

Steve Jungkeit
The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: II Kings 22: 3-13; Luke 4: 18
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The Un-Covering of Religion

In an interview several years ago about a collection of American standards that he had recorded, Bob Dylan suggested that what he was doing wasn't "covering" the songs, but rather "uncovering" them, like an archaeologist gently scrubbing off the dust and sedimentation from a rediscovered artifact.

It's a suggestive image, and it radiates in a number of different directions, directions I ask you to follow with me for the next several minutes. There are, to begin, songs that are so overplayed, so ubiquitous, that it becomes difficult to hear the immaculate craft that went into their creation. There are plays that have been so overdone - *Romeo and Juliet*, *Our Town* - that it becomes impossible to see them for the magnificent pieces of writing they are. There are places that are so often frequented, and so often photographed, that they seem scarcely worth visiting, because in a way, you've already been there. But then an artist arrives to dust off the song, a director arrives to breathe new energy into the play, or an experienced guide helps you to see a place with fresh eyes, and you discover there a pulsing energy that had been there all along. Suddenly the thing is revealed as if for the first time.

Or say it happens another way. An earlier moment of life afforded you a window into a way of being - playing an instrument, say, or playing a sport - an inner life that you swore to hold onto forever. Then, life happens. You move in a different direction, sometimes out of necessity, sometimes in order to chase a different dream. But then suddenly an event thrusts you back into that earlier form of life, and it has the force of an awakening, an un-covering within your soul. Where has this been, and why did I ever let it go, you wonder. How could I have forgotten?

I confess that's what it was like for me with ministry. After completing Divinity School, I had spent two wonderful and stimulating years learning about the habits of this vocation in a church outside of Philadelphia. But then I felt the lure of further academic work, and I followed that lure. That was a good and true instinct, but I almost forgot just how much I loved this work. A combination of different factors, the most important of which was a summer spent in Northern Vermont pastoring a small church, brought it all flooding back, and I thought, God but I missed this. I almost forgot what it was like. It was an awakening of something within my soul that brought me back to myself, back to the place where I had sensed the working of God within me. It was as though I myself were a song, a play, a place, that had somehow been un-covered.

I have a hunch that each of us has had an experience at least somewhat analogous to that, when we have been reminded of our own best instincts, and when we rediscover some essential part of our souls layered beneath the accumulated sediment of our daily pursuits. Sometimes it requires a studied discipline to brush off that sediment, that we might remain true to who we are. Other times, it requires an openness to the chance encounters that can stir a memory or a feeling inside of us, one powerful enough to lure us toward something we may once have loved, or that we may have outgrown, and then left behind.

This process of un-covering has everything to do with our relationship to faith, and religion. Just the other day I read an interview with Brittney Griner about her long detention in Russia. She spoke of how, while confined to a Russian penal colony, reading the Bible, and prayer, became a lifeline for her. Previously, she had been dismissive of religion, having experienced it in childhood as bigoted and homophobic. Her ordeal forced a kind of un-covering upon her, where she suddenly discovered that the words of the Bible, and faith itself, spoke to her condition. She became something like our imagined archaeologist, brushing layers of dust away from a discarded treasure, one that would help to sustain her through her ordeal.

There is a biblical story that is, quite literally, about this act of uncovering. It takes place in the book of II Kings. As repairs are being made to the Jewish Temple, the laborers discover a book, meaning, really, a scroll - books as we know them hadn't been invented yet. Perhaps it was buried somewhere, or stored and thereafter forgotten in some ancient filing system. We don't know. The laborers realize the importance of their discovery, and soon enough those who can read the scroll realize that it is the Book of the Law, a part or the whole of what we know as the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. According to the story, these are texts and practices that had been all but forgotten. Other priorities had taken hold, some of which, perhaps, may have felt necessary. But the text makes clear that, as in many of our lives when we operate far from the source of our being, the entire ancient Jewish community profited from going back to basics, in order to reengage those older sources.

Now, I don't know if anyone else gets nervous about the things that sometimes worry me about the Bible, but let me briefly address a worry I have about a text like this, and indeed, a hidden trap that I can envision in a sermon like this: it would be very easy to interpret this story as a kind of originalist, or fundamentalist, takeover within ancient Judaism. (Originalism in a court of law, by the way, exhibits the same habit of mind that fundamentalists exhibit toward the Bible - it's the same practice of reading, just applied in different settings). What worries me is that, from a certain angle, this story from II Kings sounds a lot like certain national, judicial, and religious voices throughout history, who also happen to be widespread throughout our contemporary scene, who wish to assert authority and control by appealing to what is usually a fictitious projection of the past. They do so by claiming to have discovered the original intention lying behind a text or a tradition, not unlike the king Josiah, who claimed to have found the original Book of the Law. That's a trap, a projection of power that we always do well to guard against - in churches, in courts of law, and indeed, in our own psychological habits.

I prefer to understand the story in a gentler way, as something akin to the process of un-covering that I have been describing. I prefer to hear it as a human parable, where something vital, something life giving, something essential that had been forgotten, is suddenly rediscovered. I prefer to hear it as an un-covering of something that had been ignored or misused, thereby providing a new sense of vitality to that community. It's not unlike the way organizations - like churches - are sometimes asked to drill down to the bedrock core of who they are, in order to articulate what it is that makes them tick, what it is that shapes their communal values. Instead of an originalist takeover, the un-covering of the Book of the Law can be read as a story about a community affirming its own best instincts, rediscovering who and what it had once valued.

Now let me make another pivot. Everything I've said about the uncovering of certain aesthetic objects, about the uncovering of our own best instincts when we've nearly lost them, and about the uncovering of the Book of the Law, can be brought to bear on the protests we've been seeing around the country, and indeed, around the world. This past week, I had a conversation with our friend Reza Mansoor, a leader at the Berlin Mosque outside of Hartford. Reza had visited the encampments at both Yale and UConn, and together, we planned to visit them this past week. But they had been cleared by the time we hoped to go. Reza said that during his visit, he encountered many of his own former students among the protesters, those he had taught in his Sunday classes on the Koran at the Mosque. And he said how grateful they were to see him. He also spoke of the strong Jewish presence at the encampments, something that hasn't been well understood about the protests. Reza then told me a poignant story about a young Jewish man that he encountered, who shared that in his religious upbringing, he had visited Israel, and who, as a result, had become disillusioned and disenchanted with his own religious heritage. Even then, he had been concerned about the oppression of Palestinians, and he didn't wish to be a part of a religion that condoned or enacted such things. In that, he mirrors a good many people who have encountered nationalist or otherwise chauvinistic versions of Christianity, and have concluded that the whole enterprise isn't for them.

This particular individual reported that the encampment and the protests had actually allowed him to reclaim his Judaism, chipping away at the sedimentation of militarism and aggression in some parts of that tradition in order to un-cover, and to recover the instincts expressed in the book of Micah: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly upon the earth. A similar experience has been shared by many other Jewish students, who celebrated Passover seders in the encampments. And it has been shared by Muslim students, who line up in prayers, and who understand their protest to be an outgrowth of their faith. I will say that my own faith has been strengthened by witnessing the quickening of conscience among so many young people. There have been criticisms, I know, of some of the rhetoric and some of the tactics, but the greater criticism, in my estimation, must be reserved for those who sent in the police to break up what were, for the most part, peaceful protests. For university administrators to unleash violence upon their own students is nothing short of a scandal. These are young people who are developing a moral conscience. Universities have a mandate to help in that regard, to teach, to educate, and to engage - not to send in the police! More than anything, I am interested, and moved, at the way this wave of protests has allowed many young people to un-cover and to recover aspects of their traditions - namely, for prophetic witness - that too often lay buried beneath layers of sedimentation. In that, it's not unlike the un-covering of the Torah in II Kings.

One of the Christians who made his way to an encampment in the past weeks was Chris Hedges. A Pulitzer prize winning journalist and an ordained Presbyterian minister, Hedges spoke to a group of students at Princeton University. He spoke about the distractions and deceptions that too often interfere with the church's vocation to live out the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is not a blueprint for how to get rich, or how to get happy, Hedges said. It has to do with Jesus and the cross. It has to do with God's identification with the crucified of the earth, whosoever and wheresoever and whensoever they may be. It has to do with the call of Jesus to all of his followers to take up that cross, and to follow him. Here is how Hedges concluded his talk:

“Where were you when they crucified my Lord?”

Were you there to halt the genocide of Native Americans? Were you there when Sitting Bull died on the cross? Were you there to halt the enslavement of African-Americans? Were you there to halt the mobs that terrorized black men, women and even children with lynching during Jim Crow? Were you there when they persecuted union organizers and Joe Hill died on the cross? Were you there to halt the incarceration of Japanese-Americans in World War II? Were you there to halt Bull Connor's dogs as they were unleashed on civil rights marchers in Birmingham? Were you there when Martin Luther King died upon the cross? Were you there when Malcolm X died on the cross? Were you there to halt the hate crimes, discrimination and violence against gays, lesbians, bisexuals, queers and those who are transgender? Were you there when Matthew Shepard died on the cross? Were you there to halt the abuse and at times enslavement of workers in the farmlands of this country? Were you there to halt the murder of hundreds of thousands of innocent Vietnamese during the war in Vietnam or hundreds of thousands of Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan? Were you there to halt the genocide in Gaza? Were you there when they crucified Refaat Alareer on the cross?

Where were you when they crucified my Lord?”

I'm humbled by that question, by all those questions. Humbled because I have not been at the encampments, and because I have not always been on the front lines of this or any of the struggles that Hedges names. But I am also, strangely, comforted. Because when asked where I have been, I would have to say that I have been here, with you. In this place and in this community that has, as best we can, sought to brush off the sedimentation that clings to our religious lives in order to be worthy of the Gospel of Jesus. We have, at our best, sought to stand in the place of the cross, even in a place like Old Lyme, which doesn't often feel much like the cross. But we have also stood together in

Palestine. And we have stood together at the Cheyenne River Reservation. And we have stood in Haiti. And we have stood in New Orleans and Soweto and Mexico and West Africa too, all of them places of the cross.

Not always and not everywhere, but at our best, we have been busy dislodging the accumulated crust from our hearts and from our tradition, in order to un-cover what is truest and best in ourselves, and our religion.

Where were we? Where are we? Still on the way, trying to follow where the Gospel of Jesus Christ is leading us. Amen.