
We live in all things
All things live in us

We depend on the trees and animals
We depend on the earth
Our minds open with wisdom and insight

We live in all things
All things live in us

We dedicate our practice to others
We include all forms of life
We are grateful for all beings and companions

We live in all things
All things live in us



SERMON:

The first Sunday of the New Year is usually set aside to honor Janus, the Roman god with two heads, one faced looking forward the other backward. We call this month “January” and we look past and into the future. In years past, I have offered a prayer to Janus, simply asking for a kind of *cosmic kindness* to us mortals as we warily review the past and optimistically look to the future.

Like any god I know of, and like any prayer I know of, this exercise is both futile and fruitful. Mostly, of course, it has to do with the ones praying and how they are inwardly changed and challenged by

the prayer. In other words, as always, *it's up to us* how to think about the past and what we want to do about that which is yet to come.

You know, I've often thought that since I've left the world of fundamentalist Christianity, how much easier it would be if, in fact, we could turn to the powers of the gods, the powers of the universe for assistance in these matters, and especially how much more comforting it would be if we *believed* those powers could make a difference in our favor. If we could only believe in the way millions and perhaps billions of people around the world actually believe in that hope. They believe that they can call upon the gods and that the gods will respond—maybe even that the gods will respond to the way the prayers want them to respond.

Thus we see the creation of so many religions and spiritual pathways hoping to appeal to the gods—a hope to appeal to something bigger than we are, when we are in trouble. When we are broken, we are hurting, when we are alone. And sometimes, we cannot find the spiritual community which can help with all these things. Even in the African-American traditions, “Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, but Jesus. It could be that nobody knows, because we feel that we are alone with no way to connect with something larger than ourselves.

But, like I said, the work of looking back and looking forward always boils down to me and to you as individuals. Our usual process at this time of year is to make resolutions of what we're going to be different in the coming year. Those resolutions are entirely based upon our personal review of the past, especially how we have flubbed up in one way or another, and how I resolve to change things, because I want to do something different this year, and how I plan to fix things, to change things tomorrow.

So, how many people have made resolutions this year? Anybody made resolutions?

We need to *fix* things in our lives, and we take this time of year to say to ourselves and to the world, “I'm gonna fix these things.”

Today, I would like to add another element, a middle way as we embark upon this monumental task. It's not just really about you and me as individuals who are doing this. The middle way is US. It's not necessarily just you and me. *We* are going to fix things. We will embark together on the journey, as a community, with all the joy and hope and commitment which community brings—when those matchsticks come together and becomes strong.

And even to protects those which have been broken.

So, let's talk about *Ubuntu*. You may not know of this concept, which was not too long ago brought forth by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, as he worked to dismantle apartheid in South Africa. *Ubuntu* is a word from the Bantu language of Africa, which roughly translates as “humanity.” It carries with it the concept that in order to be fully human, one must be in community: “*I am because we are.*” No one can be a true, authentic human alone. *Ubuntu*.

Ubuntu says, “A person is a person *through* other persons.” I am because we are. I am a person because you are a person.

(*Look at someone sitting next to you in the eye and say to them, “I am a person because you are a person.*)

Ubuntu theology flies in the face of Western culture, and also our own Unitarian Universalist culture, both of which have placed an enormous concentration on the individual, the private, the self-contained. We remember Ralph Waldo and his essay “Self Reliance” and the idea of the “rugged individual, especially how that affected American history.

Descartes once wrote a new definition for what it means to be a human being, “*I think, therefore I am.*” It's not the fact that we can think, of course, according to *Ubuntu* that makes us human – it's being a part of humanity that makes us human.

As [Archbishop Desmond Tutu](#) describes this perspective, *Ubuntu* ‘is not, “I think therefore I am.” It says rather: “I am a human because I *belong*. I participate. I share.” In essence, *I am because we are.*

“We are truly all in this together, and we will only succeed by building mutually beneficial partnerships among civil society, the private sector, and the public sector, in order to empower the men and

women executing our national policy to advance their work through *partnerships*.”

This is “*Ubuntu Diplomacy*: where all the sectors *belong as partners*, where we all participate as stakeholders, and where we all succeed together, not incrementally, but exponentially.”

I am a person *through you*. I am a person because each of you is person.

Turn to someone near you and say, “*I am a person because you are a person.*” Do that. It’s OK.

It doesn't matter if we can't agree with each other on everything— from how to dress on Sunday, to the proper height of the altar candles, or whether there should even be candles, what each of us believes about the death penalty to the continuous wars going on and on. Living in community doesn't mean being the same all the time. It doesn't mean believing the same way about everything or even *liking* everyone the same way.

It's also not the old, “I'm O.K., you're O.K.” thing either. We may have some serious differences – we may even want to act out against each other in some way – but we don't. We don't act out against each other because our own personhood would be affected. You see how the relationship is formed? When the I is an essential part of the we. If I disrespect your personhood, discount your personhood or harm you in any way – I disrespect, discount and harm my own personhood – I disrespect, discount and harm myself.

What matters is how we live in community with one another. Or as one biblical writer put it – what matters is *how we love one another*.

So, here’s some homework for you: Over the next couple of weeks, say to three people you love and respect, “*I am a person because you are a person.*” Can you do that? It’s the assignment and there will be a quiz.

Now here's the hard part of that assignment: Over the next couple of weeks, pick out three people that you don’t even like; people you've had a tough time dealing with lately – you've been at odds with them—maybe you had a fight with one of them, this morning before church, or maybe they don't know how you feel. Tell them each: “*I am a person because you are a person.*”

Imagine how that can change the relationships between you and the ones you are in relationship with. Imagine how that can change our whole culture, which is so completely focused on conflict and difference, so completely focused on the rights of the individual person, so completely focused on the “I” and not the “we”.

But the only way *I* am is because *we* are. From our foreign policies, or own personal policies of how we live our personal lives. It most certainly will change the way we see each other.

An old Jewish midrash says “before every human being, as a human being is walking, there goes a legion of angels crying out, “*Make way, make way for the image of God!*” Imagine that! Make way for the image of God. *I am because we are.*

How would the world react, if we actually lived as though that were true? If we believed it is true?

I am a person because you are a person. And collectively, communally, we make up the complexity of the divine community, the beloved community. “*Make way—make way for the image of God!*” What this must mean is that the very definition of who we are and how we are so intricately related to those around us, we realize this new dimension. *I am because we are.* To live this reality is to mirror the essence – the nature – of the divine. To live this way makes love real.

So when we ask the perennial question, *Who* are you? We hear the very next and very important question: *Whose* are you? Who or what informs your life, claims your allegiance, your energy, your name? Don’t tell me of your parents and your lineage. Don’t tell me your address or the organizations you serve or the groups where you are a member. *Whose* are you? What beyond the uniting our individual beliefs and lives in this community which holds? Is it the bonds of union, of faith in the human spirit? Is it the hope of community, the love of freedom? *I am because of who we are.* We are always on the journey to discover these important elements of who we are.

What beyond your individuality demands your faithfulness? Is the attributions. of faith in the human spirit or the love of human freedom

We’re always on the journey to discover who we are and what we are. Yet something binds us,

something holds together, something like the “blessed ties that bind”, as the old gospel song says. Something calls us to this religion as our own.

And the question is not for the individual alone, for as each and everyone of us is inspired and held to our own credos, we are yet held together,

Even the great YWH when asked by Moses said, “*I am what I am*”. And the ensuing theology which emerged among the people, not only among the Hebrews, but also among Christians and Muslims, affirms the almighty decree: *that’s what God is*. That is the nature of the community of the Divine. It is the community. To what do we belong?

What do we belong to and what is it that holds on to us. It is the community. And the sense of who we are, what do we belong to, what is it that holds on to us, rises out of knowing who we are. It is a profoundly religious impulse which rises out of own becoming.

Perhaps it would be more helpful to ask, not as human *be*-ings, but if we are humans are “becoming”. We understand the relationship between each of us and other human *becoming*, always in the process of becoming, of acting and receiving, always evolving along side other human *becoming* in the world. Always in the process of becoming, of being and moving on. I am who I am because we are. I am becoming because we are becoming.

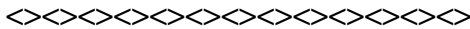
Tell me who you are, and I will tell you who I am, and the ultimate answer of who we are, we will understand that we belong to each other. And the answer is simple:

We are each others’. In the spirit of Ubuntu, *I am because we are*.

In the Eastern religions, we remember the ancient greeting and the farewell word: *Namaste!* which means “the Buddha in me recognizes the Buddha in you.” *I am because we are*.

Let us take a moment at this time to consider these things. The time is swirling around us, and the time is now to remember and to consider and to pray.

Amen and Amen.



BENEDICTION:

“It goes on one at a time, it starts when you care to act, it starts when you do it again after they said no, it starts when you say We and you know who you mean, and each day you mean one more.”

—Marge Piercy, “The Low Road”