

“Our Evolving History”

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister
At All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, on February 15th, 2009

February is in fact Black History Month. Marlin told you a bit of the history of Black History Month last Sunday. Americans have recognized black history annually since 1926, first as “Negro History Week” and later as “Black History Month.” I still find it a bit disconcerting that Black History Month ended up the shortest month of the year. But I guess, if we look through the lens of gratitude, at least there is an extra day every four years. We obviously have more work to do. Setting aside a month to focus on African American History does serve a unique purpose. It serves as a placeholder – a marker – so we do not forget that in the not-so-distant past “history” has in fact forgotten to include the contributions of African Americans in mainstream historical accounts. Having only a month may seem remedial, but it is the beginning of a remedy.

I am told that most African American Baby Boomers grew up with portraits of two white men hanging on the walls of their homes: one of Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, and the other of Jesus. And there might be a problem with both. First, because Lincoln is more complicated than he seems, and second, because Jesus – of course – was *NOT white*.

Maybe the days of hanging portraits of heroes in our homes have passed. But if I were going to hang a portrait of an African American hero in my home today, it would be of author, activist, and educator W.E.B. Du Bois. In Du Bois’s famous work *The Souls of Black Folk*, he grapples with what it means to be black in America. He writes:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,— an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,— this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the

older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.

“To be able to walk in *both worlds*,” he says. And this walking in two worlds is true, to a certain degree, for all Americans: the worlds of the secular and religious, gay and straight, work and family. But no one is subjected to such a struggle as Americans of color. The histories of “white America” and “black America” are converging more and more. But we have a long way to go before the story is woven in a way that celebrates the contributions of African Americans the other eleven months of the year, and faces the complexities of our past with regards to race relations. We have a long way to go for the American story to be more than a tale of the status quo. Our combined history will “merge [us] into a better and truer self,” evolving our integrity not only as a nation, but also as individuals. What is our combined history if not a “merge[r] into a better and truer self?” American history is in fact still unfolding – still evolving.

This week, America celebrated two historic bicentennials: Abraham Lincoln and Charles Darwin, who were born hours apart on February 12th. Henry Louis Gates Jr., the W.E.B. Du Bois Professor of the Humanities, Director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American research at Harvard University, and the Director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University, recently did a PBS special. You may have seen it this week; it’s called “Looking for Lincoln.” In the special, Dr. Gates seeks to understand Lincoln as he uncovers the man behind the myth.

There are over 14 thousand books written about Abraham Lincoln, more than any other American historical figure. He is second only to Jesus in the number of books authored about a single man, who – despite popular belief – is also *not an American*.

The Lincoln of Dr. Gates’s boyhood is the Lincoln that many of us know. A giant man with a stovepipe hat, born in a one-room log cabin. He is a self-made man who earned wages as a day laborer; one of his many tasks was splitting rails. He was an inventor, a lawyer, and then of course President during the Civil War. The mythic Lincoln stopped his campaign to rescue baby birds that had fallen from their nest. And he was “Honest Abe,” who, along the lines of George Washington, could not tell a lie when confronted even as a boy.

Many of the stories crafted with Lincoln as protagonist were used to teach morals to children, confusing the man and the myth. The mythic Lincoln was also assassinated on Good Friday and died on Easter, which only added fuel to the fire of hundreds of pulpits around the country in comparing Lincoln to Jesus. Lincoln's story became a Christian Story. It was THE American Story: the seminal narrative of our nation's history. But how do we understand Abraham Lincoln the *man*?

Dr. Gates discovers in his research that Lincoln was a complicated person and not immune to the influences of his time. And although Lincoln did in fact emancipate the slaves, the issue of emancipation and equality were separate issues for most of Lincoln's life. Historical documents show Lincoln arguing for white men's supremacy over persons of color, saying that they should not hold office, be on a jury or intermarry. Lincoln divided the issues of freedom and equality in order to make political gain. And if he hadn't, emancipation may have not occurred when it did. Lincoln is seen through the eyes of current historians as a much more realistic and complicated man, who struggled with depression, and grieved a series of losses including his first love, Ann Rutledge, to whom he was engaged but never married, his mother, and two young children whom he had with Mary Todd.

Lincoln was a man obsessed with his image – figuratively and quite literally – arranging for a portrait to be taken at nearly every speaking engagement at the beginning of the era of photography. Lincoln was seen as a tyrant by some, as he suspended habeus corpus and permitted unlawful detentions during the Civil War.

With every new discovery Dr. Gates took Lincoln down from the pedestal on which he had been placed when Gates was a boy. There is a saying among Presidents in the White House that in order to win, "you must have Lincoln on your side," no matter what side you happen to be on. Dr. Gates has come to believe that each generation reinvents Lincoln to serve their purposes. He says, "We remake Lincoln in order to remake ourselves. It is time to meet the flawed individual rather than the 'secular saint.'" As we evolve and become more complex, the stories of our heroes become more complex. The more information we uncover, the more details are filled in. The more realistic the portrait becomes, the more our image of ourselves and our history evolves.

As I mentioned earlier, there was another bicentennial celebrated this week. February 12th was also Charles Darwin's Birthday. Two hundred years later, many Americans are still trying to refute Darwin's main contribution to science: the development of the theory of biological evolution through natural selection. Darwin's contribution to the world was not only his theory of evolution, through his detailed observations and travels around the world. Darwin also gave us the gift of

reason and observation in scientific thought, concluding that we are in fact connected to all of creation. He also presented the idea that we are not a finished product, but continue to evolve ourselves.

Why is it that new paradigms are seen as a threat to some and are embraced by others? Why are there those who prefer to cling to a simplified version when the facts merely enhance our understanding? What we do know about our own evolution, is that a long time ago *something* changed. Whether it happened gradually over several hundred thousand years, as noted by some anthropologists, or quickly in a “great leap forward,” as Jared Diamond puts it, we are at least certain of this: early humans became dissatisfied with their circumstances and began to diverge from what was practiced and known. They began to look for new ways. Stone implements gave way to the more easily shaped and versatile bone. Bare cave walls were brought to life with paintings. Adorning jewelry was carefully fashioned from ordinary objects previously ignored. The notions to plant instead of gather, to breed captive animals rather than hunt them, took hold. Humans have altered their environments and enhanced their well-being unlike any other life form on the planet.

This unique capacity to diverge from what is, to accept our own story, and create something which has never before existed, resides solely within the domain of humanity. The gifts of diverse artistic expression, societal development, and technological innovation all result from the ability to question – and to conceive of things beyond – the status quo. This is a value I celebrate, and our faith celebrates. This magnificent and advanced capability of adaptation results, not unexpectedly, from an evolved and complex brain. We keep what works and throw out the rest. If stone was an adequate tool material, we at least had the good sense to continue using it after the first try.

Still, there is something special about the pursuit of novel alternatives. No other being with which we share the planet demonstrates the human capacity to continuously spawn newness. So we are freed by our neurology and biology to think outside the box. And I need a faith that makes room for adaptation – makes room for divergent thinking – when the facts or my experiences change. I need an evolving faith that continues to adhere to those traditions which serve to promote freedom of belief, and makes room for a diversity of experience. I need a faith shaped by covenant rather than by creed. A faith that can embrace this ever-changing world while holding on only to what is good and true.

In our reading this morning, the creation parable by Denny O’Neil about Ozzie and the Snortlefish, we hear the classic story of fearing change: of adhering to what has always been, at

the cost of growth and creativity. It is a familiar account of wanting to go beyond what we currently know, to dream in possibility. To redefine and recreate as new facts emerge.

Abraham Lincoln's is a story of someone who evolved over time. And with the inclusion of our new understanding of Lincoln the man, Lincoln's story becomes more valuable – more important to me. He shifted to say at the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, "If ever my name goes into history, it will be for this act, and my whole soul is in it." This was a man – an imperfect man – influenced by his time, who transformed in his thought over the course of his life and used his position and his power to make things right. He called us to champion the better "angels of our nature," hinting at citizenship for African Americans in his last speech before he was shot.

Realizing that we too have demons, all of us – even Lincoln – may bring us to the question: so where is God in all of this? In this evolution that brings us closer and closer to truth, don't we include more and more people in God's love? My concept of God has been evolving my whole life, and I suspect it will continue to do so. My love of Jesus has only increased the more I have come to understand his humanity and his history. We are blessed to be co-creators of our own evolution. We are participants with God, and our circumstances, and our environment, in affecting our own outcome, and the outcome of our neighbors. We can choose, to a certain extent, what we include and what we ignore from our individual history, our cultural history, our church history. In this case I think more is better.

I am convinced that knowledge is power. Embracing the complexities of our lives can bring us closer to our values, closer to our purpose and closer to God. Where else can we be on such a journey together? May our history continue to evolve together. I am blessed to be walking, jumping, dancing, kicking balls and playing ring around the rosary. With you.

Amen.