

**Did the Lord Send Donald Trump?**  
**Dr. Brent A. Smith, @ October 17, 2021**  
**Assistant Professor, Grand Valley State University**

**OPENING WORDS: Isaiah 55:6-7**

Seek ye the LORD while He may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near.  
Let the wicked forsake [their] ways and the unrighteous [their] thoughts; and let [them] return  
unto the LORD, [for mercy and] abundant pardon.

**SERMON**

Declared at a pre-election rally a year ago that seems like a century, then Georgian Republican Senator David Perdue, a Christian evangelical who himself was defeated in a race against now Senator Jon Ossoff, a Jew, declared “[President Trump] is providential. He didn’t happen by accident,” echoing the evangelical Christian claim that “... if God did not want Donald Trump to be president then he would not have been president.” Trump is not President, but what I think shouldn’t be lost is the question: Did the Lord send Donald Trump? I’ll eliminate suspense. I think, yes.

In other words, what I think can’t be lost upon us as religious liberals, who hold to a freedom and a unity of the spirit expressed through a love for all souls, is the spiritual question of how to live one’s life in the face of what we know about human nature and what we do about the conditions left us?

Now, you’ve heard me preach enough to know other UU’s call me traditionally religious, and while I wouldn’t call myself a Christian Unitarian I do seek to live a religious life within a relationship with God as the spiritual unity of freedom and the source of the demand for us to live a universal love for all souls. So, for me to answer yes, the Lord did send Trump, is not about God’s existence, nor God’s plan or destiny as if any human being could ever know that though many claim they do. It’s not really about what human beings think or believe about God. It is, though, about analyzing events and the human condition today within an ultimate context. And to do this intentionally, grounded in our common tradition of creating spiritual community and religiously meaningful lives in a covenant with the human family out of which freedom and justice and love come about.

We have a different context now than four years ago. Though they have always existed, unsavory elements of human nature are manifest now. The human condition is more deeply known. We may have avoided, denied, even justified human nature and will, to be what we know now it is not. The forest lies before us obscured by a thousand trees, and so to put today into an ultimate context is not achieved by casting Donald Trump as either the good ordained by God or the evil that was feared might happen. It is to see how the last four years revealed the thousand trees we must weave through. And without a sense of the entire forest we will be lost dodging singular clumps of foliage.

So, we need a guide. I offered the opening words because we are on a search now and Isaiah, a Hebrew prophet, was a good guide in his time. Closer to ours is the 20<sup>th</sup> century's expert on the Jewish prophets Rabbi Abraham Heschel, mystic and professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was his from 1907-1972. He walked in Selma alongside his close friend Dr. King, who was to participate in the Heschel family Passover Seder the week after King's murder in '68. Heschel's admission at Selma, "*I felt my legs were praying,*" described for many the intersection of action with profound religious experience. Heschel studied prophets like Isaiah, "*some of the most disturbing people who ever lived,*" he said, a characterization many used on "Heschel himself... as uncomfortable a figure for many as he was inspiring." He was blunt in word and decisive in deed: "*Instead of showing us a way through the elegant mansions of the mind,*" Heschel said of his research interest, "*the prophets take us to the slums.*"

The last four years have left us in the slums of the human mind. Heschel did not think human beings were seeking God as much as God was seeking us. "*God needs us to help God make this world better.*" And the Lord's lures are many and plentiful.

"Think of it this way," one expert on Heschel said in trying to explain Heschel's life as the intersection of instruction and action, "When you're walking down the street and you see the suffering of a child... you can't stand to see the suffering of that child any more than you could stand to see the suffering of your own children. And for Heschel, God... is really the parent of humanity [who] can't stand to see the suffering of God's children... [God] needs [the] other children to take care of the suffering."

God seeks us because God needs us. And more than before, today we see the suffering of God's children. And God needs us to figure out how to alleviate that suffering, we who are called to live our lives out of a freedom and unity of the spirit expressed through a love for all souls.

The world's narcissism and each person's devotion to their own welfare, comfort, and greed calls us to repent of our own and stand upon the ground of service to the welfare and comfort and security of others. The spiritual life begins when we see our actions in their ultimate context.

People's use of words to ridicule, to name call, to deflect, camouflage, and obscure racial hatred; to lie, to use words to spread falsehoods wantonly and joyfully; to deceive and puff themselves up. Using words, this we should take notice of, we who so prize words that we center weekly worship by them, in a sermon delivered, and joys and concerns spoken. In these ritual practices we echo that "Blessed is God who spoke and a world came into being." Heschel, who immigrated during the Nazification of Europe, reminded that "... *the Holocaust did not begin with the building of crematoria, with tanks and guns. It began with uttering evil words, with defamation, with language and propaganda...*" Prophets punctuated their pronouncements with thus saith the Lord, because "*words create worlds.*" Live love, true, but speak with love. Live hopefully, true, but speak hopefully as well.

The current disdain for the courts, politicians and citizens' scorn of their legal obligations to our laws, and the manipulations to avoid the law instead of abiding by it, calls us in this religious tradition to make explicit our special knowledge. Just as it is our covenantal promises to one

another that generate spiritual community of individuals secure in their differing theologies, it is our national promise to one another through laws, that aim to make everyone secure. “The bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom,” wrote our UU forebearer Napoleon Lovely, and this holds our spiritual communities together. So too, do bonds of affection, compassion for the least amongst us, hold together the vast varieties of persons in our Republic. Freedom for me without safety for you, is power to the privileged. Safety for me without freedom for you, foments dictatorships. The bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom when Black lives matter and are safe, and each and every soul is made secure by our nation’s actions. Our border is the circle of unfettered, divine affection and God needs us to base community and law, locally and nationally in that.

When the Access Hollywood video with Billy Bush emerged, the open hostility from powerful men towards women was on display; when a President proudly boasted of not reading the daily intelligence briefings prepared and insisted there were good people in Charlottesville walking with Nazi flags shouting “Sieg Heil” and driving cars into crowds with deadly force; when it is recommended to inject drain cleaner into your veins to address COVID, when the wearing of masks is protested, vaccine deniers supported, and all of these done without regret, indeed with pompous pride, all of this assured me that these past four years showed the path of spiritual health by putting our world in a spiritual slum. “The cure of the soul,” wrote Abraham Heschel, “begins with a sense of embarrassment, embarrassment at our pettiness, prejudices, envy, and conceit; embarrassment at the profanation of life. A world that is full of grandeur has been converted into a carnival.” I am embarrassed by how we embrace ignorance. I am embarrassed by our disdain for women like my mother, my wife, my daughter. I am embarrassed by our willingness to embrace racial hatred instead of combatting it. I am ashamed that we have turned this life, God’s grand gift, into a carnival.

And less I think I have escaped this because I did not vote for Trump either time, Rabbi Abraham Heschel props his prophetic self on my shoulder: “*Some are guilty but all are responsible.*” I am responsible.

God sent Donald Trump to call every person in this faith tradition to live the spiritual life of the ultimate effect of the immediate act, “... *that every little deed counts, that every word has power, and that we can do – every one – our share to redeem the world despite all absurdities and all the frustration and all disappointments.*” Deeds count because you count, as forgiven and loved and needed by God. Lead our culture in its exodus from the spiritual slums it is now in. Our English Pilgrim forebearers made their exodus from the oppression they endured as dissenters from the Church England, only to come over the ocean and inflict their own form of oppression and death upon the First Nation Tribes here. Our 18<sup>th</sup> century forebears made an exodus from a Christian Church that enslaved the minds of men and women to its creeds, only to attach shackles to the wrists of their African brothers and sisters and enslave them in centuries of misery. And now we, who inherit this tradition of calling us to the unity and freedom of the spirit expressed through a love for all souls, abide in a culture pummeled by public displays of narcissism, ridicule, disdain, hostility, and most of all, the absence of embarrassment. Lead an exodus out of this slum. Lead, but not into another oppression. Lead an exodus out of this slum to a freedom and unity of the spirit expressed in a love for all souls. God’s children need to dwell there.

In a keynote address to Protestant and Catholic Christian, and Jewish leaders at a gathering of social action groups in 1963, Rabbi Abraham Heschel gave these words to his time, which endure unto ours:

*Friends, at the first conference on religion and race, the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses. And Moses' words were, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, let my people go." While Pharaoh retorted, "Who's the Lord that I should heed his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord. I will not let Israel go." The outcome of that summit meeting has not come to an end. Pharaoh is not ready to capitulate. The Exodus began but is far from having been completed. In fact, it was easier for the children of Israel to cross the Red Sea than for... [many to live and walk among us now.]*

Lead the exodus from here to the land God's children need to dwell in.

AMEN. SO BE IT. SHALOM. SHALEM. NAMASTE.

### **BENEDICTION**

And now, seeing there is naught to fear, and bearing witness to what can never die, let us go forth in the world in peace.

Be of good courage,  
 Search all things  
 And hold fast to that which is good.  
 Render unto no one evil for evil.  
 Strengthen the faint-hearted,  
 Support the weak,  
 Help the afflicted,  
 Love all souls,  
 Serving the Most High,  
 And rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.