

## Worship transcript for April 19, 2020

### *Opening music*

“We Shall Be Known” (MaMuse)

It is time now, it is time now that we thrive  
It is time we lead ourselves into the well  
It is time now, and what a time to be alive  
In this great turning we shall learn to lead in love  
In this great turning we shall learn to lead in love

### *Welcome (Rev. Robert Hardies)*

Hello All Souls! I hope this message finds you healthy and well. I want you to know that during this difficult time, all of us on the clergy team and staff continue to hold you in our loving thoughts and prayers.

Welcome to our online weekly worship service.

Given all that we've been through with the Covid-19 pandemic, it would be easy to forget that this coming week is the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day. Every year on the Sunday before Earth Day we devote our service to honoring the interdependence of life on Earth and committing ourselves to the future of life on our planet.

We are delighted this year to be joined on Earth Sunday by the Rev. Sofia Betancourt, this week's guest preacher. Rev. Betancourt is assistant professor of Unitarian Universalist theologies and ethics at Starr King School for the Ministry, our UU seminary in California.

She is a Ph.D. candidate at Yale University in the departments of Religious Ethics and African American Studies, and her work focuses on environmental ethics of liberation in a womanist and Latina feminist frame.

Rev. Betancourt served for four years as the director of racial and ethnic concerns at the Unitarian Universalist Association, and also served briefly as the interim co-president of our association.

I'm so delighted that she will share with us her considerable insight and experience in these difficult times.

At this time, friends, I invite you to make yourself comfortable, and prepare your home chalice, if you have one. As I invite Rev. Rob Keithan to share our chalice lighting and opening prayer.

### *Chalice Lighting, Congregational Concerns, and Pastoral Prayer (Rev. Rob Keithan)*

It's time for our chalice lighting—please join in if you have a chalice at home. In celebration of the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, we light our chalice for the environment and resources that

give us life, and also for the people, and in particular the frontline communities and native peoples, who are most impacted and working so hard to save us all.

We turn now to the pastoral prayers of our community. First, we offer ongoing prayers of solace and solidarity with those most affected by the virus and shut down, including those who are suffering and those who are serving.

Let us also send healing prayers to little Rowan Caylor, infant son of Nick and Marissa, who is recovering from a surgery that took place on Monday.

We rejoice with Gillian Brockell and Bobby Gulshan, parents of baby Tejvir Singh Gulshan, who was born on April 11 at 11:11am.

Last but not least, we offer prayers of celebration and appreciation for Meredith Higgins Hargrave on her 50th anniversary as a member of All Souls Church. Congratulations Meredith!

In the moment of silence that follows, I invite you to speak aloud the names of those you carry on your heart.

Spirit of life and of love, Dear God of all creation,

There is so much we do not know—about our planet. About our future. About ourselves.

But we do know this: a balance has been disrupted by our human endeavors, and in particular our greed and selfishness. And we know that plants, animals, and people have, and are, paying the price for it.

We are not in right relationship with our planet, or with each other.

So, Dear God of creation and creativity, God of truth and justice, God of love and possibility, help us find the courage and commitment to do what needs to be done. Help us to make the changes, large and small, that are needed to restore balance and right relationship to the interconnected web of all people and all things.

Amen.

*Music (All Souls Virtual Choir)*

“Spirit of Life” (words and music by Carolyn McDade) (sung in English and Spanish)

Fuente de amor, ven hacia mi  
Y al corazon cantale tu compassion  
Sopla al volar, sube en la mar  
Hasta moldear la justicia de la vida  
Arraigame, liberame  
Fuente de amor, ven a mi, ven a mi

Spirit of life, come unto me  
Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion  
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea  
Move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice  
Roots hold me close, wings set me free  
Spirit of life, come to me, come to me.

*Reading and Sermon (Rev. Sofia Betancourt)*

“Instructions on Not Giving Up” by Ada Limon

More than the fuchsia funnels breaking out  
of the crabapple tree, more than the neighbor’s  
almost obscene display of cherry limbs showing  
their cotton candy-colored blossoms to the slate  
sky of Spring rains, it’s the greening of the trees  
that really gets to me. When all the shock of white  
and taffy, the world’s baubles and trinkets, leave  
the pavement strewn with the confetti of aftermath,  
the leaves come. Patient, plodding, a green skin  
growing over whatever winter did to us, a return  
to the strange idea of continuous living despite  
the mess of us, the hurt, the empty. Fine then,  
I’ll take it, the tree seems to say, a new slick leaf  
unfurling like a fist to an open palm, I’ll take it all.

Sermon: “A Love that Liberates all Peoples and All Beings”

In 1970 it would be five more years until the impact of my personal life on the planet would be felt. It was a time when the smell of air pollution was imagined to be the scent of prosperity and progress. In 1970, political leaders and an academic got together to share their vision of earth itself as worthy of justice, and together they created the first Earth Day as a national teach-in for our planetary future. What matters about this story is that it is a story of imagination. It is a story of collaboration and possibility, a story of vision across communities that had not yet really joined together in the work of climate justice.

Our leaders were inspired by the successes of the anti-war movement and while we tell ourselves a story of Earth Day that began as a national movement and became, fifty years on Tuesday, a global movement, the truth is that it spread community to community, neighborhood to neighborhood even, to result in a day when ten percent of the US population on April 22, 1970 took to the streets, to the classrooms, to the mosques, to the congregations, to the meeting houses, to the cafes, and barbershops to learn a different story about the impact and meaning of our life on this planet.

Now, this matters to me today because we are in a time of incubation, and I know that that might raise images of rest, and of peacefulness. I think we know that’s not what I mean in these times.

But we're in the time when the next great idea can take hold among us. For those of us, for those of you serving on the front lines, delivering mail, stocking grocery shelves, serving in health care, caring for the sick, doing all of the things that keep our neighborhoods thriving and alive in these days... you know this is not a time of rest. If your loved ones are essential workers... this is not a time of rest. Even if you have the privilege to be sheltering in place, and the responsibility to do so... this is not a time of rest. But it is a time when we are experiencing the world anew, seeing more of its truths in different ways and inviting ourselves to new ways of knowing.

It's easier for me to think about this when I think about a time of incubation that was less fraught, less frightening. This fall I had the immense privilege of taking a sabbatical – the first in my career – and I spent it working on a large writing project. My scholarship focuses on ecowomanist ethics, which is environmental value-making and decision-making drawn from the wisdom of women across the African diaspora. This is very different from doing the work of environmental justice from a philosophical idea about the meaning of nature. Instead, it asks those in front line communities, those whose lived experiences of environmental decay at times cause unimaginable situations, who still survive and thrive in those experiences, for their understanding of how to make difficult decisions in challenging times. So, this was a time of incubation for me, a time of thinking, of researching, of writing, and I kept circling back to a simple yet immensely rich concept out of my own culture, which is the value of making do. This is what my family would call a very West Indian cultural teaching. Literally that you make do. It is as simple as it sounds and yet it's very hard to do. The teaching of making do is what gets generations of families who experienced chattel slavery, forced migration, chosen migration because of economic suffering or food scarcity, to find ways not only to survive but to keep their families, their loved ones, their communities, and yes, their lands intact in the face of the unimaginable.

I use that language of unimaginable because it makes me think of my mentor and colleague Willis Jenkins, who writes about what he calls a crisis of “moral incompetence” – I know that's not a nice word – but what he means by that, this religious studies scholar, is that in at times when most of our religious traditions were being created, we couldn't understand, we had no way of knowing, the level of impact of human living on our planet. And so, he says when we turn to our communities of faith, when we turn to the values that shape us, many of them are drawn from a time when we could not know, that (for me at least, in 1975) began the story of my life's impact on the planet. Jenkins instead invites us to reimagine our traditions in the face of environmental degradation – what Green Souls might call living into our values, being those who serve love and justice in the world, particularly from the Universalist side of our tradition. This is part of what I know in my family as making do, as getting real and realistic about the lives that we are living, about seeing what is really possible. And I know I keep on using the word “really” but seeing what is possible, sustainable, communal, loving, resilient, and hope-filled, and leaning into those ways of making life anew. So, this time of incubation is coming out of a time that many call a crisis of imagination. I want to tell you what I mean by that.

There is a brilliant novelist, Amitav Ghosh, whose writings I get the privilege of teaching in my classes at Starr King. Most recently we worked from his text called *The Great Derangement*. Now, we were reading his writings in translation. I can't know what words the author used

originally, but I know that “derangement” is a word that has ableist leanings. So, I think it’s easier to think of this as an unimaginable crisis of imagination. Ghosh is writing as an author. He’s usually a novelist. This is his first nonfiction work in a decade. But he says that what he notices as an author is that when our artists, when those who hold for us the vision of seeing the world anew, when they write fiction that includes climate injustices those books are inevitably labeled as science fiction. We have beautiful, brilliant scientific texts that teach us about the environment. Silent Spring in the ‘60s from Rachel Carson is what gave birth to a movement that gave birth to Earth Day. Nonfiction is important, but when our writers, our dreamers who write acclaimed novels like Salt publish about the earth’s decay, it gets put into the same category as elves, wizards, and aliens. Now don’t get me wrong, I love a good science fiction novel or a good fantasy novel, but Ghosh is asking what does it say about our imaginations, about our visioning of a new future, if we relegate the dreaming of those with the most poetic writing minds among us, to a siloed category that is not at the forefront of what we know as art and literature? He says this has everything to do with our meaning making and our story sharing in these times.

I really agree with Ghosh, I have to say. I have been paying attention to the stories we are telling about the earth in this time of pandemic. I’m sure you seen them, even if you are working non-stop and barely resting. We heard the stories of swans and dolphins reappearing in the canals of Venice as a sort of silver lining to difficult times. I think our stories are either silver lining or earth, kind of redemptive suffering-facing justice right now. Both instincts are understandable, they are very human. We want to make meaning out of this depth of loss, but actually neither invites us to the great imagining, to the great possibilities of our wisdom and our knowing in these days.

The silver lining stories were shown to not be true. Some of them, as we’ve spent more time (some of us) sheltering in place, are real. We heard recently that the Himalayas can be seen in the sky, in the horizon of India, as air pollution levels reduce. That is a beautiful story, it’s true, and it is still not that longed-for moment of hope-filled salvation – that silver lining – that even as we are suffering, perhaps earth itself is healing. And the other side of those stories, where we talk about Covid-19 as some kind of population control, as if the earth in its vindictiveness would particularly target black and brown communities, would particularly target the global south, would particularly target those most impacted by generations of resource control, of colonialism and neo-imperialism. This is not the Universalist all-embracing love that we know in community. Instead, we are called to stories of an all-embracing love. We are called to Universalism as planetary care. And this brings me back to this idea of what it means to make do.

One of my mentors, whom I respect deeply, said to me that my writings in my time of incubation spoke beautifully about making do but didn’t actually tell us what to do. He wanted a list of behaviors, of actions, and I understand that too. We want to know what we can do to bring justice and love back to the center of our experience and our living. But instead, making do is not about simply sheltering in place and keeping what we have now. That’s never been making do. Making do is about feeding your family when there’s not enough. It is about holding your community when not all are safe. It’s about drawing on the wisdom, the resilience, the creativity and multigenerational knowing in the face of the unimaginable. Making do calls us back to a

time when we survived in community based on what earth and our knowing could sustain, before we went to other lands to take what others had, before we siloed into levels of economic injustice that allowed some to find comfort while others went without.

I know that your brilliant staff keeps calling you back to environmental justice that is local, that is neighborly, that is relational, that is Universalist. Making do means that we ensure that all have enough – all, being all, all people and all beings, communities and the earth, a global population that is taken care of, neighborhood by neighborhood and congregation by congregation. Making do finds wisdom in the frontline communities who are already on the quest for racial justice, already on the quest for economic justice, already seeking an earth care that makes everyone whole. Here is where making do is community care. So I want to invite you into an imagining of a planetary love. What does that look like, not only in these days, but in the eventual days to come when we come back out of shelter, take a rest from unending crisis-driven labor, from the work of literally saving souls and lives, and ask ourselves what must we do to rebuild the world around a center of love, a center of justice? How do we plant this 50-year vision of Earth Day, realized in 2020, when countries (sadly other than ours) have pledged to renew their investment in a planet that is more whole? What seeds do you most long to plant in these times? How do we take leaves that are fists and invite them into open palms? This is a time when your green pledges can become visionary pledges, when we can meet a crisis of imagination with the renewal of spring, or with the renewal of fall, or even with the incubative resilience of winter. No matter when our communities are more open again, we can nurture these seeds, these Universalist, loving, planetary seeds of justice, and root them in the soil of our communities that know something different now about making do in difficult times.

We are called to bring the grief, the exhaustion, the worry, the goodness, as we look to those doing the work of care, the helpers, as Mr. Rogers taught us. We are invited to pledge ourselves anew. In 2020, let us follow not our own wisdom, but the wisdom of frontline communities, the wisdom of local partners, the wisdom of our UUA as they connect us community by community, to the work of love and justice in these times. Let us lay down a 50-year foundation to re-vision earth justice in these days, for a love that liberates all peoples and all beings, for a love that embraces a planet in its entirety while planting seeds right here in our communities of care. This is the determination in the wake of a pandemic to insist on building the world anew.

May we bravely re-story the journey of our own lives' impact on earth and all its creatures. May we embrace that planetary love. And as we care for one another, as we respond in the midst of crisis, as we incubate new ways of knowing, may we lean into that spiritual discipline of hope at the core culture of our Unitarian Universalism and know that we can meet this call to build ourselves anew, to rejoin a planet that already seeks balance, that seeks justice, that seeks wholeness for all of us in our living. May you and all you hold beloved be sheltered and cared for in these times.

Go with my love and know that from Oakland, California, I feel your love in return.

Amen, Axé, and Blessed Be

*Music (All Souls Women's Octet)*

"River" (Coco Love Alcorn)

The river is a healer, the river is a sage  
The river knows no end and the river feels no age  
The river is a leader every single day  
It's living in the moment and it always finds a way

Water heal my body, water heal my soul  
When I go down, down to the water  
By the water I feel whole

The river calls me over, it's calling out my name  
In the day and in the night, I hear that river all the same  
It's calling me over, calling out my pain  
Oh a river gathers tears, just like a river gathers rain

Water heal my body, water heal my soul  
When I go down, down to the water  
By the water I feel whole

The river is a traveller, always on the go  
A river never worries if it's fast or if it's slow  
River take me to where I need to go  
Oh, and I will just relax and let the river flow

Water heal my body  
Water heal my soul  
When I go down, down  
To the water  
By the water I feel whole

*Offertory/Benediction (Rev. Keithan)*

As this service comes to an end, I invite you to make a financial contribution to All Souls Church. One of the many incredible ministries supported by the church is the Green Souls, our action group dedicated to education, inspiration, and mobilization for Environmental and Climate justice. Reflecting the values of our social justice ministry overall, they partner with people of color-led groups here in DC that work on local aspects of global issues, like access to healthy food. For this and the other work that fulfills our mission of building beloved community, the offering is gratefully received.

The words for our benediction are often attributed to an individual, Lilla Watson, an Aboriginal activist from Australia. Both the quote, and her response to being asked about it, speak very directly to how we're called to do our work in this time: she said she was not comfortable taking

credit for something that was born of a collective process. So the proper attribution is “Aboriginal activists group, Queensland, 1970s.” And it is this:

“If you have come here to help me, then you are wasting your time...But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

May it be so, and Amen.