

## **Call to Worship**

By [Ian W. Riddell](#)

We gather today in the presence of the old old story of death defeated by emptiness, of hope and newness triumphant over fear and separation.

We come, hearts heavy with pain and anxiety, spirits flattened by exhaustion and apathy, vision darkened by strife and violence.

We come seeking connection and love in this place of community. May the old, old Easter story of hope and rebirth lighten our hearts and make us glad in the presence of each other's love.

May our spirits be joyful as we worship together today.

## **Chalice Lighting**

*I invite you to light a chalice at home if you have one nearby:*

I light this chalice; a single flame which I hope kindles many hearts this morning.

Let this flame unite us in virtual community and remind us of each other's presence as we worship from many singular rooms.

Let this flame inspire **in us** faith and courage to face these difficult times

Let this flame be our guide in making sense of a chaotic world, and let its light show us the way to beloved community both near and far.

## **Our Congregational Covenant**

Repeat after me:

Love is the spirit of this congregation and service is our aim.

To dwell together in peace and freedom,

to seek the truth,

and to help one another. These are our goals.

## **Joys and Concerns**

Now I will share the Joys and Concerns submitted to me this week:

- Joy and Concern from Joanne and Dan Kennedy: Our son Mike who was in an auto accident in December has returned to Delray Beach. On March 24th the neurosurgeon

gave him permission to go back to work. He went to work a few days later as a Home Health RN.

- Our brother in law's pacemaker surgery has been postponed until the end of the month. Day before yesterday he coughed all night. Today he is fine but doctor wasn't comfortable doing it now. Marilyn and Arden Dockter

### **Prayer**

Spirit of Life and Love Bless us this day

With the understanding that joy and woe are woven fine;

That whomsoever brings us tears also brings us great joy;

That the hours before dawn are often the darkest.

Spirit of Life and Love Bestow upon us the Peace which passes our understanding;

So that hope, faith, and love may fill our hearts and still our worrying minds,

Spirit of Life and Love, in this difficult time, bid us to strive for our best selves each day;

Let our striving be for justice, equity, and compassion in our human relations;

Inspire us to create beloved community in ever widening spheres.

Spirit of Life and Love we give thanks for this precious day and for all that is our life for we know that our life is a gift, freely given, unbidden, and unearned. We give joyous praise for this, our one precious life. Amen.

### **Hymn #123 Spirit of Life**

#### **Reading:**

From Rabbi Aaron Weininger.

Tonight will be the first time I will be alone for Seder, but I will not be lonely.

#### **Alone Tonight**

When I stay home tonight, I will be alone but not lonely.

For ancestors who left Egypt will be with me.

I feel their tears reach my eyes even as my hands can't do so freely.

When I stay home tonight, I will be alone but not lonely.

For family by birth and by choice will be with me.

I yearn for the commotion of Seders past while using Zoom technology.

When I stay home tonight, I will be alone but not lonely.  
For partners in abusive relationships will be with me.  
I realize staying home for them is painful even as it gives others safety.

When I stay home tonight, I will be alone but not lonely.  
For teens managing life in the closet will be with me.  
I believe in their power to live fully into who they are meant to be.

When I stay home tonight, I will be alone but not lonely.  
For kids (and their exhausted adults) will be with me.  
I imagine question upon question born out of beautiful curiosity.

When I stay home tonight, I will be alone but not lonely.  
For workers facing job instability will be with me.  
I recognize these uncertain times create a deep anxiety.

When I stay home tonight, I will be alone but not lonely.  
For those who have no home in which to stay will be with me.  
I know my words are inadequate unless my action matches to change reality.

When I stay home tonight, I will be alone but not lonely.  
For healthcare providers and chaplains will be with me.  
I pray for well-being, peace, and care to envelop them regularly.

When I stay home tonight, I will be alone but not lonely.  
For friends with illness of body and soul will be with me.  
I see their struggles for hope to bud, yearning for spring to revive each and every tree.

When I stay home tonight, I will be alone but not lonely.  
For I am with them and they are with me.  
I feel and yearn and realize and believe and imagine and recognize and know and pray and see.

Hope will fill my table, and may it give each of us a sense of being free.

**Homily – *Easter in the Time of COVID-19***

This month of April sees the observance of important holy days for all three of the Abrahamic religions: In Judaism, Passover; in Christianity, Easter; and in Islam, Ramadan.

Today, I feel honored and privileged as a Unitarian Universalist to be part of a pluralistic faith which looks to the world’s major religions for wisdom and inspiration. April 2020 seems an auspicious time to consider the three Abrahamic faiths most influential in our Western Culture. I want to also explore a few of the values, traditions, and beliefs common to each, and how the adherents of each religion are in a common struggle to redefine millennia-old observances in this time of social distancing and isolation. Let me start first with Judaism and Passover.

In Judaism, Passover commences the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the Jewish month of Nisan which translates to our Gregorian calendar as April 8<sup>th</sup>. Passover lasts until April 16<sup>th</sup>. Passover commemorates Moses leading his people out of servitude in Egypt. His people had been enslaved by Pharaoh. Yahweh, the God of the Israelites, spoke to Moses from a burning bush and told him to go to Egypt to free his people. Yahweh would help Moses. So Moses went to Pharaoh and said, “Let my people go.” Pharaoh refused whereupon a plague of water turned to blood was unleashed on the Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Moses went to Pharaoh, “Let my people go.” Pharaoh refused. Pharaoh was stubborn; he abided eight more plagues: frogs, gnats, flies, diseased livestock, boils, hail, locusts, and darkness. Nothing moved Pharaoh to comply. Then Yahweh told Moses that a plague of the death of all first-born males, including Pharaoh’s son, would be visited upon Egypt that night. Moses was to tell his people to take the blood of a spring lamb and smear it over their doorways so that they would be **passed over** by the plague. Moses also told his people to get ready to travel. He said make unleavened bread for there’s no time to let it rise. The lamb must be cooked and eaten before sunrise. The next day, Moses led his people out of Egypt and across the Red Sea and into the wilderness.

For a few millennia now, Jewish people all over the world have observed Passover with a dinner called a Seder. The hallmark of a Seder is the special foods served that represent events from the Passover night. For example, matzo, a cracker-like flat bread commemorating the unleavened bread which Moses directed his people to bake. Seders are usually attended by a number of people, relatives and friends of the host. Someone is asked to read or recite the story of the escape from Egypt and four questions pertaining to why certain foods are eaten at the Passover dinner are posed to the children. It is a time of togetherness, tradition, sharing, and celebration of Jewish identity. Passover in the time of COVID-19 has been, by necessity, a very different thing. The reading by Rabbi Weininger is poignant and moving as we imagine his Seder celebrated alone. My sister and her husband cooked a leg of lamb and shared a glass of wine over an abbreviated Seder. As they recalled the Passover story, my sister proclaimed the Corona Virus to be the 11<sup>th</sup> plague. Humor helps.

Today is Easter Sunday. **Easter** always occurs on the first Sunday after the first full Moon that follows the vernal equinox. (Remember that, there’ll be a test later.) Easter culminates Holy Week in the Christian Tradition. It began last Sunday, Palm Sunday which commemorates the day Jesus entered Jerusalem humbly riding a donkey as his followers laid a carpet of palm fronds before him. Jesus entered Jerusalem knowing he was going to die for sedition against the Roman occupiers of his land. Jesus was Jewish and he was a rabbi who preached a message of

divine love and hope to the most oppressed of his people. He gained a huge following, people loved him, and that’s what got him into trouble. The following Thursday he was still in Jerusalem and it happened to be Passover; Jesus and his disciples, all Jewish, celebrated with a Seder, also known as the Last Supper. That night, Jesus knew that one of his disciples, Judas had betrayed his whereabouts to the authorities. On Friday, Jesus was arrested and put to death by crucifixion. Because he died on the Jewish Sabbath, Jesus was quickly laid in a tomb by his followers; their intention was to return Sunday to prepare his body for a proper ceremonial burial. As this story is told in the Gospels, when his followers returned to the tomb on Sunday they found it empty. Jesus’ body was gone. Confused at first, his followers would come to see the empty tomb as a sign of triumph – a triumph of love, a triumph over death, and a triumph of hope which resisted the cruelty and oppression of Roman rule.

Holy Week is observed and Easter Sunday celebrated through special liturgies in Christian churches the world over. Most churches give Holy Communion; the communion wafer and grape juice represent the bread and wine which Jesus proclaimed at the Last Supper was to be consumed in memory of him; the bread he said was his body and the wine, his blood. Today, an Easter egg hunt might follow a church service and later families and friends might gather for a meal but the focus of observance is in church services. Traditionally, Easter has been a time of gathering and togetherness but this Easter, even the Vatican is holding a Virtual Mass. These are extraordinary times and many church leaders are learning that building-bound traditions carry meaning that transcends a physical space.

And in Islam, the month of **Ramadan** begins with the first new moon which translates to our calendar as April 23<sup>rd</sup> to May 23<sup>rd</sup>. The month of Ramadan is considered holy because it marks the time when the prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon Him) received his first revelation from Allah.

Muhammad was born in Mecca in 570 CE. He was orphaned as a child and raised by relatives. As an adult he became a merchant. In his time, much of the Arabian Peninsula was populated by warring tribes who were polytheistic and very cruel to each other. Muhammad as an Arab man of the time was said to have an unusual disposition – one of introspection and empathy. He often secluded himself in a nearby mountain cave to pray. One such time he was said to be visited by the angel Gabriel who began relaying to Muhammad messages from God. Muhammad came away with the revelation that God is One, Allah, and that complete devotion to Allah was the only fruitful path in life. Muhammed began preaching his revelation which didn’t go over well in polytheistic Mecca. Muhammad and his followers relocated to Medina where he would become an accomplished statesman and would eventually unite the warring tribes of the area. Some years later, having gathered followers in the tens of thousands, he marched back into Mecca where he met little resistance. By the time of his death, most of the Arabian Peninsula had converted to Islam.

According to Islamic doctrine Muhammad was a prophet in a line of prophets including Adam, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Muhammad is, however, believed by Muslims to be the last prophet bringing the last word of God. Muhammad brought to the Arab world and eventually the world over a monotheistic belief and a practice called the Five Pillars of Islam. The Five Pillars are 1) Profession of Faith; 2) Prayer; 3) Alms giving; 4) Fasting; and 5) Pilgrimage. Muslims are expected to show their faith to Allah by praying five times a day. They are expected to care for the underprivileged among them and give back to their community with a percentage their income. They are expected to fast during the month of Ramadan, and if possible, make one lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca.

Ramadan is the time every year that all Muslims are to be especially devoted to living out the Five Pillars. Their fasting is daily from sunup to sundown. They do not eat or drink anything. The practice is meant to purify the soul and give one a sense of empathy for those who suffer or go without. Each evening their fast is broken by a meal and each morning a meal before dawn is allowed. Muslims are exempt from fasting if they have any medical condition which would preclude it. Pregnant women are exempt from fasting. During Ramadan, late evening meals are a special time for gathering and being with friends and family. In addition, the evening meal is an opportunity to share abundance with those who are in need. For example, wealthy merchants are known to set up pavilions where the less privileged are invited to break their fast with the meal provided.

As you can guess, Ramadan in the time of COVID-19 will be vastly different. Mosques and other places of worship where Muslims usually come to pray daily during Ramadan will be closed. Breaking the fast at evening meals will be shared within households only. The traditional charitable hosting of evening meals will not happen. Like the Jewish and Christian observers of Holy Days, Muslims will adapt to stay-at-home orders; they will seek ways to connect with each other virtually and seek the meaning in their traditions within a new reality.

This month of April in the time of COVID-19 presents the Abrahamic religions with challenges but perhaps in the practical accommodations to the pandemic, we can also find shared experiences. I wonder how many other worship services this morning are addressing Judaism, Christianity, and Islam at once? How many will see the similarities between the prophets of each faith tradition as bringing a narrative of liberation to their people who suffer from enslavement, subjugation, oppression, and violence? Our rationalist minds may have trouble with a supernatural God in these foundational stories but I ask you to step back and consider the larger message – the message that through the ages there has been and always will be people behaving badly but for those who suffer at the hands of Pharaohs, Caesars, and Tribal Lords there is an arcing towards justice and love that says every person has worth and dignity, that we should all expect something better for ourselves, and that we should care about each other. In a sense, Jesus’ message of God’s unconditional love for all people and the hope symbolized by the empty tomb liberated the Jewish people just as Moses had led his people out of servitude in Egypt. And,

Muhammad’s message that Allah expects better of humankind had the effect of liberating his people from a warring and cruel culture.

Let this Passover, Easter, and Ramadan of 2020 remind us that solidarity in the effort to reduce the deadly effects of a killer virus unites us even as we celebrate and commemorate these Holy Days in isolation. Let us consider our commonalities and celebrate our differences. May we bring our best selves to a world in need of healing in this time of COVID 19.

### **Chalice Extinguishing**

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.

### **Benediction**

By [Joel Miller](#)

We all know loss and pain.

Let none of it divide us.

In the rising sun today

Let us do together what we cannot do alone:

Roll away the stones that close our hearts.