

Lenten Sermon Series 3: Life of Pi and Other Creatures

All Souls Community Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan

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INVOCATION

We give thanks for this day, and its beauty and promise.

We give thanks for the light returning from darkness.

We give thanks for the blessings of family, friends, and the company of companions.

We give thanks for hands that hold ours when we are hurting, that hold up our bodies when we are weary, and soothe our spirits when we seek solace.

We give thanks for a day we did not create, and the hope that lies in every moment of trial and triumph.

We give thanks for having been given trust and love, to give trust and love back to the world, and from the gift of this day, build a greater life for all souls.

CHALICE LIGHTING

We light this Chalice to remember a truth,

Consecrated through the ages by the service and sacrifice

Of individuals and communities:

There abides a unity and freedom of the Spirit,

Expressed through a love for all souls.

Readings

Life of Pi, Yann Martel, pp 19-24

A fabulous romp through an imagination by turns ecstatic, cunning, despairing and resilient, this novel is an impressive achievement. Pi Patel narrates this tale of how he spent a beguiling boyhood in Pondicherry, India, as the son of a zookeeper. Growing up beside the wild beasts, Pi gathers an encyclopedic knowledge of the animal world. His curious mind also makes the leap from his native Hinduism to Christianity and Islam, all three of which he practices with joyous abandon. In his 16th year, Pi sets sail with his family and some of their menagerie to start a new life in Canada. Halfway to Midway Island, the ship sinks into the Pacific, leaving Pi, as he tells it, stranded on a life raft with a hyena, an orangutan, an injured zebra and a 450-pound Bengal tiger named Richard Parker, and the family he loved gone. After the tiger dispatches the others, Pi is left to survive for 227 days with his large feline companion on the 26-foot-long raft, using all his knowledge, wits and faith to keep himself alive. He finally reaches the coast of Mexico, and as he pulls into the beach, the tiger vanishes into the brush and Pi is left to tell his tale to the authorities who nourish him back to health, including investigators from the ship company whose boat sank nearly a year before and who want to know what exactly happened.

In this excerpt early on in the book, Pi tells of the connection between zoos and religion:

I have heard nearly as much nonsense about zoos as I have about God and religion. Well-meaning but misinformed people think animals in the wild are ‘happy’ because they are ‘free.’ These people usually have a large, handsome predator in mind, a lion or a cheetah (the life of a gnu or of an armadillo is rarely exalted). They imagine this wild animal roaming about the savannah on digestive walks after eating a prey that accepts its lot piously, or going for callisthenic runs to stay slim after overindulging. They imagine this animal overseeing its offspring proudly and tenderly, the whole family watching the setting of the sun from the limbs of trees with sighs of pleasure. The life of the wild animal is simple, noble and meaningful, they imagine. Then it is captured by wicked men and thrown into tiny jails. Its ‘happiness’ is dashed. It yearns mightily for ‘freedom’ and does all it can to escape. Being denied its ‘freedom’ for too long, the animal becomes a shadow of itself, its spirit broken. So some people imagine.

This is not the way it is.

Animals in the wild lead lives of compulsion and necessity within an unforgiving social hierarchy in an environment where the supply of fear is high and the supply of food low and where territory must constantly be defended and parasites forever endured. What is the meaning of freedom in such a context? Animals in the wild are, in practice, free neither in space nor in time, nor in their personal relations. In theory – that is, as a simply physical possibility – an animal could pick up and go, flaunting all the social conventions and boundaries proper to its species. But such an event is less likely to happen than for a member of our own species, say a shopkeeper with all the usual ties – to family, to friends, to society – to drop everything and walk away from his life with only the spare change in his pockets and the clothes on his frame. If a man, boldest and most intelligent of creatures, won’t wander from place to place, a stranger to all, beholden to none, why would an animal, which is by temperament far more conservative? The smallest changes can upset them. Surprises are highly disagreeable to them. In the wild, animals stick to the same paths for the same pressing reasons, season after season.

But let me pursue for a moment only one aspect of the question [of ‘freedom’].

If you went to a home, kicked down the front door, chased the people who lived there out into the street and said, ‘Go! You are free! Free as a bird! Go! Go!’ – do you think they would shout and dance for joy? They wouldn’t. Birds are not free.

Don’t we say, ‘There’s no place like home?’ That’s certainly what animals feel. Animals are territorial. That is the key to their minds. Only a familiar territory will allow them to fulfill the two relentless imperatives of the wild: the avoidance of enemies and the getting of food and water. A biologically sound zoo enclosure – is just another territory. A house is a compressed territory where our basic needs can be fulfilled close by and safely. A sound zoo enclosure is the equivalent for an animal. Finding within it

all the places it needs – a lookout, a place for resting, for eating and drinking, for bathing, for grooming – and finding that there is no need to go hunting, food appearing six days a week, an animal will take possession of its zoo space in the same way it would lay claim to a new space in the wild, exploring it and marking it out in the normal ways of its species. One might even argue that if an animal could choose with intelligence, it would opt for living in a zoo, since the major difference between a zoo and the wild is the absence of parasites and enemies and the abundance of food in the zoo.

But I don't insist. I don't mean to defend zoos. Close them all down if you want (and let us hope that what wildlife remains can survive in what is left of the natural world). I know zoos are no longer in people's good graces. Religion faces the same problem. Certain illusions about freedom plague them both.

Sermon

My wife is out of town this weekend and when she returns this evening she will ask me a question she has asked me before the few times she could not attend services. For 26 years parishioners have asked me the same question the week after services they cannot or choose not to attend. "What was the sermon about?" And I will say, "You had to be there." I am not being impolite or provocative or sarcastic, though I can be any of those at other times. I could say what the sermon was "about" as much as I could tell you what the book, *Life of Pi* is about. A boy from India, raised by a zoo keeper father, is the lone human survivor of a shipwreck and floats for 227 days in a 26 foot lifeboat with a 450 pound Bengal tiger until they reach Mexico. That is what the book is about. The sermon is about the book. Story over, sermon complete, a singular explanation, reasonable and complete. Yet, there's more, because there will be another new sermon next week.

There is no one explanation for what a sermon is about or what the book *Life of Pi* is about. There is no one explanation for what your life is about because all are so complex as to resist being reduced to one explanation from religion or science or anything else. It defies explanation. You have to be there to experience the sermon, to read the book, to live the life. The complexity of meaning is camouflaged in a day when the instant explanation of Wikipedia is ever at hand.

Human existence cannot be explained only in one all-comprehensive truth because no faith or belief is that large. Yet certain people maintain the illusion that their faith is an absolute, all-comprehending truth. And the meaning of human existence cannot be arrived at through reason alone either, because in reducing life down to its reason, what its "about," you lose most of what makes the experience unique and unrepeatable, the feel of it, what thoughts and impressions it made, all that filled it out. Philosopher William James called the neglecting of this complexity, "vicious intellectualism." You remove the experience from the experience in order to reduce it to the truth of its "essence." Foolish! You had to be there to hear the music, to feel the vibrations of the meditation, to see the faces, to feel their presence, to see how wonderfully proper the Offertory is taken and how the Sanctuary is lovingly and

painstakingly transformed from a Jewish temple into a place where Unitarian Universalists worship, and one cannot ever get at what the sermon was “about” without all of that. I ache at the faces not here for the absence of their presence. I revel at the feeling of you who are here and drink in your presence and feed as my nourishment on what I feel right now between us. Do you not feel it? It is integral to what the sermon is “about,” to the meaning of the entire experience. You had to be there, and no one explanation would ever suffice.

No absence can ever be made equivalent to presence by explanation of what it was about.

That is the foundation of the spiritual life of every age: Experience. You cannot know with certainty or with any depth of meaning, the experience of anyone else you see, or any of the life and times of people in ages past. You have to be there and even then, your experience is too complex to fully know or understand, to reduce to any essence, to be encompassed in any one truth of any kind.

That’s what the book is about. Yet, there’s more.

The world today reveals human existence to be as a lifeboat with two creatures on it that may in reality be one: a tiger and a human being. One seeks survival at all costs and the other cannot survive without meaning. Both are animals and one can reason and believe. We had better gain a thorough and realistic understanding of human nature and humanity’s yearning for God, for something more, to navigate this lifeboat safely to shore in the new 21st century.

“I have a story that will make you believe in God,” says an elderly man at the beginning of *Life of Pi*. To understand how the sacred is an element in the structure of human consciousness is like telling a story: *“That’s what fiction is about, isn’t it, the selective transforming of reality? The twisting of it to bring out its essence?”* This is what we all do in telling what the sermon or the life was “about.” We twist reality, stretch it this way and that, kneading it like dough until its full flavor explodes onto the tongue with each bite. But, we need to understand that is what we are doing, not extracting some kind of essence or essential truth contained for us to discover. The story about and any beliefs drawn from our experience is a secondary yield.

Pi Patel spends his first 16 years in his native India learning about the animal world at his father’s zoo. He is a curious, adventuresome boy whose favorite teacher, the school’s biology teacher, was his opposite, *“the first avowed atheist I ever met,”* noted Pi. *“I don’t believe in religion,”* the biology teacher once told Pi, *“Religion is darkness.”* But to Pi, *“Darkness is the last thing that religion is. Religion is light.”* The science teacher explains why it is darkness to him: *“When I was your age I lived in bed, racked with polio. I asked myself every day, ‘Where is God?’ God never came. It wasn’t God who saved me – it was medicine. Reason is my prophet and it tells me that as a watch stops, so we die. It’s the end.”*

“The tone was right,” thought Pi, “loving and brave, but the details seemed bleak.” Reason was the path the biology teacher taught and he could not tolerate any other way. But Pi remained faithful to him, his companion.

That’s what the book is about. Yet, there’s more.

Pi loved God and sought an experience of God, what we in our culture call the spiritual life. He was born a Hindu, and loved to dance with Brahma and the various incarnations of Vishnu. Pi was a Hindu who reveled in joy. He visited a Christian Church and fell in love with Christ, too, who, nailed to the cross, nevertheless loved and forgave even his most harsh and venomous enemies. Pi was a Christian who fought bitterness with love. He visited a mosque and loved the discipline of the Islamic way. Pi was Moslem who bowed five times a day to Allah. One day at the zoo his Hindu teacher, his Christian teacher, and his Islamic teacher all arrived at the same time, and in disillusionment Pi saw them arguing amongst themselves each convinced of the singular truth of the path he taught. Each one could not tolerate any other way. Each loved their religion more than they loved God. And Pi loved God. Yet, Pi remained a faithful companion to all three.

“Love is hard to believe, ask any lover,” says Pi. *“Life is hard to believe, ask any scientist. God is hard to believe, ask any believer.”* Hindu Pi, Christian Pi, Moslem Pi, Scientific Pi, they are all Pi, and more, for knowing zoos as he does, he knows the animal that lurks within himself, and you, too. And Pi loves God. In his adventuresome affection he cannot find in those who claim to be religious and those who claim irreligion as their religion, the love for living that gives and sustains life. They cannot tolerate any other way nor love those who live and believe differently. Yet, Pi remains a companion with both the religious and irreligious, and eagerly welcomes a spiritual stroll through the zoo that is the world.

And when his family decides to move from India to Canada, taking some of the animals on the long ocean voyage, Pi begins an adventure that is part Robinson Crusoe, part Old Man and the Sea, part Jonah, part Mohammed, part Noah, part Homer’s Odyssey, and all Pi. The ship sinks mysteriously, and Pi finds himself *stranded on a life raft with a hyena, an orangutan, an injured zebra and a 450-pound Bengal tiger named Richard Parker, and the family he loved gone along with everyone from the ship.* The orangutan, so human-like in its appearance, floated on a stack of bananas to reach the lifeboat safely.

But, the Tiger devours everything except Pi, and it is only because of his knowledge of animals that he is able to mark out his territory on the raft and keep the tiger at bay in a world that is a life raft. Nearly a year later they land on the shores of Mexico, the tiger leaps off the boat and vanishes, and after some time for convalescence, Pi is met by the owners of the sunken vessel, inquisitors there to determine why the ship sunk. They want the reason, what the sinking of the ship was about. Pi tells them his story, of his 227 day survival on the lifeboat with a 450 pound Bengal tiger which had eaten a zebra, hyena, orangutan, but not him. They don’t believe him. Would you

believe that is what actually happened? *“We just don’t believe there was a tiger living in your lifeboat. No scientist would believe you. It’s not reasonable.”*

That’s what the book is about. Yet, there’s more.

The inquisitors are unconvinced that Pi has told them the truth about the ship’s sinking. So, Pi tells them another story. The ship sank. Four survived on a lifeboat: Pi, a cook, a sailor, and Pi’s mother, who floated on a stack of bananas to reach the lifeboat safely. The cook was a brutish beast, soon killing the sailor in a cannibalizing fury, descending upon Pi’s mother and killing her, too, before Pi could kill him. Pi saw his mother murdered defending him, and in defending himself and killing the cook, he was alone. *“Solitude began,”* explains Pi. *“I turned to God. I survived.”*

“Is that [a better story, do you think?] Are there any parts [in that story] you find hard to believe? Since it makes no factual difference to you [because in neither story can I tell you I about the ship sinking], which story do you prefer? Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?” The inquisitors agree. *“The story with animals is the better story.”* *“And so it goes with God,”* replies Pi. And he wept from guilt and gratitude.

Yet, like his native Hindu faith, there’s more. There is always more. Like our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition holds, *“Revelation is not sealed.”* There is always the next experience or someone else’s experience.

Some religionists claim you will be free of your guilt and fear by accepting their One Truth about what your life and all human life means. Irreligionists claim you will be free of the guilt and fear religion instills in you by being freed from religion itself through science and reason, their One Truth about what your life and all human life means.

Which story do you like better? *Certain illusions about freedom plague them both.*

The religionist offers the freedom from the fear that you won’t know what your life is about, and offers freedom like an animal held in a tiny confinement of a cage knows no fear. One answer, no fear, small container, hard confinement. Or, the irreligionist, in abhorring all religions and seeking release from all of them, holding so tightly to reason as to become religious in devotion to irreligion, offers a freedom from fear like the freedom animals would have were the gates of the zoo removed, and they could romp free in the wild, released from the zoo enclosure and free in a world filled with parasites, enemies, and the anxiety of where their next meal would come from.

Certain illusions about freedom do plague them both. Which story do you like better? That’s what the book is about. Yet, there’s more.

There is the liberation beyond fear in a story of a boy who became a man by holding a tiger at bay in the territory they shared, a lifeboat, until they reached shore

safely, the tiger could be let go and the man could remember all he had experienced. He endured his particular and peculiar sufferings - the guilt and bitterness, and hunger and horror, and thirst and elation, and wonder and doubt and joy - with his devoted love for all creatures and God somehow intact and nourished. Which story liberates the spirit to live life in its fullness and love God and neighbor as self most completely? Which story liberates the spirit to bow in gratitude for this great gift? Which story liberates the spirit celebrate with joy the day as it unfolds, whatever it brings? Which story you will choose to be shape yours and be yours in your living?

A question, shaped in the context of a sermon within the boundaries of a worship service itself shaped by the historic ideas passed down by Unitarianism and Universalism, holding as foundational to meaning individual experience, so as your mind can roam free amongst all possible beliefs, to land upon a few this morning from which you can live affectionate, joyfully, and true.

“God be with you, my brothers and sisters,” said Pi at the end of the book. God be with you, my brothers and sisters.

So Be It, Shalom, Namaste, Amen.