

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
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Our Saving Message

A sermon for Covenant Renewal,
 our annual pledge campaign for gifts of money and service

With thanks to Rev. Victoria Safford for her saving message

Why, it was wonderful! Why, all at once there were leaves,
 Leaves at the end of a dry stick, small, alive
 Leaves out of wood. It was wonderful,
 You can't imagine. They came by the wood path
 And the earth loosened, the earth relaxed, there were flowers
 Out of the earth! Think of it! And oak-trees
 Oozing new green at the tips of them and flowers
 Squeezed out of clay, soft flowers, limp
 Stalks flowering. Well, it was like a dream,
 It happened so quickly, all of a sudden it happened –¹

That's poet Archibald MacLeish celebrating the coming of spring. As I read it for the first time this week, I thought, Spring is the earth's saving message. And I thought, Everything of true worth has a saving message. And I thought, What is our saving message?

I'm thinking of *saving* in a Unitarian Universalist way; saving, as in throwing our weight to the side of life; saving, as in casting our lot with tearing down that which divides us, with the rising tide that floats all boats. The great first century Babylonian Jewish scholar, Hillel, said,

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
 If I am not for others, what am I?
 And if not now, when?²

¹ Archibald MacLeish, from "The Pot of Earth" (1925), *Collected Poems*, pp. 66-67

² Pirkei Avot 1:14

A truly saving message has to be for everyone.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had a saving message. I'm still discovering all of what he gave to me, his legacy to all of us. Here's a wonderful tribute: a conversation recorded in the StoryCorps booth in Memphis, Tennessee. Retired sanitation worker Taylor Rogers, age 79, and his wife, Bessie Rogers, are remembering this week, forty years ago.

Taylor says, "Back in 1968, sanitation workers decided we were tired and weren't going to take no more. I was trying to raise eight kids. We had troubled working conditions, low salary. It was awful. You go deep back in these backyards, dump the garbage out of these fifty-gallon drums into [a tub], put that tub on your head or on your shoulder, bring it out to the truck, dump it, and move on to the next house. Most of those tubs had holes in them, and garbage would leak all over you.

"At lunchtime, we had to stand beside the truck and eat lunch. We didn't have no place to wash our hands or nothing. We just had to stop and eat wherever we could.... Our day was awful every day. But we had [families] to raise and to take care of, and that's what we did....

"...Two of the workers got in their [compactor] to get out the rain one rainy day.... [It] crushed them to death. The family didn't get compensation. So we said, 'This is it.' We just got tired. We ... [organized] to have a union. We decided we weren't going to work anymore. We were going to stand up and be men. That's what we did. We told the mayor, Henry Loeb, 'I am a man.'

"... We marched sixty-five days, trying to get Loeb to understand our needs and our frustration. All we wanted was some decencies and some dignity."

Bessie Rogers says, "We had a whole lot of help. All the churches – there was a lot of white people. They came and helped, too. They were giving money, bringing food to the union hall....

"We marched and we marched and we marched. We got sprayed. My children got sprayed in the face. Then they called in Martin Luther King...."

Taylor Rogers continues, "He stopped everything, set everything aside, to come to Memphis to see about ... the sanitation workers....

Bessie: “The night before he got killed, he was up at this big church.... He preached, and he was crying.... He really talked that night. I mean, he really, *really* talked.”

Taylor: “He said, ‘I’ve been to the mountaintop. I’ve looked over, and I’ve seen the Promised Lane. I may not get there with you, but we will get there....’”

Bessie: “The next day he was killed.”

Taylor Rogers: “It was ... like you lost a part of your family. You just really can’t describe it. To put aside everything to come here to see about people on the bottom of the ladder – I think I will always have that in my heart.

“After his death, we did have that march. You couldn’t hear a sound. You couldn’t hear nothing but leather against pavement. Everybody had this deep sorrow. Everybody was quiet and somber, but we wanted to be there because that’s what he wanted done.”

Bessie Rogers: “They finally got the union, and they were treated fairly. They didn’t have to go out and work in the rain, and they still got paid. Now the men don’t ... have to go in the backyard – we have to put the garbage out front. I tell those garbage men when they come by, I say, ‘You all are blessed....’ They’re just blessed.... A man had to come in and give his life for them.”³

Dr. King’s saving message was his life; first, his words, and his actions, and then his life. Can you find yourself in his saving message? Can we find ourselves in that mountaintop message?

Earlier this week, as I sat with this question, the sound of bagpipes rose on the wind coming up from the graveyard next to our home. Looking out, I saw a long phalanx of cars pulling in, and then the graveside service began. I didn’t know the deceased, but I am grateful to them for the timely reminder that life is short. We have such a brief, precious amount of time in which to make a difference. Our saving message can’t be something we put off for a

³ Dave Isay, ed, *Listening is an Act of Love*, pp. 190-193. Recorded 10/20/05.

better time; now is the time. And as the pipes played *Amazing Grace*, I got the deeper message: what this is really all about is grace, the grace to accept the gift of life, the gift of the present, and open it, and share it, and give thanks.

In New York City, the congregation of the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in Manhattan is writing a Torah. The Torah scroll, which must be handwritten, contains the first five books of the Old Testament, from Genesis to Deuteronomy. There must be exactly 304,805 letters, and there can be no mistakes. Typically, the writing of the Torah is done by a *sofer*, a highly trained scribe who abides by the recondite rules and spiritual imperatives of an arcane and proscribed world.

Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch says, “We could have just hired a scribe to work on it in a studio, and present it to us, but that wouldn’t allow the community to participate in the values of Torah.”

Neil H. Yerman, the *sofer* who is working with the congregation, says, “You write it with every aspect of your being. There must be ... spiritual intention. It is an act of love....”

And so it is that, on a Sunday afternoon this past fall, “Helen Margalith, 92 years old ... faced the congregation, then stared at the seeming immensity of a blank white sheet of unblemished parchment.” Mr. Yerman sat at her side, holding a quill pen made from “a turkey feather ... cut to a calligraphic point with a surgical scalpel.”

“‘Hold it gently,’ said the scribe ... coaching her to write the first letter as they both held the quill. ‘Now down, toward me.’ ... As she exerted pressure, ... the ritually blessed ... oak-gall ink [flowed] brilliantly onto the ... white calfskin. ‘And again.’

“It was done, then: the first letter of the Bible, *Bet*, in Hebrew. ‘Beautiful!’ Mr. Yerman exclaimed. [Helen Mrgalith] beamed. Wild applause erupted from the 300 congregants who had gathered in witness.

“Soon, after five other members of the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue had also written letters, there appeared the six-letter Hebrew words often translated as *In the beginning*: the first word of the *Torah*.

What is the saving message of that congregation? I hear them saying that we are all agents of the holy, all agents of wisdom and blessing. I see them honoring their traditions, with fresh eyes, and honoring their elders while including everyone.

And what is the saving message of this congregation? Let's take that apart: What is *your* saving message? What is *our* saving message?

Together, we are greater than the sum of our parts. My personal saving message is so much more powerful when magnified through the lens of this spiritual community. Since I have the microphone, I'll begin our list. But I'm counting on you to keep going.

Our saving message is of love and service, justice and peace. Our saving message will comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

Our saving message is loud and clear at our weekly Friday Night Supper; on the Boston Common, marching for peace in Iraq and hospitality for immigrants; in the streets of Guatemala, with the street kids of Only a Child; in New Orleans, in the sound of hammer blows echoing off the walls as we help to rebuild the neighborhoods of our sister church; in Dorchester, as we build relationships w/ the good people of Bethel Pentecostal. Our saving message is in the bells that ring out from our bell tower for Pride and the Red Sox.

Our saving message is in the way we greet one another, and care for one another, the way we grieve together and celebrate together. Our saving message is in every time we look another human being in the eye, every time we are kind to an animal, every time we uphold worth and dignity of ourselves and others, every time we bless the earth by walking lightly. Our saving message is in the quality of our attention to every organization with which we partner, both collectively and individually, and in the good work each of us does when we leave this sacred place and bear the blessing of our presence into the world with the chalice of our whole being.

My spiritual companions, it's time for magic! Generosity is love made manifest. This is the moment when each of us is invited to listen to our heart, and hear it entrain with the great heartbeat of this beloved community of memory and hope. This is the moment when we give of our lives to our

mountaintop vision, and proffer the generosity of our open minds, open hearts, and open hands.

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

If I am not for others, what am I?

And if not now, when?⁴

Let us begin, let us continue, let us move on, together, to our shining goal.

Shine on!

⁴ Pirkei Avot 1:14