

**"Above Rubies"©**  
**Mattatuck Unitarian Universalist Society, Woodbury, CT**  
**The Rev. Jeanne Lloyd, Minister**  
**May 10, 2009**

*"Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies." Proverbs 31:10*

**PRELUDE**

**CALL TO GATHER**

SONG: Come, Come Whoever You Are, #188

READING: Come, come, whoever you are;  
Man, woman, parent, child  
Whatever your religious journey,  
Whatever your skin color,  
Whatever your ability,  
Whomever you love-  
You are welcome here this morning.  
You are welcome at our table.  
You are welcome in this religious home.

Good Morning! Welcome to the Mattatuck Unitarian Universalist Society, or more affectionately known as MUUS. I am the Rev. Jeanne Lloyd, and it is my great pleasure and privilege to serve this congregation. We welcome all of you.

**WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS**

"Important parts of our community life are the invitations we give to one another for activities beyond our morning's service. Please note the announcements in your order of service. We have these additional announcements: (Read Announcements.)

- If you are a newcomer, and haven't yet signed our guest book in the entryway, please do so before you leave so that we may send you a newsletter listing our events. If you have questions about Unitarian Universalism or are thinking about joining this congregation, we invite you to join us for coffee/tea after our service today and to speak with me or a member of the Membership Committee who wear gold nametags.

- Later in the worship service newcomers will have an opportunity to introduce themselves, and we hope that you will do so. It is optional, but we would like to give you a proper welcome.
- To parents, children are always welcome to stay in the service, or join the other children in our religious education classes.
- My next Sunday to preach here will be the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the month (not the 4<sup>th</sup>).
- This month a portion of our 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday collection will go to support the Boys to Men Mentoring Network of New England. At least three of our people are deeply involved in it, Dave Bolduc, John Cummings, and Kevin Byler. It is a wonderful extension of our ministry in the larger world. Please plan on making a large donation toward this cause on May 31st.
- On May 31<sup>st</sup>, we will also have our next New Member Sunday, when we will be welcoming 8 new members to the congregation. Please be here for this important event.
- The flowers this morning are given in honor of \_\_\_\_\_. Please consider making an offering of flowers for this sanctuary for various Sundays throughout the year, in honor of a special event or in memory of a loved one. You can sign up at the back table.
- If you like to have sweets to eat and coffee or tea . . . to drink after our services, please sign up at the back table.
- A warning: Because I am working from the Book of Proverbs today, and other biblical sources, I will be using the word G\*d sometimes. Remember, I do not spell this word out, because I believe the concept is too large to define and categorize.

If there are any other MUUS related announcements, we ask that you line up to my left to share them now and please use the microphone."

PAUSE

And, now: "I invite everyone to relax your body, come into this natural space in beauty & light. Take the next few moments to focus on your breathing. Breathe deeply. Relax. We welcome you into this place made more sacred by your presence."

## **SOUNDING OF BELL**

### **CHALICE LIGHTING & OPENING WORDS**

Wisdom Quote

**\* HYMN #357    *"Bright Morning Stars" v. 1-3***

**\* COVENANT** (in unison)

*Love is the spirit of this society.  
Dwelling together in peace,  
Seeking truth,  
Helping one another,  
Serving human needs,  
Honoring the Earth and all that is,  
This is our covenant.*

**OFFERTORY**

As we take our collection, we invite first time visitors to let the plate/basket pass them by, you are our guests today.

Let there be an offering to sustain and strengthen this place which is sacred to so many of us, a community of memory and of hope, for we are now the keepers of the dream.

~ Brandoch L. Lovely

**SHARING JOYS AND SORROWS\*\***

If you are visiting for the first time, or have come back after a long time, or if you are still getting to know us, we would love it if you would introduce yourself to us. It is purely optional, but we'd like to give you a proper welcome. Please raise your hand so we can bring you a mic.

***Let the congregation say, "Welcome!"***

As we begin the sharing of our joys and sorrows, please remember to tell us your name before sharing.

And, now, if you woke this morning with a sorrow so heavy that you need the help of this community to carry it; or if, in the spirit of thankfulness, you woke with gratitude in your heart that simply must be shared, now is the time for you to speak.

INSERT JOYS & SORROWS

May all that is shared at this time be seen as holy.  
May it be so.

## **SINGING THE CHILDREN ON THEIR WAY**

*As you go may joy surround you, as you go, go in peace;  
know our love is with you always, as you go, as you go.*

## **PRAYER AND MEDITATION**

In Words

In Silence

In Song—Spirit of Life, #123

## **SERMON      *Above Rubies . . .***

The Rev. Jeanne Lloyd

I like the book of Proverbs. From it comes ***“Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies.”*** (Proverbs 31:10) These words come at the end of the book of Proverbs, its last chapter, chapter 31. If you read the whole chapter, you will read of the author’s numerous points about why it is good to have a capable woman, at your side. The author spends much of this chapter describing her virtues as being able to spin, weave and sew – thereby clothing the family and herself, and selling clothing to others; she cooks; she works in the vineyard and fields; she is strong, as in one whose lamp does not go out at night.

It begins to sound a bit like she is a servant. But then, you get to the end of the chapter and he says, these words, “Strength and dignity are her clothing, she opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness . . . on her tongue. Her children rise up and call her happy; her husband too, and he praises her, saying, ‘Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.’”<sup>1</sup> He goes on to say, “Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Give her a share in the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her ... ”<sup>2</sup>

From our point of view, there may be qualities named here that we can resonate with, and some perhaps that we endorse. Dignity, strength, wisdom . . . all good things to be found in a woman, or anyone else. And, justice is found in the statement, “give her a share in the fruit of her hands.” Justice for women, this is a good thing and was not always found in the bible.

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<sup>1</sup> Editor, Wayne Meeks. ***The Harper Collins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books.*** (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1993) 984-985.

<sup>2</sup> Editor, Wayne Meeks. ***The Harper Collins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books.*** (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1993) 984-985.

For on the other hand, we also know that the authors of the bible very often, through their writings, perpetuated a patriarchal society that placed women in positions of property, often with very few rights. A few examples will suffice . . .

Clearly, Eve had her hands full, being placed in that garden with that alluring snake. Most of us now realize, that “Eve was framed.” Her story was written long after her life, and written in such a way, by a man, as to promote a patriarchal society.

There are other stories, too, of women of the bible and their difficulties. I offer you a couple of stories from a book called, “Above Rubies.”

What about that story about Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis? It is an event that probably took place “about 1900 B.C.E. Historic findings lead to the conclusion that these cities lay in an area . . . [subject to earthquakes] and the explosion of natural gases . . . Anything near the Salt Sea in this locality is soon covered with a salt crust. [People can be easily suffocated by poisonous fumes that come out of the earth there].”<sup>3</sup>

In this story, Lot was judged by G\*d to be virtuous, and thereby warned to leave the city of Sodom before destruction. Lot’s wife . . . didn’t even warrant a name by biblical standards. Yet, her tarrying after the destruction of Sodom for alleged wickedness in the town became a so called punishment by G\*d.

These words, from “Above Rubies,”

“Then Lot hastened out while she moved as if held in trance, how could she tell their daughters now asleep, they too must leave. How could they bid farewell to every treasure, be turned from home; vagrants with only endless skies and hills to reap as harvest. Blindly, she packed their food. The smell of the saltmarsh had blown far inland, dried her throat . . . the acrid winds that blew against her cheek were oppressive, squeezing her heart. She almost swooned . . . [Led outside the city], they ran in frantic confusion; she somehow moaned, ‘Where, Lot, will we find the other children, where?’ [And, he says,] ‘Do not look back for they did not believe . . . ’”

“She paused and fell behind in the smoke thick air . . . She could not conceive a life without them. Her very heartstrings were about the pillars of old foundations; her soul was not prepared, nor had she the strength, nor will for this sudden evacuation;

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<sup>3</sup> Gordon, Guanetta. *Above Rubies, Women of the Bible*. (Francestown, NH: The Golden Quill Press, 1976), 16.

perhaps she could hide and later return to find her loved ones . . . She seemed ensnared in a still white fog. She thought, ‘I must look toward the future, blot out the past.’ Yet she turned [back], [blinded with tears]. Perhaps they might run to her, as so often they had done before.”<sup>4</sup>

“She heard Lot call from the hill above the coast, she tried to answer. The pungent fumes had sealed her lips, she felt numb, her flesh was drawn and scaled. In terror she struggled against the appalling dream, ‘release me, Lot, else soon I have enhaled too much of this lethal vapor, this deadly steam . . . ‘hear, Lot, here’ . . . she tried so hard to scream.”<sup>5</sup> But, she was frozen into a pillar of salt.

PAUSE

For Unitarian Universalists, this G\*d is hard to understand. It is a vengeful G\*d, an uncaring G\*d. For us, or at least for me, it is a G\*d void of wisdom and compassion. This G\*d, is not a G\*d of universal salvation, and thus does not ring true to our ears. What do we learn from this story? That women must deny reason, must deny wisdom of heart, and deny love of children to follow this G\*d.

PAUSE

Later on in the bible, there is the story of Rahab in the Book of Joshua, “a celebrated woman of Jericho, who aided two [Hebrew] soldiers set out by Joshua to spy [on the town of Jericho].”<sup>6</sup> Rahab ran an inn that was built on the wall of Jericho. She was a woman caught between many worlds, caring for brothers, sisters, and parents. Finding herself in a place where selling her body, was an expedient way to make ends meet. She was a woman looking for a better life. A woman with dreams of dignity and worth for herself and her family. These things, she believed she would find with the Hebrews.

Rahab knew the architectural strengths and weaknesses of that wall that protected the town from invaders such as the Hebrews. When two Hebrew warriors arrived, seeking a hiding place, she took courage to hide them on the roof, under stalks of grain, and redirected Jericho soldiers outside the walls to search for them. When she spoke to one

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<sup>4</sup> Gordon, Guanetta. *Above Rubies, Women of the Bible*. (Francestown, NH: The Golden Quill Press, 1976), 17-19.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon, Guanetta. *Above Rubies, Women of the Bible*. (Francestown, NH: The Golden Quill Press, 1976), 17-19.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon, Guanetta. *Above Rubies, Women of the Bible*. (Francestown, NH: The Golden Quill Press, 1976), 66.

of the Hebrew soldiers in hiding, the story goes that she said, “I tremble that I have let you view details of Jericho’s defense . . . but yet I believe in the Hebrew G\*d and would like to hear how one, such as I, approaches Him. Perhaps there is no consideration in His sphere of justice, for a gentile who wishes to change her existence.’ The Hebrew soldier brushed her words away by telling her that he knew Jehovah . . . forgave the repentant heart, that through confession, salvation was granted [to] each who changed their ways . . .”<sup>7</sup>

PAUSE

In this description, we see an image of G\*d that is coming closer to a G\*d offering universal salvation, even to those women who found as their only means of support, that of giving up something of themselves, in order to hold their families together. In order to survive. We see a G\*d with greater wisdom, holding out hope for dreams, and transformation to a better life.

PAUSE

For me, the book of Proverbs puts these stories (and others) about women into context. Throughout the bible we see different woman, saintly and ruined, courageous and foolish. But, in the book of Proverbs we find Wisdom Woman, whose persona is as “an exalted female figure in a strongly male-centered society.”<sup>8</sup> She represents not only the best of women, but the best of all people . . . for all people are called to Wisdom.

Wisdom Woman, resides in the very oldest part of the bible, Chapters 1-9 and Chapter 31, in Proverbs. For some, she represents the Egyptian G\*ddess unable to be tamed or forced out of the patriarchal society. She is the G\*ddess, women continued to worship after the rise of the Hebrew G\*d. She represents the Tree of Life that becomes the wellspring from which all life evolves. For many, she is the equal to G\*d.

From Proverbs 8:22-27, we hear, that Wisdom Woman “was a preexistent being who align[ed] herself with G\*d.”<sup>9</sup> She says, “Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there

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<sup>7</sup> Gordon, Guanetta. *Above Rubies, Women of the Bible*. (Francestown, NH: The Golden Quill Press, 1976), 68.

<sup>8</sup> Editor, Wayne Meeks. *The Harper Collins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*. (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1993) 939.

<sup>9</sup> Editor, Wayne Meeks. *The Harper Collins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*. (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1993), 953.

were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth – when he had not yet made earth and fields, or the world’s first bits of soil. When he established the heavens, I was [already] there. . . I was beside him, like a master worker.”<sup>10</sup>

And, from this very specific and most ancient part of the bible, Proverbs 3:14-18, come these words,

“Happy are those who find Wisdom, for **her** income is better than silver, and **her** revenue better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and **all her paths are peace**. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy.”<sup>11</sup>

She speaks on her own behalf, not G\*d’s, when Wisdom cries out: “I will pour out my thoughts to you; I will make my words known to you.”<sup>12</sup> “. . . Wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul; prudence will watch over you; and understanding will guard you.”<sup>13</sup>

I am very fond of this Spirit called Wisdom. She is the counterpoint, the female half, as described of a sometimes punitive G\*d. Peter Aleff describes her as “the Essence of God that pervades all creation [and] that is **the true beauty of all things**.” Her voice is too often not heard as you make your way through the bible. Her voice is not often heard in this world. But, I like to believe she is the wisdom that leads the people of the book (the bible), and us, ever toward justice, love, compassion and ultimately reason, otherwise known as wisdom. She is the wisdom in a mother’s heart that says, guard the home and care for your children. She is the wisdom in a harlot’s heart that says, have courage and seek a better life for yourself with a G\*d that is ultimately forgiving or in beauty that is ultimately sustaining.

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<sup>10</sup> Editor, Wayne Meeks. *The Harper Collins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*. (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1993). 953-954.

<sup>11</sup> Editor, Wayne Meeks. *The Harper Collins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*. (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1993) 945.

<sup>12</sup> Editor, Wayne Meeks. *The Harper Collins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*. (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1993) 942.

<sup>13</sup> Editor, Wayne Meeks. *The Harper Collins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*. (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1993) 943.

She is the wisdom that draws us to care for one another in times of trouble and discord. She is the wisdom that calls for peace, just as a famous Unitarian, Julia Ward Howe, once called for peace in this world, on Mother’s Day. She is the wisdom that at some point in our lives, I hope each of us has found in at least one person, who once turned us toward beauty, healing, light and justice.

I hope, on this Mother’s Day, you can celebrate in your heart a person, a man or woman, who has made a difference in your life, pointing you toward health and wholeness, love and beauty, compassion and justice. If you are able, I hope you can let them know either in person or spirit of your gratitude.

May it be so.

**RESPONSIVE READING #721 *“They Are With Us Still”***

**\* HYMN #191 *“Now I Recall My Childhood, v. 1-2”***

**REFLECTION AND RESPONSE (congregation)**

**CLOSING WORDS**

These words from The Rev. Mary Pratt<sup>14</sup>

[Wisdom], Teach Us To Pray (adapted)  
[Wisdom], here, now and here, name us.  
Here make your wild and messy household  
Your chaotic piles of branches and bones  
With the grass always springing up between  
And always the unseen bird calling from high in a tree  
And rain falling somewhere and snow falling  
And rivers meandering and earth shaking  
And small wet joyful creatures jumping  
And everywhere darkness and dust and stars.

Fill us with the fire of your desiring,  
Teach us to yearn for what you yearn for  
Make us ache and burn and shine and split.

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<sup>14</sup> Editor, Elizabeth Rankin Geitz. ***Women’s Uncommon Prayers, Our Lives Revealed, Nurtured, Celebrated.*** (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2000), 233-234.

Let us leave the air dazzling wherever we pass.

And give us another change.  
Teach us to walk barefooted and easy.  
Teach us to go to ground singing.  
Teach us to open our hands.

When we come to the rim of the volcano  
Or slide out onto a skim of ice  
Or step onto a thin branch,  
Push us over, crack us under, let us fall,  
And catch us, laugh, in your wide welcoming arms.

Amen.

**\* EXTINGUISHING OF THE CHALICE**

We extinguish this flame, but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again. Let the congregation say: AMEN!