

“Atonement and Icelanders: The Day They Locked the Doors at Gimli”
Interim Minister the Rev. Fran Dearman,

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with thanks to the Rev. Linda Weaver Horton, the Rev. Stefan Jonnasson, and the Rev. Wayne Arnason for their contributions, also to the editors and contributors to the new UU historical anthologies, “Burning Embers” and “Invisible Influences”. (see bibliography appended.)*

Iceland has always intrigued me, perhaps because my father was there, anchored in Hvalfjord, just outside Reykjavik, during the second world war. There they were, in a warship waiting for the Arctic Convoy to form up so they could escort it into Murmansk. Nothing much to do. So they go sailing! There’s a war on, but these young men, barely twenty, lower the lifeboat, hoist the sails, and go sailing in Hvalfjord, for sport. I love to think of my father having that good day. So when I hear of the old Icelandic Unitarian churches in places like Wynyard Saskatchewan and Gimli Manitoba, I am intrigued.

Iceland is where the world is being born, out of ice and fire, volcano and earthquake. Volcanoes erupt about every ten years or so. But the eruption of 1875 was especially harsh: the north-east quadrant of the island was covered in ash to about a metre in depth. Agriculture and grazing would not be possible for some time to come. And this time, this time there was somewhere to go. Canada and the United States wanted farmers to fill up the western plains. The Dakotas, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan were waiting. The Icelanders went.

They brought with them their pitifully sparse possessions. They brought with them their books, always books, for the long winter nights. And they brought a religious tradition of a broad church—a church with more room for diverse opinion than they were to find in the new world. Not all Icelanders became Unitarian or Universalist. But many did.

The first year in Manitoba was rough. The Sandybar settlement had the worst of it. Smallpox killed forty percent of the Icelandic immigrant community. They bore the isolation of quarantine. They suffered shortages of food and a cold cruel winter, colder than Iceland, where the Gulf Stream warms the northern waters. Only the friendship of the First Nations people brought them through, and taught them the skills for survival in the new geography. By 1891 the Icelanders had built their churches, churches where they could worship in their own language. However, the issues that had been held in tension within the broad church of the old country, erupted irreconcilably in the new world.

The Universalists, as a denomination, were too distant and too disorganized to scoop them up, although universal salvation was indeed the most significant issue in this conflict amongst the Icelandic immigrants.

The Icelanders foreign-ness, their strange names and incomprehensible language, did not endear them to Boston and the bigwigs of the American Unitarian Association.

But the Unitarian Postal Mission was there for them in Minnesota with open arms, and so the liberal Icelandic Lutherans found a denominational home with Unitarianism.

What were their issues?

There were questions concerning the authority of scripture, the nature of revelation, and the power of church hierarchy. Some Icelanders had been reading the New England Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson, and free-thinkers like Robert Ingersoll.

One specific question of burning import was the recognition of women as voting members of the church, and the entitlement of women to sit on vestry boards as church officers.

But the biggest single issue was hell and damnation.

I could speak of Stephan G. Stephansson, farmer and poet. I could speak of Margret Jonsdottir Benedictsson, who campaigned for women's suffrage. I could speak of Björn Pétursson, who broke trail through many a snowbound mile carrying liberal faith to the Manitoba Interlaken, and then to the city of Winnipeg. Or Jennie McCaine, who ran the Unitarian postal mission in Minnesota, and encouraged the evangelizing work of Björn Pétursson. Jennie admired the work and the man sufficient to follow Björn to Winnipeg, marry him, and with him bring forth the Icelandic Unitarian church in that city.

But today, Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week, one week away from Easter Sunday, I speak of Mágnus Skaptasson, Icelandic-born, whose Easter sermon of 1891 galvanized the New Iceland liberal Lutherans into an open affirmation of universal salvation.

The story goes like this: Magnus Skaptasson had completed the three years of his term as minister. It was time to re-up. Skaptasson said he'd only sign on for another term if he were no longer required to teach the doctrine of eternal and everlasting hellfire. He just could not do that anymore. Vestry said that was just fine by them, in fact they wouldn't want it any other way. And they made it article three of their constitution: "The eternal everlasting damnation it completely rejects".

Theirs was the majority opinion; however, the minority was a robust forty percent. Then folks started putting padlocks on church doors. In time, most of the Interlake churches became Unitarian, and Skaptasson eventually anchored the big church in the city of Winnipeg, following the death of Björn Pétursson.

Unitarian minister and historian Stefan Jonasson, fourth generation Icelandic Canadian, puts it this way:

Skaptason had come to North America to take charge of the scattered Lutheran parishes of the area known as “New Iceland” on the western shores of Lake Winnipeg.... In a dramatic Easter sermon in 1891, Skaptason rejected the Augsburg Confession, the creed of the Icelandic Lutheran Synod. He said that eternal damnation was contrary to the nature of a God who was the “eternal source of love.” He declared the holy scriptures to be the work of human hands, not the direct revelation of God. In the controversy that ensued, five out of the seven New Iceland congregations followed him out of the Lutheran Synod and into the formation of the Icelandic Free Church in America, which quickly affiliated with the American Unitarian Association (AUA).

[Words of Stefan Jonasson, from “Burning Embers” pp 132-33.]

The people who made these choices did so knowing that they might well lose their jobs or their customers, or be shunned by family and friends.

Stefan continues:

In the Easter Sermon, Skaptason explained why it was impossible for him to reconcile belief in God as a loving deity — a heavenly father — with the unforgiving doctrine of eternal damnation, since his experience of his own parents had taught him that they were sources of unconditional love. If human beings were capable of such love as this, then why not God?

[Words of Stefan Jonasson, from “Burning Embers” p 143.]

Let’s hear some of Skaptason’s Easter Sermon, as translated by the late Emil Gudmunson.

I began to doubt whether an all-good, all-merciful father was in reality so callous that he could not forgive his children, as earthly fathers forgive their children....

Where is God's love: eternal, immeasurable, all-embracing compassion? Compare such compassion with the compassion of humans, those ordinary and imperfect beings. Does a father not forgive his child if it has disobeyed?Would you not suppose, beloved friends, that God is equally just, compassionate, and merciful as humans?...

What an absurdity it is to consider God so incomplete, so vengeful, and so ignorant as to condemn the very divine self, when it is acknowledged that all humankind, each and every person, is created in the divine image..... that all...are the children of God!.... It is our belief and holy conviction that God has given us love in our hearts to palliate life's struggles, to bind us, one with another, to be able to experience the most blessed times in this world, when friend loves friend, when people love their Creator and Sovereign.

[Words of Magnus Skáptason, trans. V. Emil Gudmundson, from "Burning Embers" p 145.]

In 1891, Skáptason's rejection of eternal and everlasting hellfire was deemed radical and scandalous by some. Why would people be good, some asked, if they weren't afraid of hell? Where was divine justice, if all was love and forgiveness?

The liberal Icelanders were dirt-poor farmers and fishermen, but their spiritual lives were rich and deep. And generous. They put more stock in love than fear. Skaptason preached his "Break-Away" Sermon, also known as the Easter sermon, up and down the shores of Lake Winnipeg throughout Lent and Easter of 1891. Thanks to Emil Gudmundson's book, "The Icelandic Unitarian Connection", we have Skaptason's own words, in translation.

Here, Skaptason tells us what it feels like to choose universalism. He begins:

When I was a child ... I remember well what fright shot through me, when I thought about the condition of the souls of the damned, and all the pains that they were to endure throughout eternity. I thought about it during the day, I dreamt about it at night, about all those endless pains, which had been described to me so dreadfully.

When I matured, I began to find them slightly repulsive; I began to ask myself why an all-wise heavenly father must really punish us, his children, in this manner. Then I began to doubt whether an all-good, all-merciful Father was in reality so callous that he could not forgive his children, as earthly fathers forgive their children—something that I have seen and experienced personally.

Skaptason pursues the thought: how the various doctrines of salvation contradict one another; how they exclude those born before Christ; how they exclude millions of Muslims, Bhuddists and Brahmins; how they exclude innocent children who died unbaptized.

He asks himself how his God—a god of wisdom, might, and eternal love—might be reconciled with the painful and everlasting punishments ascribed to him. “Does a father not forgive his child if it has disobeyed? Does he not try over and over again, in every way, to lead it to righteousness?” ... “Would you not suppose, dear friends, that god is equally just, compassionate, and merciful as men?” “How can it then be that most of the universe ends up in eternal damnation? What an absurdity it is to consider God so incomplete, vengeful, and ignorant that He should condemn Himself, when it is acknowledged that all mankind, each and every person, is created in His image, whether a Greek or a Jew, Chinese or Black, Tartar or Indian where all acknowledge that all these are his children!”

Skaptason concludes that no person, and no god, could rest easy while a single soul was confined to eternal torment. He lifts up the holy as righteous and loving, embracing all from cradle to grave, a god that calls all to eternal bliss, a god gracious and near.

And the Icelanders had need of a god gracious and near. The early settlements knew hard times: poverty, famine, and epidemic. The god they could respect would offer, in the words of the universalist preacher John Murray, found in our hymnal (#704)—“not hell, but hope and courage; preach the kindness and everlasting love of God”. And that was the faith they chose, for the living of their truth.

I’m not so sure that they or I or any of us has an inside track on the universal integrity that holds the sum of things together. But what we choose to believe tells a lot about us. May we well remember those who have gone before; may we in our turn bring such love and courage to the living of our own times.

May it be so.

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I am most grateful to colleagues who shared their work and insights:

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The phrase “universal integrity” I have read in the work of Buckminster Fuller.

FD/fd Olinda April 2017.