

“Soul Vacation”

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister
At All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, on May 31st, 2009

Brandon Daniel Hughes imagined this memo and I would like to share my adaptation with you this morning:

God, long overdue for her first-ever vacation, was anxious to be on her way. She sat at her laptop, glasses propped up on her head, a never-ending cup of fair trade coffee beside her, and began to type:

*TO: Everyone
FR: God
RE: Vacation*

This is to notify you that effective 12:01 A.M. cosmic time, I, God, Yahweh, Jehovah, Allah, The Mother-Father, El Shaddai, Adonai, Most Holy of Holies, Creator, will be on vacation.

This memo is to suggest that you figure things out on your own for a while. I have provided you with reason, humor, free will, the internet, and opposable thumbs. So Me be damned, people, USE these gifts to help one another. I am counting on everyone's complete cooperation.

Now, I know that last time something like this happened, like when that kvetcher Nietzsche started spreading rumors about my death, it caused untold panic and great harm. I expect nothing of this sort to happen again. You are hereby on your own. I will return in exactly one month.

If there are any prayers, please leave them on my voicemail. I will, however, not be answering email or voicemail while I am away.

Remember to keep praying: it works even when I am away, just not the way you think it does.

*Sincerely,
God*

*P.S. Will someone please put out my recyclables each Monday while I am gone?
Much obliged.*

God hit the send button, and humans everywhere were buzzing with the news. The New York Daily News headline read: “GOD CHECKS OUT” and the Daily Post had similar bold headline in large, defiant typeface: “GOD DROPS OFF FACE OF THE EARTH.” But God was way overdue for this vacation. She had been at it for an eternity, and was pretty much just

burned out. The last few millennia, all she could think about was sitting on the beach with her iPod, sipping on one of those funny drinks with tiny umbrellas in them, getting sand caught in her toes and even getting a little sunburned. She figured she'd invite Jesus, Mary, Joe and the kids for a few days and they could rent mopeds, build bonfires on the beach and play hearts or pinochle until the early morning hours. If ever a deity was primed for a little R and R it was she! So she left.

And the world faltered a bit.

Churches and Mosques and Temples closed their doors for the month, which not only impacted the planet's morale, it shut down a lot of service for those in need. The sun and moon decided to start rising and setting together, leaving neither day nor night, but rather a mix of the two that no one could really name. Poets went mad trying to write about the "something-set" or the "thing-a-ma-jig-rise." This also had an impact on crops growing, and the food supply. What's more, a lack of creativity swept over the planet. All the TV programming, for some reason, started turning into 24-hour news stations. It was horrible!

After the initial shock of God's absence, people began to come together to talk about what they missed about not having God around. They drew together at the water cooler and were able to see their commonalities more than their differences. Oh, there were still troubles, of course. There were people who tried to use this opportunity to their own advantage! One guy in New Jersey, using a Holstein dairy cow as his icon, tried to gather worshippers in God's absence. They were called the "Holy Order of the Hoof and Udders" and they believed salvation was only possible in the recognition of the Bovine-ness of Human Life. Butter, cottage cheese and yogurt were sacraments and they performed rituals around the homogenization process. (This did not catch on, however, since a large number of homo sapiens are lactose intolerant.) Another guy in Zimbabwe proclaimed the divinity of the mosquito, showing off bites as some sort of holy stigmata, until a small outbreak of malaria and encephalitis broke out in the region quickly putting the kibosh on that religion. The "Holy Order of Erythromycin and Quinine" soon started up after this and actually garnered many converts.

When the month was up, God, swinging in her hammock, flipping through her Franklin day planner, realized it was time to go back, and felt just a little bit sad. She tossed her Birkenstocks – a gift from Jesus long ago – into her bag, still gritty with sand.

Then she went back.

When she resumed her rightful place as the ruler of everything, things on the planet Earth began to return to normal. Soon – too soon in fact – the old prejudices and bigotries flitted back like they had been on vacation too. God booted up her laptop and listened to her voicemail:

“You have 7,653,432,433 voicemails” the automated voice said. She popped a couple of aspirin as she already had a headache. Then she looked at the Great Calendar of Things hanging on her wall, and wondered how she could ever make it until her next vacation.

We, very much like the God depicted in this scenario, have very important work to do! Take earning a living, caring for our families, keeping up with the news, politics and what is good for us and what is not. Add to all of that the responsibility that we have all signed up for, which is to become spiritually mature adults who work to bring more justice and more freedom to this world. It is nearly a miracle that you are dressed and awake this morning!

It used to be that this church, much like the Unitarian churches on the east coast, would shut down during the summer. Some say this tradition began in the east because there is nowhere hotter in this world than a colonial-style New England church in July. (Except maybe a colonial style New England Church in Oklahoma!) But the debate of whether or not to close our churches has been going on since the formation of this country.

I found an old Unitarian journal from 1893 where the editor, JT Sunderland, takes on an impassioned argument for keeping our church doors open in the spirit of a southern revival. He writes, “Wherever you go [this summer] carry with you a missionary spirit. If you have a religious faith that is valuable to you, it would be valuable to other people. If it has blessed your life, it would bless theirs.” “You have no right,” he continues, “to be content selfishly keeping it to yourself. And the vacation is just the time to let shine any light that God has given you! He also suggests that if it is too hot in our New England style church, then to consider holding services in the open air, outside, in a tent.” (Such crazy ideas from our own tradition!)

Well as you well know, these days we have air conditioning, which allows us the option of indoor, year-round church. And this year, for the first time in this church’s history we have too many people coming to fit into a single service, so we have not one service, but two! That means of course, more volunteers, more programs, and questions like, “Are we expected to come to church every Sunday?” (“Yes,” says our Senior Minister Marlin Lavanhar from behind me on the chancel..)

Our desire is still the same: that you come as often as you can and bring your whole self with you. You now have an opportunity to stay engaged with this community throughout the summer and maintain your practice of being part of a spiritual community as you can make that happen. I must tell you though, that if you are vacationing on a beach like God, even Mr. Sunderland in 1893 suggested that we “make it a rule” to go to church *wherever we are*. So let us send a message to ourselves and to our families that this is a *practice* – one that is important

and one that feeds us. It also gives us a chance to see how other churches in our tradition do church. Sunderland suggests that it may in fact reinvigorate our affection for our home congregation.

If we have been working hard all year for the church then we are *tired*. So I am not surprised by the Luke story of the exhausted disciples. In the Garden of Gethsemane, the night before Jesus is betrayed, he asks one last thing of his followers:

STAY AWAKE.

KEEP WATCH!

He doesn't tell them what to watch for. He just says *watch and pray*. And then Jesus goes off with Peter and a few others to pray himself. Jesus goes to renew his spirit. He takes a little soul vacation to center himself – to get clear in the face of what he knows will be his last night on earth. But as soon as Jesus is gone, the disciples fall sleep. They have been following him for so long, walking for miles, with little rest. Everyone needs a vacation, even GOD right?

I love that creative rendition of when God goes on vacation. I love it because what I take away from that story is not the fear of impending doom and chaos that might occur if there was no God around, or if she did in fact *vacate*. What I take away from that story is that we should be acting the same way, whether we believe God is present or not. And the Jesus story in the Garden of Gethsemane continues that argument. We need to be awake and we need to pray, when he is there with us, and even when he is not. Jesus is frustrated – angry even – I believe, not because the body is weak, for he surely knew that already. But I believe Jesus is angry at himself for not communicating one of his core messages in a way that his disciples could get it. (If you have ever been a teacher or a parent you know this kind of frustration!) He is at the *end* of his journey with them, and he is scared and angry that they may have missed a MAJOR point.

There are all these commandments, and all these rules in religion, but *Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. Love thy neighbor as thyself*. These are the most important commandments. Jesus' message was not to be caught up in the letter of the law so much that we miss the point. He taught about the rules of the Sabbath, what to do and what not to do. The Pharisees were all caught up with the rules – with the letter of the law – which lead to questions like:

- So, if you aren't supposed to work on the Sabbath, what do you do if your son or your Ox falls in a well? Do you not work to save them?
- If you are hungry, should you not fix yourself something to eat?
- Should Jesus heal on the Sabbath?

Just because something is complicated does not mean it has no value. Jesus did not intend for us to throw the Sabbath out completely! If we have not taken the time to rest and pray we will not be awake and able to see the opportunities to live out our values. We are not as likely to make a difference, or be fully present with those we love. Just like the disciples in that story. If we do not taken the time to rest and pray, we too – despite our best intentions – fall asleep. We too are only present in body, and not in spirit, during our most challenging and most important times.

Whether to save the ox, or to heal, or to pick wheat – those were the nuances of Jesus' time. For our time it might look like this: *How can I rest* when the house isn't clean, the laundry isn't done, and my project on Monday is due? *How can I keep a spiritual practice* when I work 50 hours a week, I have to get my kids off to school, and I don't even have time to read the paper? *How can I eat right* when I don't have time to cook, I only have 20 minutes for lunch, and the drive-thru is so convenient? *How can I possibly exercise* when I am already... so... tired?

I want to let you in on a little secret. Some is better than none. And it adds up. Taking Sabbath time – time to feed your soul – will actually give you more time, and more energy later. There seems to be an ideal in our culture that suggests if we can't do something 100% then it is not worth doing. I am here to profess to you today, that that is absolutely not true! 90% is FANTASTIC, 51% is pretty good, and heck, 20% is still better than none!

I remember the first time that I was struck with this blatant internalized perfectionism. I was running with a friend last year, training for a half marathon. We were slogging along on an eight or nine mile run, when she said something like, "I will never be very fast because I am not a runner."

There we were, up for the third time that week, at 6:00 am – running. And we were in the middle of running at that very instant. And she is not a runner? So does that make me not a runner?

I asked her, "Well if running three times a week doesn't make you a runner, what would? How many times do you have to run in a week to make you a runner? How many miles do you have to log?" I think judging by our behavior, we are runners! Especially compared to all the people who were still at home cozy in their beds that morning. But for some reason we like to compare ourselves to some imaginary eternally optimistic and happy-go-lucky Olympian. Or we have some cockamamie belief that we must enjoy every nanosecond of something in order to claim it – in order for it to count.

Here is another cat I am letting out of the bag. I really don't like to run. I like how I feel AFTER I have run. And in talking to fellow runners I have found many others who feel the same way. The practice of regularly showing up to run creates results that I like. And this applies to

many things in my life, and I bet yours as well. But when we deny our efforts and our progress – when we do not give ourselves credit for time logged, miles run, effort put out – we are more likely to quit altogether, after holding ourselves up to some standard that is completely unreasonable.

I used to be a vegetarian. For about three years, and in my conversation with my running buddy I said, “How many cheeseburgers would it take to make me not a vegetarian? Think about it. If I have one cheeseburger a year? Two?” It is interesting to pay attention to the tipping point when we no longer try to maintain our intention and just throw in the towel. Should we judge another person by their behavior the majority of the time or on a single instance? And how ought we judge ourselves?

My point (and I promise I have one) is this: find the time to take care of yourself. Make space for Sabbath, for exercise, for rest. Whether it is 10 minutes a day of quiet reflection, an hour of exercise that you have spread out throughout the day, or a 30 minute walk at lunch and maybe another before bed. Take time, even if it is only a minute, to breathe in deeply and give your soul a rest. Why? Because when you are called to do the *hard* work, all that time banked resting and in spiritual practice and in making a healthy you, will pay off when it really counts.

I want to share a small tool that I use, and that most of our Branches groups are using, to take what could be called a soul vacation, at any time throughout the day. At a stoplight, during a commercial, when you find your attention wandering away from a conversation, when you are distracted from someone speaking to you, even when you are listening to a sermon...

If you will indulge me a moment, I invite you to close your eyes. Take a couple of deep breaths. Now try to turn your attention inward to your own heartbeat. You might do this by putting your attention on your chest, or your pulse in your neck, or you might feel it in your ear. It takes practice for some. If you are having trouble, place your fingers on your pulse of your other wrist. This calming rhythm has been with you since long before you were born and will continue to beat until your last days on this earth. Putting your attention here plants you square in the moment – in your body. Now the trick is to open your eyes, still listen to what is going on around you, and toggle your attention between what you hear and your heartbeat. It is not necessarily easy, but when you find yourself distracted go back to your heartbeat.

This is a great tool to have thousands of mini-vacations, mini-sabbaticals – *little Sabbaths* – each day. So if you can't go to the beach, or take a week off, even if you can't take a whole day, you can take a moment. And those moments add up to a life – a life intentionally lived... *awake*.

Amen.