

**SLD01.08.17 Baptism of the Lord, Wesleyan Covenant Service**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Isaiah 42: 1-9**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

**“Altered Traits”**

**Isaiah 42: 1-9**

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Huston Smith, who died recently at the age of 97, is a hero of mine. Although born of Methodist missionary parents, Smith became a renowned scholar of world religions, not merely studying but also practicing, over the course of his career, the Hindu Vedanta tradition, Zen Buddhism, and Sufi Islam, for more than ten years each. A distinguished professor of religion and philosophy at Washington University, MIT, Harvard, and Univ. of California at Berkeley, Smith's serious, even-handed and respectful exploration and presentation of the religions of the world has, since the 1950's, shaped many Americans in both the ecclesial and secular worlds.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huston\\_Smith](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huston_Smith)

"If we take the world's enduring religions at their best," said Smith, "we discover the distilled wisdom of the human race." In 1958 Smith wrote his seminal book The Religions Of Man, and then its abridged 1991 edition, The World's Religions, both of which were used as textbooks and together sold more than 3 million copies.

I like to think Smith impacted my father, who, a devout Presbyterian and a preacher's kid, was also a Colonel in the Air Force and a world traveler. And when he was invited to preach one time at an ecumenical service at an Air Force base, took the opportunity to extoll the virtues of all the religions of the world.

Certainly Smith impacted me, when, as early as my nursing days in San Francisco, he introduced me to the riches of world religions, perhaps even setting the vector that led me to Western Sufism here in Atlanta, which ultimately delivered me to seminary. The faith and practices of world religions so fascinated me that I wanted to dive more deeply into my own.

A couple days ago on NPR, Terry Gross aired a 1996 interview with Smith in which she asked him, among other things, whether, after incorporating practices from different religions into his own spiritual life, including saying Islamic prayers in Arabic five times a day and practicing yoga from the Hindu tradition, he still thought of himself as a Methodist. Here's what he said:

**My answer is that I have a body and I have a soul. And my body belongs to the faith into which it was born, the Methodist Church. And let me just enter a small parenthesis. That was a very good experience with the Christian tradition for me. Many of my students, they're - I have come to call them wounded Christians or wounded Jews, meaning that what came through to them from their traditions was two things - dogmatism - we've got the truth, everybody else is going to hell - and moralism - don't do this, don't do that.**

**To me, it was very different. What came through was we're in good hands, and then gratitude for that fact. It would be good if we bore one another's**

**burdens. And in all my globe circling, I still haven't come upon anything that tops that. All right, I've talked about my body. It was born (and batized) in the Methodist church, and it will be buried in the Methodist Church. Meanwhile, I have a soul. And my soul cannot be confined to any human institution.<sup>2</sup>**

Think about that. Your body (at the moment) belongs to the Presbyterian Church, but your soul cannot be confined to any human institution.

Does this mean Smith, and we, are 'universalists?' No, says Smith It is one of the illusions of rationalism," he says, "that the universal principles of religion are more important than the rites and rituals from which they grow."<sup>3</sup> Every religion is a blend of universal principles and local setting; we tend to live out our lives in the particularity of a specific tradition.

That is, whereas Christians, Buddhists and Muslims may agree on, say, the golden rule, what genuinely feeds and grows our understanding of the divine is rooted in the particularity of our communities, our habits of worship, of mission, of study. In our case, our respect for scripture and for a well-crafted and thoughtful sermon based upon it, our hymnody and prayers, our passing of the peace and sharing of joys and concerns, these, ultimately, are what deepen and grow our faith and help us to live out of it.

This is important to understand because, as Smith also says, "the goal of spiritual life is not altered states, but altered traits."

This from the man who hung with Timothy Leary and Ram Dass in the 1960's, participating in their experiments with psychedelics, AND who went up against the Supreme Court in 1990 to argue that the use of peyote by Native Americans in their

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.npr.org/2017/01/04/508195918/remembering-huston-smith-noted-worlds-religions-scholar>.

<sup>3</sup> The Religions of Man, Huston Smith, Harper & Row, New York City, 1958. p. 4.

religious ceremonies was, in fact, protected by our Constitution, which led to the passage, in 1994, of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act.

"The goal of spiritual life is not altered states, but altered traits." The goal of spiritual life is not getting high on God but transforming who and how we are in the world.

And what effectively alters who and how we are in the world? Specific, repetitive, even ritualistic, habits of the heart, and of relationship, and of community, all of which require far more participation and investment and discipline than a passing salute of general principles. Think about it. How much harder is it to show up week after week for choir practice, or month after month to prepare communion, or supper for Clifton shelter, than to hold hands around a campfire and sing, 'We are the World?' And, how much more formative?

Said Smith to Grose, "I liked what a teacher in India once said to me - If you are drilling for water, it's better to drill one 60-foot well than 10 6-foot wells." This is what I see us doing here at Emory Church – continuing to dig together this particular 60-foot well God has given us. And, frankly, in order to keep digging, what is required of us is more than we got. Since the goal of spiritual life is allowing God to transform who and how we are in the world, what is required to keep digging is surrendering our lives to the will of God. For us to allow God to transform who and how we are in the world, sooner or later we gotta say, 'okay.' 'Okay, God, I'm up for it.' 'Okay, God' I'll give it a shot.' 'Okay, God, your will and not mine.'

Pietistic traditions like the Methodists and Baptists are better at this than we are. But even we Presbyterians must actively consent to God's presence and work in our

lives. For, as Diana Butler Bass says, “What will make a difference to the future is awakening to a faith that fully communicates God’s love—a love that transforms how we believe, what we do, and who we are in the world.”<sup>4</sup> And fully awakening to this love requires us to surrender to it. The Wesleyan Covenant service is a ritual of surrendering ourselves to the love of God, of rededicating ourselves, not just at the level of the institution, but at the level of the soul, to the will of God.

Still, the words we are about to say, the covenant we are about to make, can feel challenging, scary, even dangerous; certainly beyond anything that we can accomplish on our own. The well we are digging, folks, is way too deep to be left to our own devices. But then again, we’re not on our own, are we. What God tells Isaiah is what God tells us:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon you. I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

No way we can fulfill the covenant we are about to make on our own, but we’re not on our own, are we. God chooses us, upholds us, delights in us, and puts God’s spirit upon us. Remember? It’s even written on the façade of this church – ‘the spirit of the Lord is upon me.’ And so, as we keep digging our particular 60 foot well here at Emory Church, may it be so.

To the glory of God. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (HarperOne: 2013), p. 37.