

“Top Ten Religious News Stories of 2012”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, my favorite Unitarian,

Says that: *‘to be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else....*

Is the greatest accomplishment.’”

And here, standing with you on the hinge of a new year –

looking behind us at the year past, and looking ahead to the waiting time –

The question we’re asking is: okay Ralph, but how do we do that?

How do we nurture that person we want to be (and I’ll just list

Some of the qualities I want; you can fill in yours)

– hopeful, light, passionate, serious but not intense,

Playful but not carefree, forgiving, never cynical –

In a world that tempts so frequently away from being our best selves.

We may not believe here in original sin or that all things happen for a reason,

but sometimes when we review the headlines of the year, as we do today,

We can be forgiven our questions about how to explain it all.

But as we will see – all is not lost and all is not broken –

Because sometimes the question of how remain hope-filled

And sing *“it is good, so very good”* at creation depends entirely

On how and where we look.

The longer I am a minister the more I think that religion is not about believing; religion is about a way seeing.

So, with it, here are my top religious stories of 2012,

Deep breath in; deep breath out, and let us meet together...

10) *The brave kid who stood up against hate*

We don't know this kid, but in the picture I saw he is standing at the end of a long line of people holding

Signs along some road in some American city.

All of those of those people are holding all these signs, and forgive

Me for even saying this out loud in our pulpit, but all those signs read:

"God hates fags"

And do you know what this kid is doing?

In a t-shirt that reads "y'all vote" he is holding up his school notebook,

On a page he has obviously just turned to and written on, that reads

In defiant contrast: *"God hates no one"*

I hope we have been paying, we the church and we the religious denomination,

That has worked on this social justice issue longer and harder than probably any other,

But 2012 saw remarkable advances for Lesbian, Gay, bi-sexual, and transgender rights

In the US, as well as in Europe.

President Obama cited his Christian faith in support of gay marriage,

Voters in Maine, Washington, and Maryland made steps to legalize gay marriage,

Voters in Wisconsin elected the first ever openly gay person to the Senate,

Voters in Arizona elected the first ever openly bi-sexual person to Congress,

Presbyterians passed resolutions that paved the way for gay marriages in their church,

And Muslims saw the rise of gay friendly mosques in Paris and Washington DC.

At the same time, the Vatican stepped up again its anti-gay rhetoric and Uganda (encouraged by some American evangelicals) continues to try to pass a bill making Homosexuality a capital crime.

With one step back comes two steps forward and the arc of the universe, I believe, Will eventually bend towards justice for LGBT people.

9) The Mormon Moment That Wasn't

Perhaps what was most striking about the 2012 election – at least to me –

Was how silent Mitt Romney went on his faith, perhaps because he thought

It wasn't going to help him much.

This from a man who whatever you believe about him, surely loves his church

And has devoted significant portions of his time, talent and wealth to help nurture it.

During the primaries, leading evangelicals worried about the ‘cult’ of Mormonism,

But after he became the Republican candidate, Christians on the right decided his faith

Wasn’t that bad after all and scrubbed cult from their rhetoric and websites, Proving as one reporter put it, that politics nearly always trumps theology.

In the end, Mitt’s Mormonism was talked about a lot but mattered little.

A recent Pew poll showed that 82 percent of people learned little or nothing about the

Mormon faith during Romney’s presidential bid.

Should we have learned more? Does a politician’s religious beliefs matter?

Is Romney’s hunch that his beliefs would be met with suspicion and prejudice

Correct? What does that say about us?....are good questions to ask.

Meanwhile, and on a somewhat similar theme, the 2012 election made history when

Tulsi Gabbard became the first Hindu elected to the House,

And Mazie Hirono became the first Buddhist elected to the Senate, both from Hawaii.

Gabbard just took her oath of office over the Bhagavad Gita, marking another first.

Religious diversity – we're getting there. Still waiting for a Unitarian Universalist...

8) Cosmic Insignificance?

In August Curiosity, a roving laboratory a little bit smaller than my Mazda

Landed on a nice, flat surface and beamed the first ever grainy images of Mars –

We saw Martian gravel, a mountain sunset, and images of its white-knuckle plunge
Through the red planet's atmosphere.

Meanwhile, scientists using NASA's Kepler Space Telescope

(anyone get one of those for Christmas?)

Discovered that our Milky Way Galaxy, which is only one of 200 billion,
Contains at least 100 billion planets.

Someone will do the math for me during the rest of the sermon and tell me in

The receiving line

But let's just say that in the entire universe that makes for what kids might describe
as

'OMG – a lot of planets!'

And meanwhile, scientists using the Hubble Space Telescope have confirmed
That the universe is still expanding.

As amazing as all that is, what's even more astonishing is the fact that we can
know any

Of this at all.

The universe obeys rules, and by doing so reveals those rules to us.

We just have to be smart enough to investigate them and learn about them.

And we ARE that smart.

Against this incredible cosmic tableau, the reality of our being human either becomes

Infinitely meaningless or infinitely wonderful and precious and extraordinary.

I vote for the latter, thinking of that Star Trek quote as I do so:

*Let us explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations,
to boldly go where no man has gone before.*

7) *Revolt of the Nuns*

Having gone to Catholic School all my life,

Having messed, in particular, with Sister Antonio in the 3rd grade

And paid dearly for it,

I and countless other folks could have told the Vatican not to pick a fight

With these self-determined, independent, strong women,

But that's what it did when it criticized the largest association of U.S. nuns

For allowing 'radical feminist themes' to permeate its meetings.

At the same time the Holy See took on Yale Divinity School prof. Margaret Farley,

also a nun, by denouncing her book "*Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual*

Ethics” for the way it condones divorce, homosexuality, masturbation, and non-procreative

Intercourse.

Well, what were you expecting Margaret, really?

Her book, which up until all this attention was obscure and hardly read, shot to the top of the Amazon best-seller list.

The Pope was heard to say: *well, that totally failed.*

Meanwhile, just as the Catholic Bishops were warming up their opposition to health care

Legislation mandating contraception (remember that?),

A whole bunch of nuns were warming up a bus on Wisconsin,

A bus emblazoned with letters that read: “Nuns on a Bus”

To begin a nine state tour across the Midwest in an effort to highlight cuts

Made to safety net programs contained in the House Republican budget authored

By Rep. Paul Ryan, himself an outspoken Catholic.

Along the way, the nuns stopped at food pantries, shelters, school, and hospitals

To point out the impact of the cuts, including visits to the offices of the ten

Elected officials who voted for the budget, including Speaker John Boehner,

Another outspoken Catholic, reminding them that the budget contradicts all

Of social Catholic teaching that asks Catholics to stand on the side of the poor.

When the t-shirt gets made that says “Nuns Are Cool” please buy me one.

6) I'm at the fiscal cliff...and I'm looking for a pulpit

This one could get away from me if I'm not careful, but let it suffice to say
That just as I'm reading that Congress permitted a cut in the payroll tax
To expire, meaning that that tax burden for the average worker will increase about
\$1000 in 2013, affecting 160 million people

I'm also reading there at the tail of 2012 and the dawn of 2013 that the bill
Also preserved billions of dollars in corporate tax giveaways that will benefit,
Among other things -

Financial firms, the Ford Motor Company's international lending division
And a benefit for the owners of tracks used by NASCAR that allows them
To accelerate their depreciation expenses, meaning they can deduct more in taxes.
NASCAR spent \$1.1 million lobbying congress.

All of these breaks are part of a package of so-called tax extenders first approved
by the

Senate in early August that mixes popular benefits like a deduction for teachers
who buy

Classroom supplies,

With corporate-friendly carve-outs, including something called 'active financing'
That permits businesses earning interest on overseas lending to defer U.S. taxes
On that income...indefinitely.

Sigh.

There will be those, some of you even, who will tell me all this is more
complicated

Than it seems and that it's far too easy and far too unfair to paint the corporations as

The bad guys here. It is and it is.

And yet, let's call a duck a duck and ask:

Why is it that lobbyists always seem able to get what they want

Even when everyone else is starving?

And: what kind of country taxes dividends and capital gains

So much more favorably than earned income?

Something's broken here, something's not right,

And, friend, we need more of us to talk about it.

Forget the political labels or questions of political bias.

To me this is a religious issue and if there is one thing

Almost of all of religion teaches it is to: Share and Share Alike.

5) Another brave kid who stood up against hate

The most controversial movie of 2012 was hardly a film.

Badly acted and badly produced, one reviewer described it as having

All the amateurish aura of a 1970's sexploitation film, but without any real

Titillation.

What is the film? *Innocence of Muslims*, and though it was ostensibly a bio-pic

Of the Prophet Muhammad, one its actors was a head-tattooed former porn star

And its producer was a Coptic-American con man with too many aliases

Out on parole.

Never mind.

The film was timed all too perfectly for the divisive presidential campaign

And clips from the film were propagated by the usual suspects,
including that Florida pastor who burned a Koran last year (remember him?),
And firebrands in the Islamic world who despite Western influence –
All leading to a siege of the U.S. embassy in Cairo and – possibly –
An excuse for militants in Benghazi to overrun the U.S. diplomatic compound
there,
Resulting in the death of the American ambassador.

Which leads to the other brave kid, there in Benghazi, who while the riot of
Of people are sieging behind him,
Is shown in a photograph I saw holding a sign above his head,
all in misspelled English, that reads:

*“Sorry people of America. This is not the behavior of Islam
Or our Prophet.”*

Amen, young man, amen.

4 The human-to-climate, and human-to-human response to Hurricane Sandy

As the Northeastern coast of the US continues recovering
from October’s devastating storm,
Which killed hundreds in the Caribbean and the U.S.
and cost billions in property damage,
The U.N.’s climate panel have said that global warming most certainly played
A role in the development of the disaster,
With the water level in NY City a full one foot higher than it was a century ago.
The panel’s No.2 scientist, Jean-Pascal van Ypersle,
said that the new question facing the storms of the future is not:

Did climate change cause this? but instead: Is it possible that climate warming did not cause this?

Why? Because climate warming causes will be already assumed.

For the first time ever, perhaps because one of these storms hit NY and Maryland And New Jersey and not easily forgotten New Orleans,

More people seem to be agreeing with the scientists.

Is it too late? is not a doom-filled question; it is unfortunately a fair question.

Meanwhile, during and after this storm people are still beautiful, amazing -

Like Dr. David Ores, who duct-taped a sign to a stick and stuck in an emergency cone

Outside his apartment that read: *“Open - Free Medical Care – Dr. David Ores”*

Or the family in some power-outage local who snuck an electric cord and power-strip

Through their window and zip-tied it to a fence with a sign that read:

“We have power; please feel free to charge your phone.”

Or the person who stuffed a whole wad of cash into an envelope and stuck it

On the front door of a ravaged home with a note that read:

‘Dear homeowner: I was going to give this to the Red Cross;

However I am giving it directly to you to use in your recovery.

Sorry for your loss.”

Or the photo I saw of the hundreds of hospital employees making a human chain passing containers of fuel up 13 flights of stairs

to the backup generator at Bellevue Hospital in New York City.

Religion is not believing, remember? It is a way of seeing,

Of knowing where and how to look in order to become hope-filled.

3) The nones are Coming...so we better get our act together!

You're thinking: really, more nuns?

Yes, but these ones are spelled 'n-o-n-e-s'

And they refer to the rapidly growing group in the U.S. who claim No Religion.

According to a report this year from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life,

One in five American adults now have no religious affiliation;

they include 13 million self-described atheists and agnostics,

and 33 million people who don't identify with any religion.

More than two-thirds of the nones said they believe in God,

more than half said they frequently feel a deep spiritual connection

with nature and the Earth,

more than one-third see themselves as "spiritual but not religious,"

and one in five pray daily.

Most of this growth, said the report, is attributed to the gradual replacement of older,

generally more religious generations with younger, generally less religious generations.

So what does this mean for us?

I think it means a golden opportunity, and an important mission, if we only we seize it!

A number of leading church think-tank-types say that faith communities like ours

Are in the right place at the right time when our values of openness,

Theological curiosity, and being non-dogmatic

Are intersecting with the values of the culture.

But in order of us to welcome these new folks now and in the coming generations

We are really are going to have to do some things differently –

Play more with what worship looks and feels like (less sitting static in pews,

For example!)

Be less afraid of adopting new technology (are we ready for our services to go up

On YouTube – we should be!)

Try new and different music (organ, yes, piano yes, but drums, guitar, jazz, rock,

Rap, blues, folk – diversity doesn't just mean theology, my friends!),

Be willing to try new things, ask Why Not? Instead of the more judgmental Why?

And finally be willing participants in what we'll call passive evangelism, which simply means:

Helping people with their spiritual journey, not persuading them to become Unitarians

Or believe like you, doubt like you, worship like you.

To welcome the none's and let them know we are here I am not above begging

Please tell your friends about what you experience here.

They want you to tell them; trust me. Please. Please. Please.

2) *Why God?*

This the question asked by many over this holiday as we live with fresh memory of 20 children

And 7 adults murdered in Newtown;

This the question asked by many this August when a man stormed a Sikh temple

In Oak Creek, Wisconsin, killing 6, injuring 3.

This the question asked by many this this July when a man walked into an Aurora, CO

Movie theatre and killed 12, injuring 70.

I understand the theological impulse to ask God why,

But in these kinds of crimes using high-capacity weapons our curiosity

Might be better directed to more earthly places, as in:

Why Governor?

Why NRA?

Why Representative? Why Senator?

The Why question, I think, starts there.

But that doesn't mean that religion has nothing to say. Far from it.

One of you sent a terrific piece written by priest a few weeks ago

In which he spoke for all clergy when he said that not only does he

Not know why bad things happen,

but also that people, when they come to us, are not really expecting explanations.

What they are expecting is to be comforted,

And one true thing faith does, especially in the context of family and community,

Is comfort.

A contemporary theologian has described mercy as '*entering into the chaos of another,*'

And perhaps that is why this month of December has been so hard, because

We cannot even imagine the broken-hearted chaos down in CT.

And yet, as this priest has written,

Every time we have entered someone's suffering,

Every time we have been a mercy to others,

We are pulled out of ourselves to be love's presence to someone.

I do this a lot, and I can tell you, it has been an incredible gift to me.

1) Which leads to the #1 story of 2012, which is really one that starts here, now,

In 2013, so I am cheating.

I would like to ask the ushers to hand out our envelopes now – please don't open them!

There should be enough for each of you, but if not, or if you want, you can share them with a partner or as a family.

.....*Wait*.....

You're thinking: will this be like a fortune cookie?

Have everyone open them.

Have someone read the line inside:

“Use this gift for good. Share the fact that it came from your church. Return and tell the story.”

This money,

which comes from the Discretionary Fund you have made available to me,

Is given out of this wish I have:

that I just want you to share this ministry with me;

Of being a mercy to someone; of reaching out and making a small

Difference on behalf of our church.

Please share your stories with Maureen at communications@uuac.org

Or write them down this whole month here at church – next Sunday

We will have figured out a way to post them.

Religion is not believing, it is seeing...and it is doing.

Who knows what you will see and do as you consider how to put this small

Amount of money to good use.

Here's to a good, so very good 2013!

Amen.