

MUSIC: [Kaija Saariaho: Petals \(1988\)](#) (08:27 – audio)

Before Chalice Lighting

We kindle this chalice flame because there is darkness.
In our world, the shadows of injustice, oppression, hunger, and pain fill too many lives with gloom.
We light this small flame,
Not because it will vanquish all darkness,
But because it is a start;
Because rather than condemn the dark,
We have chosen to bring light.

After Chalice Lighting

The illumination of a candle is a sign of human mastery
- a reflection of our power to create, to control, and to destroy.
May this be a flame of humility
- that we may be aware of our recklessness.
May it be a flame of compassion
- encouraging us to bring light into darkness and spread warmth where cold prevails.
And may it be a flame of connection
- that we may recognise the great human family of which we are part.

HYMN: 194 – We light the flame (purple book)

SHORT STORY: The Fruit of Heaven

There was once a woman who had heard of the Fruit of Heaven. She coveted it. She asked a certain dervish, whom we shall call Sabar: 'How can I find this fruit, so that I may attain to immediate knowledge?' 'You would best be advised to study with me', said the dervish. 'But if you will not do so, you will have to travel resolutely and at times restlessly throughout the world.'

She left him and sought another, Arif the Wise One, and then found Hakim, the Sage, then Majzup the Mad, then Alim the Scientist, and many more She passed thirty years in her search. Finally, she came to a garden. There stood the Tree of Heaven, and from its branches hung the

bright Fruit of Heaven. Standing beside the Tree was Sabar, the First Dervish.

'Why did you not tell me when we first met that you were the Custodian of the Fruit of Heaven?' she asked him.' Because you would not then have believed me. Besides, the Tree produces fruit only once in thirty years and thirty days'.

BRIEF MEDITATION ON WOMEN: (Buddhism-inspired passage)

Sit with the breath and let the mind grow still.

Reflect with gratitude on the women who sustain life with wisdom, patience, and quiet courage.

See them not as roles or expectations, but as living beings walking the same path towards freedom.

Contemplate their joys and sorrows, their strength and vulnerability, and recognise these within yourself.

Let compassion arise for all women, for those who are honoured and those overlooked, for those who suffer and those who guide others with clarity.

Hold them in boundless loving-kindness, wishing: *May all women be safe, peaceful, and free from suffering.*

READING 1: Summing up the Christian Narrative about Women

God created both men and women in His own image and made them equal custodians of all His creation, but, because of their disobedience, God punished Adam and Eve and evicted them from the Garden of Eden. Eve's punishment was to suffer pain in childbirth and be ruled over by her husband.

Jesus broke with tradition and treated women in a much more egalitarian way than was normal in the society of that time. The early Christian churches followed Jesus' lead and gave women much higher status and more privileges than was common in the rest of the world. However, Paul and other Christian leaders continued to affirm the principle of a husband's family leadership and authority over his wife.

Christians disagree over whether this principle should apply in the modern world. Is the man's authority over his wife and family a great spiritual principle decreed by God for all time, or is it, like the Bible's teachings

about slavery, just a reflection of the realities of Biblical-era culture? Today, many Christians believe women should enjoy all the same rights and privileges as men. Other Christians, however, continue to advocate a secondary role for women based on Genesis 3:16 and other Bible passages.

READING 2: The Role of Women in Judaism by Rabbi Pinchos Fried

What is the role of women in Judaism? Of late, this has become a hot-button issue, something of a loaded topic. With passionate feminism coming up a lot, many point an accusing finger at Torah Judaism, claiming we are stuck with an outmoded perception of women at best, and a discriminatory, chauvinistic attitude at worst. (The fact that half of authentic Torah Judaism is made up of actual women, so many of whom are quite content with their beautiful lifestyle, often gets lost in the translation)

In truth, like with many subjects, there is a lot to discuss, and a lot of depth to explore. Giving a shallow and simplistic answer is not fair to us, not fair to our women, not fair to the Torah, and is simply a shame. And as the lucky husband of the most amazing wife (for real), and proud father of lovely girls (not to mention my dear sisters, with whom I once fought so lovingly, and now graciously forgive me... I think), this topic is especially meaningful to me.

**READING 3: On Women who Dream, p.113, by L. Annie Foerster
"For Praying Out Loud: Interfaith Prayers For Public Occasions"
(Edgar to bring a hard copy of this book – to be read by Sheila?)**

HYMN: 73 – If every woman in the world (purple book)

["If Every Woman in the World" Performed by the Community Church of New York Choir \(02:30 – video\)](#)

REFLECTIVE ADDRESS: A Unitarian Reflection on the Female Dimension as appears in Hebrew, Christian and Islamic Scriptures.

When we read the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, we often encounter them as great stories of prophets, kings, teachers and

patriarchs. Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Jesus and Muhammad naturally occupy much of our attention. Yet running alongside these familiar names is another story: the story of women whose courage, wisdom, faithfulness, suffering and leadership have helped to shape the religious traditions of millions.

From a Unitarian perspective, this female dimension is particularly worth exploring. We are not required to begin with the assumption that one tradition possesses the whole truth and the others possess only fragments of it. Instead, we can listen for wisdom wherever it appears, while bringing to our reading the values of conscience, reason, equality, compassion and human dignity. And when we do that, we discover some remarkable common threads.

Consider first the Hebrew Scriptures. One of the earliest women we encounter is Eve. She has often been portrayed in Christian tradition as the woman responsible for humanity's fall. Yet the Hebrew text itself is more complex. Eve is a seeker of knowledge, a human being confronted with moral choice and curiosity. The story can be read not simply as a warning about women, but as a profound reflection on freedom, responsibility and the human desire to understand.

Then there is Sarah, whose story is one of uncertainty, disappointment and unexpected hope. Her experience reminds us that the women within these scriptures are not merely passive figures supporting male heroes. Sarah laughs, questions and acts. Her life is entangled with the promises and failures of Abraham.

Miriam, the sister of Moses, provides an even clearer example of female leadership. She is a prophet and a leader in her own right. After the crossing of the Sea of Reeds, it is Miriam who leads the women in song and dance. The biblical tradition remembers her as one of the three great leaders of Israel, alongside Moses and Aaron.

And then there is Deborah: prophet, judge and military leader. In the Book of Judges, Deborah is not an exception who quietly remains in the background. She sits beneath her palm tree, hears disputes, gives counsel and summons Barak to battle. Her story challenges any simplistic assumption that biblical leadership was exclusively male.

Ruth offers another kind of strength. She is a foreign woman, a Moabite, who chooses loyalty to Naomi and becomes part of the story of Israel. Her famous declaration of solidarity is one of scripture's most moving

expressions of commitment. Ruth reminds us that belonging can be created through love and fidelity rather than ancestry alone.

Esther, meanwhile, uses her position and courage to protect her people. Her story is one of political wisdom, courage and responsibility. A woman who initially appears vulnerable becomes the person capable of changing the fate of an entire community.

The Christian Scriptures inherit these stories but introduce further women whose encounters with Jesus are strikingly significant. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is remembered for her response to the angel's announcement: she accepts a calling whose consequences she cannot possibly know. In the Gospel of Luke, her Magnificat is not merely a gentle mother's hymn. It is a song about justice, the lifting of the humble and the challenging of worldly power.

Then we meet Mary Magdalene. She becomes one of the most important witnesses to the resurrection. In John's Gospel, the risen Jesus appears to her and entrusts her with the message to the disciples. She is, in effect, an apostle to the apostles: the first bearer of the resurrection message.

Jesus also repeatedly crosses the social boundaries of his time in his encounters with women. He speaks publicly with the Samaritan woman at the well. He takes her questions seriously and engages her in theological conversation. In a culture in which gender, ethnicity and religious identity could divide people, this encounter becomes a meeting across boundaries.

We also encounter Martha and Mary of Bethany. Martha is sometimes unfairly remembered as the woman who was "too busy" while Mary is praised for listening; but perhaps the deeper message is that women, too, are theological participants: questioning, learning, listening and engaging with Jesus as intellectual and spiritual equals.

Islamic scripture offers another rich female dimension. The Qur'an speaks of women with a directness that deserves attention. Maryam — Mary, the mother of Jesus — is especially significant. Indeed, she is the only woman named explicitly by name in the Qur'an, and an entire chapter, Surah Maryam, bears her name. She is presented as a woman of exceptional devotion, chosen by God and honoured among women.

The Qur'anic Maryam is not simply an accessory to a male religious story. She experiences fear, isolation and physical suffering, yet she becomes the mother of Isa, Jesus, through an extraordinary act of God. Her story

connects Islam directly with Christianity and, through the earlier biblical tradition, with Judaism.

The Qur'an also recalls the wife of Pharaoh as an example of faith. While Pharaoh represents tyranny, his wife is remembered as someone who believes despite living within the household of the oppressor. Her story makes a powerful point: our moral identity need not be determined by the family, society or political system into which we are born.

The mother of Moses is another important figure. Faced with the terrifying command of Pharaoh against infant boys, she places her trust in God and puts her child into the river, ultimately leading to Moses's survival. Her courage is the beginning of the story of liberation.

And then there is the Queen of Sheba, known in the Qur'an as the woman who rules a kingdom. She is not depicted simply as foolish or morally inferior because she is a woman. She observes, consults, considers evidence and makes a political decision. Her encounter with Solomon becomes a story about wisdom, discernment and recognition of truth.

What, then, can a Unitarian perspective draw from these traditions?

Perhaps the first common thread is that women are repeatedly portrayed as people who make choices. Eve chooses. Sarah questions. Miriam leads. Deborah judges. Ruth commits herself. Esther acts. Mary accepts a calling. Mary Magdalene bears witness. The Samaritan woman engages in theological conversation. Maryam perseveres. The wife of Pharaoh chooses faith over conformity. The mother of Moses acts courageously. The Queen of Sheba thinks, questions and decides.

The second common thread is the importance of conscience. These women often stand at moments when obedience to convention conflicts with a deeper moral or spiritual calling. Their stories invite us to ask: What does it mean to listen to the voice of conscience? When should we challenge power? When should we cross boundaries?

The third is human dignity. These scriptures emerged in societies very different from our own, and we should not pretend that they are modern feminist texts. There are passages in all three traditions that have been interpreted in ways that restrict women; but alongside those passages are stories that preserve the voices of women who are courageous, intelligent, faithful and morally decisive.

As Unitarians, perhaps we can hold both truths together. We can acknowledge the historical limitations of scripture without dismissing its wisdom. We can honour tradition without becoming prisoners of tradition. We can read critically without reading cynically. And perhaps there is a final common thread: the sacred is encountered through human lives.

God — however each of us may understand that word — is not revealed only through kings and prophets, teachers and warriors. The sacred is also revealed through mothers, daughters, widows, queens, refugees, outsiders, disciples and witnesses.

The women of Jewish, Christian and Islamic scripture, therefore, invite us into a wider understanding of religious experience. They remind us that revelation is not simply something spoken from above; it is something lived through courage, compassion, questioning and action.

For a Unitarian community, that may be one of the most valuable lessons of all. We need not erase the differences between Judaism, Christianity and Islam in order to find common ground. Indeed, genuine dialogue begins when we respect those differences while listening carefully for shared human wisdom.

When we place Eve beside Maryam, Miriam beside Mary Magdalene, Deborah beside the Queen of Sheba, Ruth beside the Samaritan woman, we discover not identical stories but resonant ones. Women in these traditions have asked questions, crossed boundaries, resisted oppression, nurtured life, carried faith through uncertainty and spoken truth to power.

Their stories belong not only to women. They belong to all of us, and perhaps our task today is not merely to admire these women of scripture, but to ask what their courage requires of us.

Whose voice are we still failing to hear?

Whose dignity are we still failing to recognise?

Where do we need the courage to question?

Where do we need the wisdom to listen?

And where might we, like the women in these ancient stories, discover that the sacred is calling us to become agents of compassion, justice and hope? That, I believe, is a conversation worth continuing — across faiths, across generations, and across the boundaries that so often separate human beings from one another. Amen. So be it.

MUSIC: Francis Poulenc – Villanelle (2:12 – video) [Francis Poulenc - 'Villanelle' \(Clarinet and Piano\)](#)

The Magnificat – The Prayer of Mary (to be read by Ann Kader?)

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour
for he has looked with favour on his lowly servant.
From this day all generations will call me blessed:
the Almighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his Name.

He has mercy on those who fear him
in every generation.
He has shown the strength of his arm,
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.

He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
and has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.

He has come to the help of his servant Israel
for he remembered his promise of mercy,
the promise he made to our fathers,
to Abraham and his children forever.

HYMN: 146 – Speaking truth in love (purple book)

POETRY (to be read by Dr Christine Avery?)

Mirror by Sylvia Plath

I love this one, but it hurts.

Mirror

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
Whatever you see I swallow immediately
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
I am not cruel, only truthful---
The eye of a little god, four-cornered.
Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
I think it is a part of my heart. But it flickers.
Faces and darkness separate us over and over.
Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
Searching my reaches for what she really is.
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.
She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.
I am important to her. She comes and goes.
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

Closing Words

We are blessed with an abundance of good things for we which we are truly thankful, as long as we remember them.
We are privileged with great freedom and power, for which in return we act with responsibility.
We are lucky to have shared this time and space together, because we are lucky to have each other.
May the spirit of this place and these friends go with us into the busy city!

MUSIC: Georges Bizet – The Pearl Fishers, 'Au font du temple saint' (excerpt) – (6:16 – video) [Andrea Bocelli and Bryn Terfel: Au Fond Du Temple Saint - from Bizet's Les pêcheurs de perles \(HD\) - YouTube](#)

ANNOUNCEMENTS by Sheila

ORDER OF SERVICE

MUSIC: Edward Elgar – Elegy for Strings, Opus 58 (4:42 – audio)
[Edward Elgar - Elegy for string orchestra Op. 58 \(audio + sheet music\)](#)

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SHORT STORY

BRIEF MEDITATION ON WOMEN

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READING 2

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