

“Top 10 Religious Stories of 2011”

We begin by taking a deep breath. Breathe in, breathe out.

And now repeat after me these words Maureen read for us earlier:

“They don’t publish the good news.” (repeat)

“The good news is published by us.” (repeat)

“Leave behind the world of sorrow.” (repeat)

“The good news is that you can do it.” (repeat)

“We have a special edition every moment...” (repeat)

“and we need to read it.” (repeat)

“The good news is that you are alive.” (repeat)

And with these reminders in mind,

Let us dive in together into these headlines of 2011,

My selection of the top religious news stories of the past year.

I’m ready. Are you ready? Are you comfortable in your

Uncomfortable pews? Here we go.

10) In the form of a question: **Who is Lobsang Sangay?**

Answer: Lobsang Sangay is a graduate of Harvard,

And like many of us he has never visited Tibet,

But unlike any of us he also Tibet’s new Prime Minister in exile,

A title he gained only after none other than the Dalai Lama

Stepped down in August from his political leadership

Of the Tibetan Exile movement.

The Dalai Lama, who is 76 and is 14th in a line of men said to be

the reincarnation of the Buddhist god of compassion,

Said he needed to resign because he feared chaos would erupt after his

Eventual death, when the Chinese government and Buddhist monks

Are certain to argue over the identity of his successor.

This year China has cracked down more than ever before on

The independence-seeking Tibetans,
 Not even allowing the Buddhist monks there
 to celebrate the Dalai Lama's birthday.
 In response to this crackdown,
 members of the UN drafted a resolution in protest.
 More dramatically and tragically,
 9 monks and 1 nun committed an ancient Buddhist practice known as Sati,
 or self-immolation, as a symbol of defiance; all of them died.

The story reminds me how domesticated and caricatured my views
 Of Buddhism are;
 how behind the Dalai Lama's beatific smile and Hollywood popularity
 There live desperate people willing to commit desperate acts
 In response to a potent mix of repression and religiously-endorsed self-violence.
 It also affirmed my belief in two kinds of freedom –
 the freedom we need to choose our politics,
 and the freedom we need to reject any religious message that calls us harm
 Others or ourselves.

9) **The Gift of Christopher Hitchens**

Chris Hitchens, who died of esophageal cancer this December,
 probably needs no introduction, but that won't stop me:
 He was British, he was an acerbic essayist, he was brilliant,
 he was an unapologetic connoisseur of Scotch and cigarettes,
 And, most famously, he was a militant atheist
 who once dismissed Mother Teresa
 As a "*fanatic, a fundamentalist, and a fraud,*"
 and called the late Jerry Falwell an "*ugly little Charlatan,*"
 saying "*it's a pity there isn't a hell for him to go to.*"
 Tell how us you really feel, Chris.

It was because of language like this that I paid him no attention,

Believing then and believing still that he could be as militant
 And fundamentalist as those he criticized.
 But he opened my heart when I listened to an interview he did
 With Rev. Marilyn Sewell, a now retired UU minister,
 Not long after he announced his terminal cancer.
 In it he spoke of the Anglican orthodoxy that informed his atheism,
 How early on he was unwilling to accept the large and small
 Actions carried out in God's name.
 And he also spoke in that interview,
 given not six months before his death,
 How knowing we're going to die gives us a lot to think about,
 And how all of us, including him,
 have a need for the 'transcendent' or the 'numinous'
 That comes out in love and music, poetry and landscape.

That might be a religious impulse you're talking about, said Marilyn.
Absolutely not; it's a human one, he fired back.
 But his gift was just that – an unwillingness to divorce
 Religion from rational criticism, and, in the end,
 An openness to language that those of us in robes use all the time.
 Christopher Hitchens, praise.

8) **The Politics of a Person**

Over the summer GOP candidate Mitt Romney provoked the incredulity of many
 When he defended his pro-business record by saying: *Corporations*
are people, too.
 Leading one columnist to write: *I'll believe corporations are people*
When they hang one in Texas.
 Several months later in Mississippi, the Personhood Initiative,
 Which would have outlawed abortion by declaring a fertilized egg
 A person, is soundly defeated – this despite that the law enjoyed the support
 Of both political parties and both candidates for governor.

Opponents were worried the law could have all kinds of unintended
 Consequences, including the criminalization of birth control,
 In vitro fertilization,
 And the forcing of doctors to decline pregnant cancer patients with chemotherapy
 For fear of legal percussions.

Meanwhile, on October 30th
 Danica May Camacho was delivered just before midnight
 In a packed government hospital in the Philippines.
 Weighing 5.5lbs, Danica was chosen by the UN to be the child
 Symbolically representing the world's 7 billionth person on earth.
 In our faith we say we affirm the worth and dignity of every person.
 So I'll leave it to you to decide how you think that affirmation applies
 In these three instances – corporations, fertilized egg, or Danica.

7) **KJV turns 400.**

If you don't know what KJV stands for maybe it would help if
 I told you that without it we wouldn't have such phrases in our
 Common lexicon as:

*“eat, drink and be merry; the apple of his eye; an eye for an eye;
 Fight the good fight; can a leopard change his spots?;
 am I my brother's keeper?; salt of the earth; see through a glass darkly;
 how the mighty have fallen; with the skin of my teeth.”*

Can you guess now?

KJV stands for the King James Version of the Bible,
 And this year the Bible that King James had published to unify
 The English-speaking Protestant Christians turned 400 years-old.
 Created by groups of scholars,
 Preachers and poets from both Puritan and Anglican camps
 Working side-by-side for over six years (!),
 the King James Version
 Is often called a “masterpiece by committee.”

The version clearly does not enjoy the popularity it once had,
 But in order to understand some of the key figures and speeches
 Of the last few hundred years, one needs to know the old standard.
 To take just one example,
 Why would Abraham Lincoln begin the Gettysburg Address
 With the phrase, “Four score and seven years ago...?”
 A phrase that occurs in King James.
 Surely he knew that Americans didn’t talk that way in 1863.
 But Lincoln did know he was speaking to a people divided by civil war –
 But one who shared the same King James Version of the Bible.
 Do yourself a favor and take up a copy of the KJV this year.
 It is scripture in the form of poetry.

6) Its the end of the world as we know it, and we feel fine.

Go back with me to last May,
 The afternoons are warm, the flowers are in bloom, summer is nigh,
 And, of course, apocalypse is in the air.
 Why?
 Because Harold Camping, an elderly man with a drawling voice
 Heard most prominently on his Family Radio empire,
 Predicted that on May 21st the world would end and God would judge
 The living and the dead.
 Some people left jobs. Families prepared to be raptured.
 And as the clock ticked down, the entire world held it’s collective
 Unbelieving breath.
 And then time went on, and oddly a little disappointed, so did we.
 In late May Mr. Camping said his calculations were off by five months,
 Moving the Judgment Day to Oct.21st.
 Again, no dice (or more accurately, no death).

It’s too easy and frankly a little unseemly to give this man and

His message such attention, which is why I haven't until now,
 But it's worth pointing out how captivated we seem with
 With this idea of apocalypse, a word that means literally 'to unveil,'
 Or 'to reveal.'

We may debunk Camping's call to repent, repent, repent in time for
 Judgment Day, but the call to 'change or die' is one we hear from
 A range of movements, including some environmentalist groups
 And political organizations.

My discomfort with the apocalypse message in any form
 Is that it seeks to motivate people with threats and fear,
 And it seeks to cast a black and white vision in which
 'those who are not for us are against us.'

Does my discomfort mean I will be Left Behind when the Rapture
 Comes, however it comes?

Probably.

5) **Tebo Genuflects and Love Wins**

If I knew that playing football could have advanced my career
 As a religious professional, I would have stayed with the try-outs
 In high school instead of taking all those religion classes.

That's what Tim Tebow did, the Denver Broncos quarterback
 Whose throwing style and trademark bended knee public prayers
 Have helped him achieve unprecedented fame this year.

His book "*Through My Eyes*" has become the top-selling religious
 Book of the year, outpacing even my own collected book of sermons!
 Who would have thought?

Meanwhile, Rob Bell, a thirty-something evangelical preacher
 Who wears hip glasses and preaches in Gap skinny jeans to his
 Congregation of 10,000 in Michigan every weekend,
 Caused a nearly apocalyptic storm in the evangelical world
 This year when he published his work, modestly titled:

*“Love Wins: Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person
Who Ever Lived”*

The book’s sales have experienced a meteoric rise, rivaled
Only by Tebow, mainly because people have resonated so much
With Bell’s principle claim that in the end love wins
And all people will be reconciled with God.
Now, if this message sounds familiar to you....it should,
Because it is also the principle claim of the Universalist
Side of our faith.

Will you allow me a moment of pettiness when I say:

“Hang on a second Rob Bell; we have copy writes on that message!”

And, with the resonance of Rob’s message in mind, will you allow
Me to remind us how important it is to get past our discomfort with
Proclaiming our faith and let people know that we too, proclaim
A faith where Love Wins...and that in fact, we thought of it first!”

4) I’ve got Mormon on My Mind, and I’m not alone

The public affairs department of the Church of Jesus Christ
Of Latter-day Saints recently noted an uptick in the media’s use
Of the word “cult” to describe Mormonism,
Even in notable publications such as the New York Times and
The Economist.

It is probably not coincidental that two Mormons, Mitt Romney
And Jon Huntsman, are running for President.

Both men’s campaign has led a frenzy of discussion about what it
Means to be a Mormon in politics.

The fact that Romney

Was governor of Massachusetts, Huntsman was governor of Utah,
And that Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid is also Mormon
Doesn’t seem to stop the endless punditry and suspicion.

Who would have that the evangelical religious right and the secular left
Would unite together in being so dismissive of this faith tradition,

Seemingly forgetting the ideals of religious freedom and tolerance
 That our hallmarks of our democracy.
 Odd, disturbing side-fact: Mormons are third most hated religious group
 In America, after Muslims and (surprise) Buddhists.

Meanwhile, the Book of Mormon – the musical, not the book – wins 9 Tony
 Awards and becomes one of the most honored productions in Broadway history.
 Written by the creators of South Park, the show was rave reviews for its
 Humor, but also for its sweet, heartfelt music.
 The Church of Latter Day Saints embraced it, wise to the wisdom
 That almost any publicity is good publicity.

Knowing that suspicion of any minority religion decreases when
 People have personal interactions or friends with members of those religions,
 A challenge to us 2012: find someone who is Mormon, and show curiosity
 And interest in them and their faith (just as we would like someone to do
 With us and our UU faith).

3) Religious Response to Osama Bin Laden's Death and the tenth Anniversary of September 11th

After President Obama announced that al-Qaeda leader Osama
 Bin Laden had been shot dead in Pakistan, ebullient crowds
 Gathered outside the White House and at Ground Zero to cheer
 The demise of the world's most wanted terrorist, smoking cigars
 And breaking into chest-thumping chants of "USA! USA!"
 For some Americans, bin Laden's death was literally an answer to prayer.
 However, the official religious response was heartening and wise.
 The Vatican replied: *A Christian never rejoices in the death of any man,
 No matter how evil.*
 Jewish leaders quoted the prophet Ezekiel, saying: *"God takes no pleasure
 In the death of wicked people, preferring only they turn from their wicked ways
 So they can live."*

And our own denomination's website posted: *"even as we mourn the death Of thousands, we do not celebrate the death of any human being."*

Still, without apology I believe we can all acknowledge that we sleep better Knowing that Bin Laden is no longer a threat.

And as an aside: 2/3 of Americans believe Bin Laden is in hell.

It is a test of our Universalist faith to ask if we agree with them.

Several months after Bin Laden's death I joined clergy across the country and the world

In memorials of the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks,
All of us confronting again the question: *What kind of God would allow this?*
And How can we transform fear, panic, and horror into rescue, outreach, And resilience.

The most meaningful response I heard came from a Rabbi whose congregation Is only blocks from Ground zero – *"Sometimes something is so tragic, There aren't words. In this case silence is a fence protecting wisdom."*

2) The Muslims are coming; the Muslims are coming.

These are the facts: the U.S. Muslim population is expected to More than double over the next twenty years, from 2.6 million today to more than 6.2 million in 2030.

In the rest of the world, the Muslim population will increase By 35% to 2.2 billion in 2030.

And if current trends continue, Muslims will make up 26.4 percent Of the world's total projected population in twenty years.

In response to these numbers, what one US politician described As the "Muslim Menace,"

Several states across the country proposed and passed 'anti-sharia' laws, this despite the fact that no state has ever had any pending laws Advocating for sharia law.

Fueled by cynical politicians and well-funded think tanks,

There is an effort in this country to imply that anything Islamic
Is inherently un-American.

This point was driven home only recently when the home improvement
Store Lowe's decided to pull their advertising on the TLC series
All American Muslim after the conservative Florida Family
Association complained that the show sugarcoats Islam.

Which makes me wonder: maybe we should boycott the Florida Family Association because
they weapon-ize Christianity.

In any event, Muslims across the country issued a boycott of the Lowe's,
Something I have joined them in.

And just to say it plain and clear and for the record
Using my best preacher voice: Bigotry and bias is un-American;
religions that we may be uncomfortable or unfamiliar with are not.

1) And for my number one religious story of 2011, one that some of you
Of you will disagree with and others will praise,
Which means that I am in the sweet spot that is the middle,
Feeling the squeeze, and loving it,
I offer a hint by asking:
What do you think has been the most 'Googled' word in 2011:
Steve Jobs? No.
St. Louis Cardinals World Series Champs (my team)? No.

Would you believe the most Googled word has been: **"Occupy"**
As in Occupy Wallstreet, Occupy Boston, **Occupy your faith.**
The religious engagement of the Occupy Movement is my
Number one story for two reasons:

1) Because the issues it has raised, primarily around the themes
The opportunity inequality, the income gap, and the needs of those
At the economic bottom of our society
Are religious issues as much as if not more than they are political issues.
And that is because the principles of our faith, and every faith,
Are to stand up for those who do not have a voice,

to give to those in need,
And to bear witness.

2) The second reason this is my number one story is for the ways in which
This movement and how to respond to the issues it raises
has sparked much discussion in our own congregation,
some of it heated, impassioned, and marked by disagreement.
It has, in a word, been fascinating...and a little, just a little stressful...
As we have lived in the tension between wanting to stand up for causes
We believe in, on the one hand,
And sought to honor our covenantal theology which says that we all not need
To think alike to love alike, on the other hand.
Some of you have come to me, asking: *Nathan, are you worried*
That our lovely and warm and generous-in-spirit congregation
Could be disrupted by the disagreement?
And my answer has been and still is an emphatic 'no,'
because I believe if we can't in this church bring together
people of different perspectives, different theologies,
different political beliefs, then where can we?
Just like relationship, the test of healthy community is not whether or not
We disagree; it is HOW we disagree that matters;
Is there humility? Is there listening? Is there forgiveness?

In the end I will repeat what I said to the group on our Occupy email
List here at church:
How as we engage in this work of asking what is fair? What is just,
I am reminded of the notion that one of the greater sins there is
(if we want to use that word sin) is indifference to the pain we see in the world.
And the fact that all of you care enough to care about all these big, complex
Issues is a testimony to you and to this faith we all share.

In this, my 9th year with you, this year of energy and purpose and big issues,

I remain honored to share this ministry with you.

Here's to a 2012 that is low on cynicism,

high on perspective,

Generous with hope,

Compassionate to a fault, quick with laughter, slow to anger,

Rich with second, and third and fourth chances,

wealthy with forgiveness,

blessed with acceptance for what we cannot change,

soaked in courage for what we can give,

and, finally (most importantly) sprinkled with love.

Amen