

A Free Faith?

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By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

A month or two ago I included in one of my sermons a critique of a reality TV show. Later someone came up to me and asked, quite seriously, “I like to watch Jeopardy, is that OK?” As if he needed my permission to watch the shows he did. Well since I have inadvertently set myself up as the arbiter of what you watch on television, this morning I thought I would direct you to something good rather than what to avoid.

My favorite thing to watch these days is actually coming back this week with new episodes. It is a show called “Flash Forward.” A flash forward is the opposite of a flashback. The premise of the show is that last fall, in October 2009 the entire world blacks out simultaneously for a little over two minutes. During those two minutes everyone has a vision of what they will be doing in April 2010; on the same day, at the same time. In essence, you see in the first episode of the season what all of the characters, whom you have just met, will be doing on the last episode of the season. The main character, an alcoholic who has been

sober for seven years, sees himself drinking again. A man whose daughter was a soldier, and who had been killed in Iraq two years before, sees her alive he is talking to her. A woman who is both single and gay sees herself five months pregnant getting an ultrasound. A man who is engaged to be married doesn't see anything, and later learns that he will be killed in March. The show follows the FBI as they try to figure out what caused the black out and who did it. They soon discover that the visions, or flash forwards as they are called, are consistent with each other. If you and I are talking to each other in our flash forward, then I saw you and you saw me, and we both agree that we were having the same conversation.

What this show raises, both for me and what it explores as the season plays out, is the nature of freedom. The characters are always wondering, are these visions true? Are they inevitable? Do I have the freedom to change the outcome of what I saw? Or what if by trying to change what I saw, I inadvertently move closer to it? A couple of times people have received gifts that were the clothes they were wearing in their flash forward, and so they throw them away. Or they try to avoid meeting the people they saw, only to become more intertwined with their lives. Or they seek out the people they saw in their flash forward only to just miss them. Like all good premises to science fiction, this one is really social or philosophical commentary: are we in any real sense free?

This is the same question that the Unitarian Universalist minister and theologian Forest Church is wrestling with in our reading this morning. Church dedicated an entire book of essays to this topic entitled Freedom from Fear, from which our reading is a small part. Freedom is at the cornerstone of Unitarian Universalism, and many would argue that freedom is UU's defining characteristic. We are a free faith. Unitarian Universalism begins with freedom from oppressive doctrine and overbearing church authority. No one tells us what to do or what to believe. But with the gift of freedom comes the responsibility of action. Our vision of the world as it should be, does not magically drop from the sky; we have to work to make it happen. One of the great lessons of Humanism is that no one does it for us simply by wishing it so. If we want to see a world transformed by love, connected in brotherhood and sisterhood, where we can explore our crazy theological ideas without prejudice or persecution, then we have to be very intentional and innovative in creating a church that allows for that. We all have to do our part, as our Long Range Plan puts it.

So in another sense you could say that we are NOT a free faith, if by that you mean that our faith is something cheap or easily acquired. Freedom demands, as Forest Church tells us, that we are active, and not reactive, with the choices we make in life. Active lives are intentional; one might call them proactive really. Unlike reactive lives, we cannot simply be on the defensive all the time, following the demands and

desires of others. Freedom means standing up for your values. Through our choices, our acts of freewill, we shape the future into something that begins to look like our compelling vision.

But the key to freedom is that you have to act. Freedom is freedom toward something; not merely freedom from the past. As a church we too make choices—choices that make a real difference in the lives of our community and in the lives of our members. These choices are not always easy. The important decisions in life rarely are easy. I suppose that is part of what makes them important in a way.

Last summer I had a difficult decision to make. At first all was going well. We hired a painter to come paint the exterior of the church and to repair some of the external woodwork. A nice little project to spruce up the building so that it looks nice for Ingathering in the fall. The painters started their work and they got to the main entryway, the area over the double doors where many of you probably entered the building this morning, and they stopped. They said, “The roof over that section is so rotten that we can’t put a guy on it because he would probably fall through.” Those of you who came to church last summer may remember the Buildings and Grounds Team showing off pieces of the rotten wood at a table during coffee hour. Fixing that roof, at least ten years of deferred maintenance, would be more than we bargained for or budgeted for. We have a savings account for such emergencies, but should we tap it so early in the year? Particularly given the high cost of

the project? It would be a lot of money to spend so early in a church year that had just gotten started. We received lots of advice and counsel, but the way we have it set up is that it came down to me giving this the green light or not. What made me say yes to spend the money, was when the contractor said, “You know, one really good snow this winter, and that roof comes down.” Imagine what could have been with the winter we have had this year. And that was without the benefit of a flash forward thank you very much!

Another example of how we choose to exercise our freedom even when it is tough came to me from my wife Sharon. A few weeks ago she was picking up our son Thomas from preschool. She got to talking with the mom of one of Thomas’ best friends in class. This mom knew what I did for a living and asked Sharon where we went to church. Sharon said, “First Unitarian.” “Oh,” this woman said, “that is the church with the sign, right?” I had to chuckle when I heard that story. If you have been around a couple of years you know the saga of the sign, and how difficult it was to get it up and working. One Sunday I even offered to go out there and start digging myself. But if you have joined the church in the last year or so, then you too perhaps knew us as the “church with the sign.” And as difficult and at times painful as that experience was for us, this anecdote shows that in the end the sign is effective. It is doing what we hoped it would do: a large number of

people gain at least a small awareness of who we are. Tough choices yield important results.

Now I could regale you with many other such vignettes, but what do they have in common? That when we make those tough choices, when we lead active lives and exercise our freedom, then we wind up making decisions that make a difference. What we choose to do matters because we put our money where our values are. Last month I did a sermon series on our new long range plan, “Renew at First U.” It is a bold vision for our church’s future with many bold choices to be made. We make those choices when we commit our resources to making them happen, and that means money.

Which brings us to today: Commitment Sunday. It reminds me of a story I heard, a true story I think, of a Unitarian Universalist minister who went to the beach. Like many New Englanders, this UU minister was vacationing one summer on the coast of Maine. As he was walking along the beach he stumbles across a lamp, and rubbing off the sand the obligatory genie emerges to grant him his wish. As I told you, this is a true story. “Ah so I get three wishes!” the minister said. “Well, not really,” says the genie, “Times are hard and my magical powers are not what they used be, so you only get one wish.” That is what I call a rough economy.

So the UU minister thinks a bit and says, “I have always been interested in Eastern religions and I would love to travel to India to study under some of the great masters there. But the reason I have never done it is because I hate to fly. So my wish is for a highway from here to India that I can just drive my car there.” The genie gives him a look of disgust. “What are you some kind of wise guy? I just told you my magical powers are limited. Let’s call that plan B; pick something else.”

So the Unitarian Universalist minister thinks a bit more. “Boy these genies get some attitude hanging out in those lamps for so long,” he thinks. But then an idea comes to him. “So I am a Unitarian Universalist minister and every year we do a pledge drive. It’s stressful, it’s a lot of work, and I just want it to be easy this year. So my wish is that every member in my church this year would tithe, they would give ten percent of their income to the church.” The genie considers this for a while and finally says, “So did you want that highway two lanes or four?”

Raising money for the mission of the church is an important thing to do. It can also stir up anxiety. But as Forest Church teaches us, freedom, our choices to lead a proactive life, are the primary way we overcome that fear. This year we have set a big goal because we have a big vision for ourselves to Renew at First U.

These are exciting times at First Unitarian Church. The warmth and energy here is amazing, especially this year. There are more and more people coming to church, not just here in the sanctuary but in our Religious Education program too. Coffee hour is a buzz every Sunday with people talking, energized by worship, bonding over snacks and visiting tables. Some of you may not know this, but in the Youth Center the kids get together after their Sunday school classes and have a similar fellowship time. We have heard from parents that their kids look forward to being with their friends after church as much going to their classes. Certainly last Sunday we saw how amazing our youth are—it is no accident that they have come up together in our religious education program. We have tons of energy right now.

With our new long range plan we have plenty of vision to go around too. We know where we will be going in the next five years, and if you have not read the pamphlet “Renew at First U” I urge you to do so. Some of the details of that plan which will be implemented next year: plans to increase publicity through a revised and expanded website that will take advantage of modern technology on the web. There is increased staff support for membership, leadership development, and religious education. And yes, there is even a plan to replenish that savings account that saved our roof at the eleventh hour, so that we don’t have to wait another ten years to take care of our building. Even things like the talent show last night and our new partnership with Canaan

Baptist church involves a lot of work by our staff who need to be compensated better than they are now.

So we have the energy, and we have the vision. To bring it all home, and make that vision a reality and ride our momentum into the future we need the resources to make it all happen. Will we do it? I don't know. Nothing I have just mentioned is guaranteed. I have not had a flash forward that reveals to me exactly what is in next year's budget. I don't know for sure that all of those great ideas will become reality. That is because the outcome is dependent on your freedom, on the choices you make. You have a choice to make today, one that will have important results and make a real difference. That choice is the number you fill in on your pledge card this morning in the Parish Hall after worship. As you think about that choice remember Forest Church's observation that "Fear goes with the grain, charting out the path of least resistance." Instead consider increasing that number 25% to ensure that our vision becomes reality and we are able to capitalize on this moment in our church's history.

This morning I am pleased to report to you that the Board and some of our lead givers have already made their choice and pledged prior to today. Collectively they have generously increased their pledge and we are already almost twenty percent toward our pledge goal. This is an excellent start, and we are very grateful for it. But remember it's not how you start but how you finish that counts.

Please make your pledge today. Otherwise you may hear from Bill “the Terminator” Hardam. We call Bill “the Terminator” because he keeps coming, and he absolutely will not stop until you have pledged! As Forest Church reminds us, fear seductively suggests that we put off for tomorrow what we can do today. But postponed anxiety multiplies. By pledging today you ensure that the Terminator will not be coming your way.

Finally I want to end by thanking all of you in advance for your generous pledge of support to First Unitarian Church. We are so very grateful to everyone who makes a pledge and contribution to the church; be it big or small. However you choose to exercise your freedom and generosity this morning, we thank you for making a contribution to our free faith. Amen Blessed Be.