

## Worship transcript for April 26, 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. Tony Coleman)*

Welcome.

Hello. My name is Tony Coleman, and I serve as All Souls’ Minister of Congregational Care. It is with joy that I welcome you to this week’s long-distance worship service.

Though our building is closed, our church is open, friends, so we hope that this video will nourish and warm your spirit. These virtual services represent one of the many ways that we, as the All Souls staff, are committed to helping our community stay connected in this time.

In addition to these videos, our clergy team continues to host Zoom gatherings where we invite you to come together and share what’s on your hearts. Our choirs continue to meet and support one another regularly. Our religious education staff are continuing to produce a wealth of wonderful content and opportunities for All Souls families to connect. And, of course, so many members of the All Souls community continue to call each other, host their covenant groups, bring each other meals, and so much more. However, there are still some among us who may be feeling isolated and disconnected. If that it is the case for you, please reach out to me or anyone else on staff, and we’ll be sure to do what we can to help you get connected.

Community, caring for one another, creating new and powerful ways to stay connected—these tasks are as important now as they ever have been. For this reason, I want to invite you to consider what ways you may be able to give—whether it be of your resources, your time, or your talents, I invite you to contribute to our community’s efforts to be together and be in the world, as a symbol of hope, as a force for good.

With that, friends, I invite you to pause a moment and get a chalice or a candle, as Rev. Norman, our Minister of Adult Spiritual Development, leads us in a chalice lighting and opening prayer.

### *Chalice Lighting, Congregational Concerns, and Pastoral Prayer (Rev. Norman Allen)*

Hello. If you have a chalice ready, go ahead and light it with me now. I invite you to take this moment to consider the flame, to consider the light that emanates from it, to consider a light that turns away shadows and reveals new truths – even in the most difficult of times. As we enter into this period of worship, let us look to that light, and let us look to the gifts that it might uncover.

Spirit of life and of love. Spirit that moves through and among and within us. Spirit that connects us and makes one even when we are made distant by time and space. We hold in our hearts today all those who risk their health and happiness to keep us fed and to keep us connected. We hold in our hearts those working in hospitals and care centers and testing sites. We bring into our hearts those of us who struggle with isolation and loneliness and empty days – and those who have seen the burdens of work and family increase – and who long for solitude.

Spirit of life and of love, even in the most difficult times, we know that life goes on. We find strength in our beloved All Souls community as we consider the joys and sorrows that ebb and flow in our lives:

We celebrate with Fiona Brideoake and Mandy Berry as they welcome the arrival of newborn Willa Brideoake Berry, little sister to Oscar and to Arlo, who is so greatly missed.

We remember Jamari's grandmother, Diann, who died in Arizona after a long battle with COPD, and who participated in the very first sit-in of the Civil Rights movement.

We send prayers of healing and strength to Derek Stanfill's dear friend Jay, as he continues to heal from a severe illness.

We hold in our hearts Beth Conlin and her family as they mourn the loss of Beth's father, Thomas J. Conlin – a loving father, and a beloved and kind man.

We celebrate with Jennifer Keller as she retires from a career at the EPA and from work that spanned a quarter of a century.

In the silence that follows, I invite you to speak the names of those whose joys and sorrows are on your hearts today. [Silence.]

Spirit of life and of love. Spirit that moves through and among and within us. In these challenging days we remember that the ebbs and flows of life do continue. And we recognize that these days bring with them the possibility for renewed grace and strength. May it be so. 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. Coleman)*

Our reading comes from the Epic of Gilgamesh, an excerpt from tablet XI:

Six days and seven nights  
came the wind and flood, the storm flattening the land.  
When the seventh day arrived, the storm was pounding,  
the flood was a war—struggling with itself like a woman  
writhing (in labor).  
The sea calmed, fell still, the whirlwind (and) flood stopped up.  
I looked around all day long—quiet had set in  
and all the human beings had turned to clay!  
The terrain was as flat as a roof.  
I opened a vent and fresh air (daylight!) fell upon the side of  
my nose.  
I fell to my knees and sat weeping,  
tears streaming down the side of my nose.

### **Sermon: Apocalypse, Now?**

Like so many of us, I've been keeping in especially close contact with my family in this time. You see, while I live here, they live in Memphis, TN, the city I grew up in. When I asked my mom, in the early weeks of this pandemic, what folks in Memphis were saying about it—predictions about what the infection rates would be for the region, whether or not there was any talk of stay at home orders, she said, "Well, I'm not sure about any of that, but, everybody here's been saying that it's the end times." Everyone's convinced this is the apocalypse. If you don't know much about Memphis, among its claims to fame, in addition to barbecue and the blues and being home to Elvis's residence, it's also home to the highest number of churches per capita in the U.S. And, most of those churches are conservative, Evangelical communities. So, predictions about the apocalypse were, in fact, a regular feature of my childhood.

You could bet that when you got to talking to a seasoned Christian about current events or even just rehashing the day's news, at some point in the conversation, with a slow shake of the head they would say, "Mm..mm..mm...See that. It's the end times. God's coming to judge." Every time there was a flood somewhere in the world or news of a bee colony collapse or whispers of war brewing anywhere, you would hear the same doomsday prognosis—it's the apocalypse. Sermons would be preached about it; feature films would come to Memphis theatres dramatizing the Biblical narrative around it, hours at family reunions would be spent talking about it. So, after a childhood of these failed predictions, when my mother told me that this was how people

were characterizing our moment, honestly, I just rolled my eyes. But, then, as events related to this pandemic continued to unfold, I started to be a little less dismissive. I began to hear people from all over the world, people who were not self-proclaimed Christians, using words like “plague” or “catastrophe,” words like “global crisis.” As we look around at the world, as we see the empty shelves at our once surplus-stocked grocery stores, as we draw closer to the people we love for fear that some sickness may come and take them from us, as we take stock of our societies’ pitfalls and see, maybe for the first time, exactly who our social infrastructures have been leaving behind, “apocalypse” doesn’t sound like such an inappropriate word to use. However, I say this not because the news cycle has convinced me that the end of the world is near. Far from it. Instead, what’s convinced me was what I saw in my own little network of friends and family, people coming to terms with certain truths that they had not before embraced. You see what that word “apocalypse” really conveys, at the level of its etymology, is, in fact, a sense of uncovering, a sense of revelation, hence why the book of the Bible that prophesies the apocalypse is called “Revelation.”

For many of us, though, “apocalypse” describes only an event. A moment in time when forces beyond our control converge to end life as we know it. For many of us, it’s a distinctly Christian myth. However, it is, in fact, an ancient idea, first recorded in the Epic of Gilgamesh’s account of an apocalyptic flood we read earlier, a record we can trace through the story of Noah’s arc in the Hebrew Bible up through the stories of the first Christians expectantly waiting for Jesus to return to Earth. The ancient Norse called it Ragnarok, a series of battles and natural disasters that would destroy all the old gods and the world as it was known. Hindu texts describe a cosmic contraction wherein all existence is destroyed. Human cultures from across time and space have narrated a cosmic end. What all these stories have in common is destruction, to be sure. This is why that word “apocalypse” feels so terrible and catastrophic. However, friends, this is only part of the narrative, because each of these stories has another through line, another resonance that we see in each and every one of them, regardless of time period, regardless culture—in each of these stories the end is, in fact, a beginning. After the flood, after the plague, after the cosmic crisis, always, as the Epic of Gilgamesh puts it, quiet sets in. And in the quiet, in that moment of stillness and clarity, human beings begin to rebuild, refresh, restore, and create. Just as our climate moves from winter to spring, these ancient religious stories tell the tale of how we humans move from darkness to light, from suffering to salvation, from nothing to everything. In the destruction, in the pain, a way is revealed, a door opens, a new potential becomes clear and acts as the new beginning for a new world.

It can be so easy to take in the world’s events and despair, regardless of whether you are an evangelical Christian or not. It can be easy to give in to theories of global collapse or tyrannical plots to take over a country or some other way of saying we’re doomed. It can be easy to give into that impulse to shake your head with regret or terror and say, “It’s all over.” But, I invite you, friends, to set those thoughts down for a moment and consider the following question: what is this time showing me to be true? What is this time revealing to me about the world, about my country, about my own life?

Again, the whole point of the apocalyptic stories that have come down to us isn’t to simply sensationalize the end of the world or romanticize a new one; the point is found, in fact, in the

revelation. And, friends, if this time of global crisis is doing anything, it's uncovering truths that the pace and privilege of our lives had long since hidden away.

How many of you have a family member or a friend whom you've contacted, for the first time in a long time, over the past few weeks? How many of you have taken this time to pick up a long waiting passion—learning to cook or bake; finally finishing that sweater you started knitting for your aunt 2 years ago; starting that book you kept putting off? How many of you have seen, with new eyes, just how interconnected our economy, our planet, our very lives are? How many of you have seen now how the racism built into our social infrastructures has resulted in woefully disparate outcomes for people living in the exact same city? How many of you have taken the time to get to know your neighbors, now that you might need them in a pinch?

I'd be willing to bet that each of us, in this time, has come to a new understanding of what's really true about our lives—who really matters; what we really need; what our neighborhood, our society, our planet must have to be sustained.

In that way, understood as an event that reveals to us the truth of what's actually important, well I don't think it would be all that wrong to call this time apocalyptic, to call it revelatory. This moment we're in, with all of its fearsome challenges, has uncovered something true for so many of us. And perhaps what's hardest about what we're learning right now, is the fact that it's been true for a long time. Dori Midnight said it best in her poem, "Wash Your Hands." She writes:

My friends, it is always true, these things.

It has already been time.

It is always true that we should move with care and intention, asking

Do you want to bump elbows instead? with everyone we meet.

It is always true that people are living with one lung, with immune systems that don't work so well, or perhaps work too hard, fighting against themselves. It is already true that people are hoarding the things that the most vulnerable need.

It is already time that we might want to fly on airplanes less and not go to work when we are sick.

It is already time that we might want to know who in our neighborhood has cancer, who has a new baby, who is old, with children in another state, who has extra water, who has a root cellar, who is a nurse, who has a garden full of elecampane and nettles.

—

It is already time to not take it personally when someone doesn't want to hug you.

It is already time to slow down and feel how scared we are.

Friends, my prayer for us, for you and for me, is that we do just this: slow down; feel how scared we are. And then, I pray that you look for revelation. My prayer is that we keep asking that deep and probing question—what is this time revealing to me? I pray that we take what we're learning about the truth—about who matters in our lives; about what changes our society needs; about what actions our governments must take—I pray that we gather up these revelations and hold fast to them, so that when the new day comes, when we open a vent and feel the fresh open air fall upon our noses, when we drop to our knees and feel the tears streaming down our faces, when we reach the day when our schools and highways and airports and governments and

churches open back up, we will get up on our feet to march, to build our way toward a better world. This is the challenge of apocalypse—to take what has been revealed to you in the midst of the flood, the plague, the catastrophe; to take time to fall to your knees and weep, and then to take a step toward a new beginning—to keep calling the loved ones we missed, to make sure it doesn't take a pandemic for our cities' air to be breathable, to share our resources with those who need them, even when we aren't in crisis.

Take stock of what this time is revealing to you, friends, make room to fall to your knees in tears, and then, when the time comes to get up and build the world anew, remember the truth; hold on to what actually matters.

Amen.

*Music*

“Anthem” (Lenard Cohen; from the All Souls Solidarity Sing, 2017)

The birds, they sang at the break of day  
Start again, I heard them say  
Don't dwell on what has passed away  
Or what is yet to be

Oh, the wars, they will be fought again  
The holy dove, she will be caught again  
Bought and sold and bought again  
The dove is never free

Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack, in everything  
That's how the light gets in

We asked for signs, and signs were sent  
The birth betrayed, the marriage spent  
The widowhood of every government  
Signs for all to see

Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack, in everything  
That's how the light gets in

You can add up the parts, you won't get the sum  
You can strike up the march, there is no drum  
Oh but every heart to love will come  
But like a refugee

Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack, in everything  
That's how the light gets in

*Offertory/Benediction (Rev. Allen)*

As we move toward the conclusion of our time together, I invite you to make a donation to All Souls. Its ministries are far-reaching, stretching far beyond its walls.

Many of us received stimulus checks in the past week. If your financial situation is such that you're looking for ways to share that unexpected income, you might consider giving a portion to All Souls, and a portion to the Congregation Action Network's Covid-19 Emergency Fund.

All Souls is a founding member of the network, which now encompasses more than 60 congregations. The Emergency Fund will assist immigrant families who don't qualify for local, state, or federal support. It will help cover health expenses, rent, groceries, utilities, tuition, and work authorizations.

Whether giving to All Souls directly, or to the work of the Congregation Action Network, your generosity is greatly appreciated.

My friends. As we leave this sacred time together and go our separate ways, let us look to a brighter future. Let us not pray that things go back to the way they were but, rather, let us open ourselves to unexpected blessings. May it be so. Amen.