

Worship transcript for May 3, 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. Rob Keithan)

Hello, and thank you for tuning in to All Souls Long Distance worship. If you're an All Souls congregant and read the email about this service, you know that I'm stepping in to preach while Rev. Hardies recovers from a minor bike accident earlier this week. He'll be back at work on Monday, May 4, and preaching most of the Sundays in the next month before his departure from All Souls after 19 years of ministry with us. In the meantime, please join me in sending lots of love and healing prayers his way for a swift and full recovery.

And please remember that although the building is closed, All Souls is open! There are numerous opportunities for learning and connection each week, and the clergy team is here for you.

For my part, I was already scheduled to preach this Sunday, not at All Souls but at the Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Fountain Street was planning to host an exhibit of All Souls' Hiroshima Children's Drawings. My title—written in mid-February, long before most of us had ever heard of coronavirus—was “Making Right Out of So Much Wrong.”

I've decided to keep that focus for worship here, as the theme is quite similar: how do we recover from a catastrophe? What can we learn from the past that sheds light on our future? And not just the past in a general sense, but the past of our own church?

With these questions in mind, let us worship together.

Chalice Lighting, Congregational Concerns, and Pastoral Prayer (Rev. Tony Coleman)

Friends, with this flame we create Light, a light that illuminates our lives in even the dimmest of times, a light that warms our spirits in spite of the coldest doubts, a light that kindles within us a fire for justice and the spark of wisdom.

Will you join me in prayer?

Gracious and loving Spirit,

We gather in this moment, across time and space, to make ourselves aware of the sacredness of life, the power that pulses within us. Even now, as so many of us grapple with fear or sickness or

exhaustion, as so many of us worry about how life will or even can go on, let us remember the stubbornness of the dandelion, let us recall the tenacity of the jellyfish swimming in the canals of Venice, let us rejoice as we consider all of the ways that community survives, and even sometimes deepens, in the face of crisis—how love has the capacity to make itself known, always and in every way.

It is in this spirit of love that we send healing and peace to the residents and staff of the Pleasant Hill community, as they grapple with the news that 2 people recently tested positive for COVID-19.

It is in this spirit that we hold the Dillon-Blackburn family in our hearts as they mourn the loss of Dennis Dillon, Kristen's loving and devoted father.

We lift up prayers of peace and safekeeping for Annmarie Hansen's grandfather whose senior living community recently went into lockdown when a resident tested positive for COVID-19.

We hold Dave MacMillan and all of his family in our hearts as they accompany Dave's brother, Alex, in the final days of his life after a massive stroke.

We lift up prayers of comfort, healing, and peace for Rose Lindgren, Kristin Smyth, and their baby, Naomi, as Kristin awaits a diagnosis in the hospital after 14 days of severe symptoms and 3 negative COVID-19 tests. We also lift up prayers of gratitude for Kathy Miller, Kristin's mother, with whom Rose and baby Naomi are living, supporting one another in this time.

Finally, we offer a special prayer for all of the children in our community and in our world who are, in one way or another, struggling right now—whether it be with feelings of isolation or depression, a sense of loss or confusion, latent frustration or down-right anger. May all of the youngest people amongst us be cherished; may they be met with the power of patience; may they find themselves surrounded right now with love.

Gracious Spirit that animates all things—be in us and with us all, comfort our hearts, strengthen our spirits, bring peace to our minds. Help us to remember that life endures, with tenacity, with resolve, with us—and all our efforts to protect it and preserve it.

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.

Story for All Ages (Dolores Miller; Nathan, the puppet; Ruth Benson; JJ, Adele, and Margot McCleskey; Billie, Henry, and Corey Null; Ben and Sarah Stockton; Eli and Tova Puro; Naia, Nile, and Andrew Mendenhall Miller; James Ploeser and Cedar)

“Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky Your Are?” by Dr. Seuss

When I was quite young and quite small for my size, I met an old man in the Desert of Drize.
And he sang me a song I will never forget. At least, well, I haven't forgotten it yet.

He sat in a terribly prickly place. But he sang with a sunny sweet smile on his face: When you
think things are bad,

when you feel sour and blue, when you start to get mad...

you should do what I do!

Just tell yourself, Duckie, you're really quite lucky! Some people are much more... Oh, ever so
much more... Oh, muchly much-much more unlucky than you!

Just suppose, for example, you lived in Ga-Zayt, and got caught in that traffic on state highway
8!

Or suppose, just for instance, you lived in Ga-Zair, with your bedroom up here and your
bathroom up THERE!

Think they work you too hard...? Think of poor Ali Sard! He has to mow grass in his uncle's
backyard and it's quick- growing grass and it grows as he mows it. The faster he mows it, the
faster he grows it. And all that his stingy old uncle will pay for his shoving that mower around in
that hay is the piffulous pay of two dookls a day. And Ali can't live on such piffulous pay!

So he has to paint flagpoles on Sunday in Grooz. How lucky you are you don't live in his shoes.

And, while we are at it, considered the Schlotz, the crumple-horn, web-footed, green-bearded
Schlotz, whose tail is entailed with un-solvable knots. If he isn't muchly more worse off than
you, I'll eat my umbrella. That's just what I'll do.

And poor Mr. Potter, T-crosser, I-dotter. He has to cross T's and he has to dot I's, in an I-and-T
factory out in Van Nuys!

And how fortunate you are not Professor de Breeze, who has spent the past 32 years, if you please, trying to teach Irish ducks how to read Jivanese.

And suppose that you lived in that forest in France, where the average young person just hasn't a chance to escape from the perilous pants-eating plants! But your pants are safe! You're a fortunate guy. And you ought to be shouting "How lucky am I!"

And you're so, so, so lucky you're not a sock, left behind by mistake in the caverns of Krock!

That's why I say, "Duckie! Don't grumble! Don't stew! Some critters are much-much, oh, ever so much-much, so muchly much-much more unlucky than you!"

Reading and Sermon (Rev. Keithan)

For the story of the Hiroshima Children's Drawings to fully make sense, it's important to understand the context.

We'll pick up the story in November 1946. On November 10 of that year, Rev. A. Powell Davies preached a sermon called "Lest the Living Forget," which was his powerful reaction to a newspaper article showing images of the atomic bomb task force celebrating their work. The story included a photograph depicting two admirals smiling as a well-dressed woman cut a three-foot-high cake topped with angel-food puffs in the shape of the mushroom clouds.

I've only been able to find some short excerpts of the beginning, but it's very clear that Rev. Davies is so angry that he's struggling to find words appropriate for the pulpit. One of the things he says is this:

The naval officers concerned should apologize to the armed service of which they are a part, and to the American people. No apology would be sufficient to efface what it may mean to the people of the world. If you do not understand this, may God awaken you!

That sermon was so well-publicized that it came to the attention of an US official in the provisional government in Japan, who wrote to Rev. Davies about the plight of Japanese schoolchildren who lacked even the most basic of school supplies.

In response, Rev. Davies delivered a sermon in early 1947 entitled "In Reply to a Letter from Japan," to which the children of All Souls Church responded by collecting a half ton of pencils, crayons, paper, erasers, paste, and paper clips for the Hiroshima children. The supplies were sent to Japan and distributed to two schools and an orphanage.

In appreciation, the school children in Hiroshima sent artwork back to All Souls as gifts. A selection of them hang on the walls downstairs at the church, and if you've seen them you know that they are bright and hopeful.

Starting in 2005, a group of All Souls members decided to restore the drawings and attempt to locate the original artists. That began a major initiative that continues to this day as the Heiwa

Peace Project. Working with Japanese partners, more than 20 of the original artists were located. The project was the subject of a documentary film, called “Pictures from a Hiroshima Schoolyard,” that was released in 2013. The Heiwa Peace Project alternates between sponsoring trips to Japan and hosting delegations of visitors, and 2020 is a milestone year because it marks the 75th anniversary of the bombings.

So that’s a summary of the drawings. I want to say a little more about the larger context of the time, both to explain the power of the drawings and the partnership and to put our own current circumstances in perspective. Since Feb 29 of this year, approximately 60,000 Americans have died from COVID-19. On August 6 and 9, 1945, somewhere between 100 to 120,000 people in Hiroshima and Nagasaki were killed almost instantly. And it is estimated that several hundred thousand more people would die from radiation poisoning in the months that followed.

And here’s the final piece that’s critical to name. Many of us know about the internment of Japanese Americans in the United States during the War, which is now widely recognized for what it was—blatantly racist and unnecessary. What’s not widely known is how that racism operated within the war itself. Notably, there was significant public outcry around the world when the United States and allied forces bombed the city of Dresden, Germany, in an indiscriminate way that killed 10 to 20,000 civilians. But by the time the United States dropped the atomic bombs on Japan, we had already destroyed more than 60 Japanese cities and likely killed more than 130,000 people with essentially no public pushback.

I don’t know how intentional it was, but when A. Powell Davies spoke out, and when the individuals and families of All Souls donated school supplies, they were at least implicitly rejecting the racism of their time. And when some were cheering at the technological achievement of the atomic bomb—a mentality which laid the groundwork for the nuclear arms race and Cold War—our religious ancestors were calling for a response grounded in compassion and cooperation.

In his reflections last week, Rev. Tony Coleman invited us to consider several questions. He asked:

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?

He also invited us to consider both how interconnected we are, AND how racism results in such disparate outcomes.

Just two years after the horrors of 1945, children in Japan were able to send us artwork that’s full of life and hope. Despite the shameful actions of our government and the blatant racism of our own nation, we—the people at All Souls and some people halfway around the world—we were able to make a human connection based on a different set of values. Those same principles will serve us well now.

And I have a final thought about how all this ties together. It comes from a source I’ve quoted before, a book on organizational management theory by William R. Bridges called “Transitions.”

In that book, Bridges lays out a process that can help organizations adapt to significant change. The process has three distinct stages: Letting Go, the Neutral Zone, and the New Beginning.

The neutral zone is a time of unknowns and discomfort, when it's clear that things need to change but not clear what's going to happen. In this time, there's a critically important variable that defines whether or not a successful transition occurs. The anxiety of the time pulls us back to the comfort of our pre-existing patterns and ideas. In the midst of uncertainty, it's tempting to return to these old ways rather than risk becoming something new. But returning to the old ways isn't what's needed, and institutions that do that fail.

In the challenges presented by COVID-19, I think it's easy for us to yearn for a time when we can return to "normal" life. That's what our anxiety wants. Alongside this voice, we need to hear other ones. We need to hear the voices of our religious ancestors. We need to hear the voices crying out in the larger community. We need to hear the voice of our own conscience.

And we need to recognize, as deeply as we can, that "normal" wasn't working for a lot of people. According to the Poor People's Campaign, more than 250,000 people die in this country every year as a result of poverty and inequality.

So let's not go back to that. As we recover, let's not rebuild the same thing that existed before, because that thing didn't work. Rather than getting back to normal, let's get back to better.

At the end of the day, making change comes down to a simple premise: if you want things to turn out differently, you have to be willing to do things differently.

What always inspires me about change-makers is that they're not just playing within the existing set of rules, they're critiquing the rules and working to change the structure itself. For example, in a workshop on voting this past weekend at the Revolutionary Love Conference, Latosha Brown, founder of Black Voters Matter, said that their name was chosen to say "Black Voters" rather than "Black Votes" as a rejection of the norm that cares only about the transaction of political victory and not about the lives and needs of the people who are voting. She encouraged us not to just talk to likely voters, but to everyone. She called us, in her words, to be transformative, not just transactional.

We don't know how all this is going to turn out. We do know that the old ways were broken. And we do know that people who came before us—people who suffered unspeakable destruction, and people who responded to it—found a way forward.

My prayer, and my belief, is that so can we. Let's not return to normal. Let's be open to the changes that need to happen so that we can build something better.

Amen.

Music

"On Your Wings" (Sam Beam, AKA Iron and Wine)

God, there is gold hidden deep in the ground
God, there's a hangman who wants to come 'round
How we rise when we're born like the ravens in the corn
On your wings, on our knees, crawling careless from the sea

God, give us love in the time that we have
God, give us love in the time that we have

God, there are guns growin' out of our bones
God, every road takes us further from home
All these men that you made, how they wither in the shade
Of your trees, on your wings, we are carried to the sea

God, give us love in the time that we have
God, give us love in the time that we have

Offertory/Benediction (Rev. Coleman)

Friends, we hope that you've enjoyed this week's long-distance worship service, and we thank you for joining us. We have been so encouraged and heartened by the love that the All Souls community has embodied and shown over these many weeks. Despite this time of distancing, so many of you have continued living out the values of our community, the values of service, of justice, of compassion, of stewardship and care. And, friends, I want to invite you to make a gift to All Souls in whatever amount you can to ensure that we can continue to live out our values together as a church. Our commitment to generosity is the foundation upon which our community stands.

And with that, friends, I invite you to join me in a benediction.

Let us go forth from this time and this digital gathering space with a renewed sense of the preciousness of life, joined as a community of partners in our shared efforts to nurture love and to serve justice.