

WHAT IS HOLY

a sermon given by the Rev. Rosemary Lloyd
at the First Church in Boston
Sunday, February 22, 2009

There are words we use, words like *faith* and *hope* and *love*. We believe we have a sense of what we mean by them. But when we stop to ask, “What does that mean to *you*?” we discover that the definition is not as easy to articulate as it is to sense or to “know” without words.

The idea for this sermon began when I heard a rabbi say: *Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh*. (Is 6:3) Translated, we sang this morning: Holy, Holy, Holy.

What is *kadosh*? What is *holy*?

The physical context for the rabbi’s speaking was not a temple but a suburban hotel function room. There was at a gathering of delegates from diverse congregations to a meeting of GBIO—the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization. The assembled—including 5 members from First Church--were attending a three-day retreat, trying to get a handle on the current economic crisis.

Skillful teachers were presenting an overview the complex elements that conspired to bring down the world’s interconnected economy. In GBIO meetings, the leaders also ask questions which we work on together: What are your stories about how you are being affected by this economic collapse? What are you hearing in your congregations? How shall we respond to the cry of the people? In what ways can religious people act collaboratively to influence systemic change that will bring restoration to the suffering? These are huge questions. And the answers are still emerging daily. If you have a story to share, we are here to listen...

It was into those questions that the Rabbi rose to speak. “*Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh*,” she said. Holy, holy, holy. I’m sure she said something after that, but I was so struck by that call into the middle of our discussions! It still rings in my ears. What does it mean to us here in this midst of this crisis?

Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh. These Hebrew words are found in the book of Isaiah. The prophet, Isaiah, is proclaiming a vision in which he heard the voice of the Lord. And he saw “the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty,” surrounded by angels with six wings who chant constantly: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts! The earth is full of his glory!”

Their thunderous song causes the house to shake and fill with smoke and Isaiah is terrified. He is also humbled, repentant and purified. So when he hears the Lord call out, asking Whom shall I send [with my message to the people]?, Isaiah replies, “Here am I; send me.”

The message Isaiah carries forth includes a threat of divine retribution and the promise of a future kingdom of peace and justice. He trumpets words of woe to those who have been unjust. And words of hope and redemption to those who act justly.

As our dramatic history unfolds, as the financial cataclysm shakes our houses and we feel afraid, perhaps we would do well to pause to listen to the voice of Isaiah as he spins the wheel of fortune, so closely tied as it is to acts of justice

“What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?” demands Isaiah on behalf of the Lord. (Is 3:15)

And he warns: Woe to you “who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice, and to rob the poor of their right, that widows may be your spoil and that you make the orphans your prey....” (Is 10:1-2)

But who in this modern day will hear such warnings? Why should we and how can we believe the promise of restoration? First we would have to be willing to hear a guy telling us that there were angels shouting, “Holy, holy, holy! All of earth is full of God’s glory.”

Now, don’t misunderstand me. I’m not here to tell you that I think we should all take out the Old Testament and start reading it literally for signs and portents. I am not regarding these books as the humanly recorded divine word of God. That is not my orientation to Biblical texts.

But! I am interested, deeply interested, in the ageless, poetic texts that speak to us of truths that are embedded in powerful histories, myths, and metaphors. And that is where I would like to take us for a while this morning to contemplate: What *is* holy?

In traditional religious definitions, the word *holy* pertains to God. Now, for some listening, when we hear that denotation “God,” an old image may arise. You know the one I’m talking about: the big, white-bearded guy on a cloud. Maybe a lightning bolt at the ready....

If that is your image, I invite you to let it go. Let it disappear in a wisp of smoke like the illusion it is...

If you have been in this spiritual community for a while, you have heard me say before that God is what I choose to call my sense of Divine Love or the Great Heart of Compassion. It is the place-holder for that which embraces all of creation with Mercy. Author of Creation. Spirit of Life. Eternal Mystery. YOU name it. For you. And then I pray your patience and understanding that when I say “God,” that is my limited language for that which is limitless and unnamable. But perceivable. And felt. And, in some pre-verbal way, known.

I hope you take my point. To even begin to talk about what is holy, we need to take a deep breath and enter into a realm of conversation that is necessary in a religiously pluralistic setting such as this one. That’s right. One of the challenges we undertake each week when we come together as Unitarian Universalists is to remain open to the language that is used in every Sunday service. We need to remain actively curious about the meanings and metaphors and to engage in interpretation or internal translations as we strive to find something useful, strengthening, or ennobling for our lives.

What I’m talking about is not passive or easy work for any of us—divinity degrees or not. We come out of many different starting points and one day we walk into this place, risking joining our lives with the lives of others. Agreeing to be on an intellectual and spiritual journey together. I may have been raised Catholic, and you Congregationalist. Some here traveled from Judaism and Islam. Others Methodist and Christian Science. We have wandered through a New Age into Buddhism or Yoga. Perhaps your church has been a museum or laboratory, your text the world of nature or art. There are many paths, yet we share the journey.

On this journey, in this community, we are challenged to choose our language in such a way that we can speak clearly and with care and listen with care so that we can

hear clearly. Thus, if I say, “God,” I am aware and grateful that many listening have to engage in simultaneous translation. I think that this is holy work, because it is part of what supports our being in relationship with one another. But that is jumping ahead in my exegesis...

So back to Holy. *Kadosh*.

Holy is that which pertains to God. Holy is that which is set apart for a special purpose.

Your grandmother’s china may be set apart for a special purpose; it is only taken out for special occasions. But is it holy? No, I don’t think so.

Part of being holy is that it is set aside for God’s purpose (translate as needed: for Love’s purpose, might be useful...) For example, for the purpose of building right relationships in the service of mercy or justice.

On Sunday mornings, this sanctuary is regarded as holy or sacred space. It is a space and time set apart from our ordinary lives so that we might engage in set apart activities: to be intentionally quiet together; to open our hearts; to sing our thanksgiving; to regard our suffering; to contemplate meaning; to release our fear; to recollect our better selves; to perceive the presence of Love in our midst; to know we are not alone. These are holy activities.

Holy, holy, holy. All of earth is full of God’s glory...

If we were to hear Isaiah’s vision of angels singing this hosanna from the point of view of a war-torn, suffering, ancient Israel, what do you think we would hear? First of all, we would hear truth-telling. Isaiah is a righteous man. He is a prophet. And his job is to tell the truth, whether it is palatable or not, whether we are ready, or not. Woe and restoration...

Holy, holy, holy: it’s a three-alarm call to wake up! To remember something very important. To notice the presence of the holy in the world. And to see it clearly. If we can notice it and see it clearly it, holiness will inform and direct our lives.

How can we see what is holy? “All the earth is full of its glory.” Holy is being reflected—gloriously—in the earth, in the world. Holy is everything in the world that receives our careful, awake attention, our awe, our love, our praise and gratitude.

Where might you see holiness reflected in the world? Jane Kenyon offered a litany for our consideration:

*I am the blossom pressed in a book,
found again after two hundred years. . . .
the young girl who starves
[sitting] down to a table . . .
I am food on the prisoner’s plate. . . .
I am the stone step,
the latch, and the working hinge. . . .
I am the heart contracted by joy. . .
the longest hair, white before the rest. . . .*

Elsewhere in both the Hebrew and Christian Bible it is said: “You shall be holy because I am holy.” (Lev. 11:45; 1 Pet 1:16)

What is holy? It is the relationship between you and the
*one whose love
overcomes you, already with you*

when you think to call my name. . . .

Holy is the relationship we develop with another when we speak clearly and listen with care. Holy is the relationship we understand already exists because we share our path and our humanity. When we comprehend the holiness of our relationships, how can we but “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God—however we name that in our lives? (Micah 6:8)

The holy is set apart for a special purpose. And it is everywhere, waiting *like a blossom pressed in a book*. It is set apart, willing to do the work of the latch and the hinge. It is set apart, starving for food, for justice and for joy.

What is holy?

Listen! It is calling--like the echoing seraphim--for your attention. For your love. Your praise and gratitude.

May you be holy and whole.

Blessed be. AMEN