

Steve Jungkeit
 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Exodus 25: 10-22; 2 Corinthians 4: 7
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Sacred Bundles for Sacred Journeys

“But we have this treasure in clay jars...”
-2 Corinthians 4:7

There’s a feature of Aztec and Mayan iconography that I learned about two years ago, when members of our congregation began visiting the Benedictine Sisters down in Cuernavaca, Mexico. When you study paintings or other visual representations from the pre-colonial era, you notice that some warriors and priests carry something that anthropologists have described as “sacred bundles.” Those bundles, usually a kind of wrapping carried in one’s hands or on one’s back, contained objects and implements that represented the presence of various divinities. Thus, the bundles were means of carrying the spirits, the gods, across difficult journeys or life passages. It’s a practice shared by many indigenous traditions. For example, to this day, our Lakota friends at Green Grass are in possession of a sacred bundle, handed down across generations, which contains their most holy object – a pipe, in which the wisdom and rituals of the entire community is symbolized.

Though it might sound alien to our own tradition, something akin to sacred bundles can be discerned in at least two biblical sources. First, a trace of that idea can be discerned in the Apostle Paul’s image in Colossians, where the gospel itself is described as a treasure, contained in clay pots. It’s an image that derives, at least in part, from traditions of carrying one’s sacred implements in mobile containers – a sacred bundle. But another example of a sacred bundle can be found in the ark of the covenant. As the Hebrew people made the difficult and arduous passage out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land, they carried their own bundle, if you will. The ark contained the tablets of the law, the life system that bound the Hebrew people together, that made them cohere. And those tablets were the implements that represented the Hebrew peoples’ special relationship to Yahweh. The ark preceded them into battle. It accompanied them wherever they roamed on their wilderness journeys. It was given pride of place in each of their encampments, and when the time came, in their temple. The ark is a version of what we find in indigenous cultures throughout the world: a sacred bundle possessing special implements of ritual power, capable of sustaining a people through an exodus, and eventually, the establishment of a home.

I got to talking about sacred bundles this past week as I helped our daughter Sabina prepare for the first day of high school. Last week I shared with you how fraught the lead up to that moment was. Thankfully it all turned out well. Better than that, really. At about 2:15 on Tuesday afternoon, I watched as both of our girls walked up the driveway and stepped onto the side porch, trying to detect what exactly was approaching: a bundle of frayed nerves and worries? Exhaustion? Frustration? Something lighter perhaps? To my relief, both girls bounded inside, grins on their faces. “The day was so

fun! It was really great.” Sabina said. Elsa echoed her. “I love Middle School,” she beamed. I breathed a sigh of relief.

The night before, in an effort to encourage Sabina, who was feeling especially anxious, I shared with her the practice in ancient cultures of carrying a sacred bundle, especially when marching into dangerous or unfamiliar terrain. I told her that’s what she was preparing to do: walking ahead into a significant life passage that, in the moment, felt threatening and scary. So maybe it would help, I suggested, to think about what belonged in her own sacred bundle, and how those objects, or beliefs, or memories, might protect and strengthen her for what she was about to do. It wasn’t a physical assemblage that we created that night, but it was a sacred bundle all the same, stocked with images, songs, and memories that were significant to her. I can’t tell you exactly what was in it – that belongs to her alone. But on Tuesday morning she carried it with her. I like to think that she was a warrior heading into a battle of a particular kind. And I like to believe that, because of the sacred bundle she carried, an entire spiritual army was marching with her.

In what follows, I want to suggest a number of different layers in which we might put this dynamic to work. I’ve already described the first layer for you – it has to do with our own personal bundles, the things we carry with us that remind us of our own sacred worth and power. We each of us possess memories, objects, beliefs, rituals and practices that confer that sacred power upon us. Lurching as we are from one crisis to the next, I believe it’s important to prepare a sacred bundle, to have it at the ready, the better to meet the many challenges before us. Winter is coming, as a famous television show put it, and this will be a passage like few others before it. What will you need to get you through these months? What will you have at the ready in your bundle?

I told you last week about one of the precious events that I carry with me in my own life, when my extended family gathered in a circle to sing “The Lord Bless You and Keep You.” That experience, along with all of those many people, are somehow within my bundle, and they’ve now been joined by other people I love who weren’t even alive in that original moment, who I didn’t even know when that gathering took place. Past and present converge there, and it’s all in the bundle. That’s wrapped up with the conviction that an unseen Presence, who we name God, or Jesus, somehow accompanies each of us across our life experiences. But there are a few other things I carry in my bundle as well: a pair of running shoes, a daily practice that has grounded me for thirty years; a collection of old time blues and mountain songs whose hisses and scratches claw toward the transcendent; a beaded necklace acquired in Haiti to aid my recall of a colorful cast of African deities; you’d find a Bible in my bundle, and you’d find a lifelong habit, instilled from childhood, of finding a way to connect with a worshiping community; you might find Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* or something from Marquez, and you’d likely find a detailed map of some places I love – New Orleans and L.A., Berlin and Havana and some Western mountain ranges too. And you’d find picante sauce, a necessary implement to keep on making life spicy hot. I might even throw in a bottle of fine tequila for ritual moments of friendship and zesty conversation.

That’s my bundle. I’d be interested to know what you keep in yours. Drop me a line and tell me if it occurs to you. We’ll need to have all of those implements at the ready in the months to come, as we wait for relief to arrive. It will come, but not before we pass through another stretch of uncharted terrain.

The second layer in which this image of sacred bundles unfolds is suggested by the ark of the covenant. The objects contained in the ark belonged to an entire community and shaped its life together. And so we can also say that sacred bundles are carried by entire communities, implying that we ourselves, at FCCOL, are in possession of a sacred bundle. We carry important memories, rituals, and learnings with us as a community, and they have great power to protect and guide us through difficult passages. Way back at the beginning of this crisis, I invited David Good and Carleen to share some of those stories and objects. It formed the content for our first sacred conversation, and it's well worth revisiting. Carleen reminded us of the incredible first visit of the South African choir, while David shared wisdom garnered from our many partnerships – in Green Grass and in Haiti, in South Africa and in Palestine. We hold those experiences in common, even if, like me, you weren't around when those moments actually occurred. But the past and present converge in sacred bundles. They all become transformed into ritual implements for summoning God, for remembering God, for remembering who we are as a people before God. They're all there in the bundle.

But there are other things within the bundle as well. There is the experience of singing Silent Night in a darkened Meetinghouse on Christmas Eve. There is the experience of singing the Hallelujah Chorus at the end of an Easter service. There is the experience of having gathered in a circle to pray a blessing upon our friends, residing with us in sanctuary during a moment of crisis. There are hands and shoulders joined together in a common task during the White Elephant Sale. There are the hymns that, even if we wouldn't necessarily listen to them in our leisure, somehow reach down deep into our souls, providing comfort when we need them. There are the passages of Scripture that have mysteriously seeped into our being so that they reside deep in our bones after years, decades sometimes, of hearing and reading them. There is our tradition of musical excellence, and our conviction, alive from the era of the Puritans until the present, that ours is a public faith, requiring bold stands. There is an assurance that God is so in love with the world, with us, that even the greatest sacrifices are worth it in order to persuade us of that same passionate, worldly love. The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme is in possession of a sacred bundle in which all of those experiences and memories and practices reside. Together, we carry that bundle with us. To be a part of this place, to carry that bundle with one another, means that a great spiritual army marches into the unknown beside and around us as well.

But I'd like to unfold one further layer of meaning around sacred bundles, suggesting that it might apply to wider collections of people as well. To be a citizen or resident of the United States is, in many respects, also to be a part of a collective journey, filled with perils all around. Many of us are worried about our democratic practices, and how they're undergoing severe strains at the moment. We're worried that many of the institutions we cherish may collapse or be eroded. We worry about whether or not we can pass through this season with our collective soul intact. Some have already given up on that collective soul, and would argue that it never existed in the first place. But perhaps there's a sacred bundle that we carry as a democracy, inside of which lie a number of practices that may just sustain and save us. Here are a few implements carried within it.

Like a church, synagogue or mosque, we possess a number of important texts that we deem worthy of continual scrutiny, interpretation, and debate. Those texts center us,

but they also challenge us to renew our commitments as a people. I would include in that canon The Mayflower Compact, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Federalist Papers. But I would also include the speeches of Frederick Douglass, select speeches of Abraham Lincoln, as well as those by Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Susan B. Anthony and Fannie Lou Hamer. I would include the speeches and essays of MLK, and I would include Barack Obama's great Philadelphia speech on race from the spring of 2008. It's an open canon, and so you might include some others. But then I would also broaden the meaning of text to include ritual and performance, so as to include the wisdom contained in Native American practices, which depend not upon writing but upon the spoken word and bodily gestures. Under that broad understanding of text, we can say that we are gathered together, and held together, as a people of the text. As with Scripture, the meaning of those documents is never simply given. It requires continual interpretation and careful argument. The texts themselves are flawed documents, requiring critique for their omissions, for their silences, and for their failures. Still, they have a centering effect, with the capacity to gather and renew, to heal and to challenge. Those foundational texts belong in our sacred bundle.

Another implement in that bundle is a symbol. The one I have in mind is the Statue of Liberty, inscribed with the words of Emma Lazarus, "give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free." It's a reminder that at our core, we are a nation of and for immigrants, centered in a gesture of hospitality, of making room for the other. That we have so often failed to live up to that noble ideal doesn't diminish the ideal itself, nor the very real acts of inclusion that have sprung from it. That sense of striving is captured in the statue itself, for her right foot is ever so slightly raised, as if she is marching somewhere. Which is to say, she is a little decentered. That's vital – you see, every step we take, every time we put one foot in front of the other, whether we realize it or not, we're balancing and stabilizing ourselves again. That activity happens over and over again over the course of any day. The statue suggests that every new era, every new moment, every new step, will require acts of conscious intentionality if the ideal of hospitality, generosity, and making room will continue to be realized. The Statue of Liberty belongs in our bundle.

But finally, I would include another practice in our greater communal bundle, a tradition that I consider to be fundamental to our democratic identity. And that is the ongoing tradition of Black resistance and protest. That tradition has saved the United States from its worst impulses over and over again, and it has held up nobler ideals upon which we might all stand. It can be found in the "no" uttered by the runaway slave. It existed in Black leadership during the era of Reconstruction, and it was found in the exodus of millions of Black Americans during the Great Migration. It was found in the Civil Rights Movement and it exists right on up to the present day, in which the inhumanity and blindness of so many of our institutions stands naked and exposed. Black resistance and protest has, again and again, held our collective feet to the fire, challenging our democracy to live up to its highest ideals. That tradition, I contend, is an essential implement that we carry with us in our wider sacred bundle. It's one that should be celebrated, used as a compass to point the way forward through this particular wilderness moment.

There are, to be sure, other implements that could be named within the larger bundle. Still, it's there, and the things we carry have the capacity to see us through.

Whether in our individual lives, in the life of this particular community, or in the life of the wider community to which we belong, there are powerful, shining objects that we carry, reminding us how far we've come, and strengthening each one of us for the way that lies ahead. For we have this treasure...