

## Worship transcript for August 2, 2020

### *Opening music*

“Yonder Come Day”

Yonder come day! Day is a-breakin’  
Yonder come day, o my soul  
Yonder come day! Day is a-breakin’  
Sun is a-risin’ in my soul!

### *Welcome and Chalice Lighting (Rev. Tony Coleman)*

Hello there and welcome to this week’s long-distance worship service. Thank you so much for joining us as we come together for a time of worship, reflection, and connection. Though our building is closed, our church is very much open, friends. Though we find ourselves in the midst of transition all around us, community can be our constant. Though we may be distanced, we don’t have to be alone.

You can check out the All Souls website for information about all kinds of virtual gatherings that will take place this Sunday and throughout the rest of the week. One event that I want to point out is a socially distanced candlelight vigil that will take place on the front steps of our church this Wednesday, August 5, at 6:30 pm. This vigil will be an opportunity to recognize the 75th anniversary of the United States’ dropping of an atomic bomb on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. All Souls joins with other organizations in the DC area to mark this important anniversary throughout the week, and, again, you can go to our website to find other ways you can get involved.

I also want to share a special welcome to Danielle Garrett who will be serving as our liturgist for this service. Danielle is an All Souls member who recently moved to Nashville, TN to start a new chapter of her life at Vanderbilt Divinity School.

Finally, speaking of new chapters, I want to thank each and every one of you who has wished me well and sent my family and me love as we prepare to start a new chapter of our own in TN. While this means that the next few months won’t look the way we anticipated, I’m so excited to be able to keep working with All Souls as part of our dynamic, diverse ministry team.

Friends, as we prepare ourselves for this time of worship, I invite you to join me in a chalice lighting:

Let this light be a guide as we make our way through the confusion, the chaos, and the crises of our lives. Let this light be a source of hope when we find ourselves in the dark valleys and low places. Let this light be a reminder of the energy and the power that rests inside us all.

*Pastoral Prayer (Danielle Garrett)*

As we prepare to pray together and bring our own joys and concerns into this sacred space, let us first take a moment to lift up prayers of healing and comfort for Leona, Dolores Miller's mother, who is grappling with a bout of pneumonia and recently tested positive for COVID-19.

And now, into this silence, I invite you to speak the names of the people and places you carry on your own heart this morning.

Will you join me in prayer?

God of many names- God of freedom and forgiveness, God of justice and mercy

Be with us as we gather in spirit this morning, closing the physical distance between us by sharing in this act of common worship.

In these days when the losses feel too great to bear and we are worn down, worried we will never bend the arc towards justice, help us to notice the small mercies, those moments when the burdens lift, even just a little, and hope breaks through. The kindness of friends, the beauty of the earth, the birth of a new baby.

During this time when there are so many reasons for righteous anger and vengeance feels like the easier path, help us to remember that mercy and justice are not incompatible. Help us to draw on the deep wells of love and compassion that are necessary to guide our struggle for freedom, liberation, and equality for all people.

And, at the end of the day, when the dishes aren't done and the work isn't finished, when we feel like we haven't done enough, like we aren't enough, help us to grant ourselves the mercy we need.

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 and the children of All Souls Church)*

“Rose Meets Mr. Wintergarten”

The All Souls theme for this summer’s threshold. As I mentioned last month, a threshold is actually part of a doorway. It’s the place where you cross from one space to the other.

Clara, can you point to the threshold? Eleanor, can you walk back and forth over the threshold?

But a threshold can represent crossing into a new friendship. As is what happens in our story today.

The morning the Summers family moved into their new house, they felt at home. Rose put up pictures. Baby Blossom watched.

Does that look right, Blossom?

Rose’s mom/dad planted flowers. It was a yard full of life.

But next door there was no colorful life. Next door lived Mr. Wintergarten. There were stories in the street about Mr. Wintergarten.

He’s mean!

And horrible!

He’s got a dog like a wolf!

And a saltwater crocodile!

They say he rides his crocodile at night.

And Gets ya!!!

(Kids scream.)

I don’t believe you. Don’t listen to them Blossom.

No one ever goes in there in case Mr. Wintergarten eats people.

If your ball ever goes over there, forget it!

Just then Rose's ball went flying straight over to Mr. Wintergarten's yard. Rose went to tell her dad.

My ball went into Mr. Wintergarten's yard.

Well, honeybunch, why don't you just go ask him for your ball back?

Because he eats kids!"

Maybe he'd like cookies instead.

Rose took the cookies and crossed the threshold to Mr Wintergarten's yard. She could see there was a dog, but no crocodile. She tossed the dog a cookie. Then she knocked on the door.

Who the heck is that?

It's me, Rose

What do you want?

I'm Rose Summers. I've come to ask for my ball back. I've brought cookies.

His dinner didn't look very good. But Rose could see he didn't eat children.

Go away!

But when Rose had gone, Mr. Wintergarten did something he hadn't done in a very long time. He went outside.

No one has ever asked for their ball back. Or brought cookies.

Then Mr Wintergarten kicked the ball, and his slipper, back over the fence.

(Kids cheer.)

Good kick!

Could someone please throw my slipper back?

Good throw! Let's play again tomorrow.

(Kids cheer.)

And they did.

*Reading (Rev. Coleman)*

“The Answering Machine” (Linda Pastan)

I call and hear your voice  
on the answering machine  
weeks after your death,  
a fledgling ghost still longing  
for human messages.

Shall I leave one, telling  
how the fabric of our lives  
has been ripped before  
but that this sudden tear will not  
be mended soon or easily?

In your emptying house, others  
roll up rugs, pack books,  
drink coffee at your antique table,  
and listen to messages left  
on a machine haunted

by the timbre of your voice,  
more palpable than photographs  
or fingerprints. On this first day  
of this first fall without you,  
ashamed and resisting

but compelled, I dial again  
the number I know by heart,  
thankful in a diminished world  
for the accidental mercy of machines,  
then listen and hang up.

*Message (Rev. Coleman)*

Last week I visited a retreat center in Maine. Several months before, I had been asked to serve as “minister of the week,” to maybe do a couple of workshops, lead chapel services, be available for pastoral counseling and spiritual reflection.

The summer’s theme, I was told, was going to be “joy.”

As such, the summer was going to feature a number of retreats oriented around finding joy or creating joy or experiencing joy in our everyday lives.

That, though, was before the country went into lockdown, before things got cancelled and rescheduled and reimagined, before the world changed.

So, when they told me that I could still come, even after everything changed, I was surprised. And, when I found out that the summer's theme would remain "joy," I was curious. I thought: how could "joy" still be the theme for this year's retreats.

As COVID-19 continues to ravage our population, as protests and racial reckoning continues to rock our news cycles and city streets, why joy?

Why not a retreat about something that speaks a little more directly to what we're going through together? Why not a retreat about resilience or faith? Why not a retreat about heartbreak or responding to hatred? Why joy?

Is it that we need an escape? I wondered. Is our time of retreat this year meant to be, in fact, a means of distracting ourselves from everything that is woefully less than joyful in our lives right now?

If this were true, I don't think anyone could fault us, given everything we're collectively struggling to hold right now.

Come August, it will be 6 months that the United States has been in pandemic lockdown, and yet, we continue to reach record-breaking rates of infection and numbers of deaths.

Meanwhile, our streets continue to quake with marching feet and shouts of anger and grief as people leave their homes to protest the enduring legacy of white supremacy.

And then, we can't even look to our country's highest leaders for solace, for the comfort of competent policy or sound planning, because they seem to be only making matters worse.

Listening to our president and his politicians deny how the pandemic is getting worse rather than better, listening to them throw gasoline on the fires of racial unrest that are tearing through our cities and psyches, it can be heard to know where to turn for hope.

I don't think it's an exaggeration to get biblical about it and say that we're walking through a valley of the shadow of death, and there's no fresh plain, no wildflowered meadow, no ocean shore, no end to the valley's long shadow in sight.

This phrase, walking through the valley of the shadow of death, comes from Psalm 23.

For those who may not be familiar with what the Psalms are, they comprise one entire book of the Hebrew Bible.

A collection of poetic verses and hymns, they evoke and describe a wide variety of human experiences.

There are psalms of lament, “out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice” (Psalm 130).

There are psalms of thanksgiving and celebration, “I will glory in the Lord; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the Lord with me” (Psalm 118).

And there are psalms like Psalm 23, psalms that state a set of beliefs, psalms of faith, psalms of trust.

Psalm 23 reads:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness  
for his name’s sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil,  
for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord

forever.

For those of us who are familiar with Judeo-Christian funerary rituals, this may not be the first time that you’ve heard Psalm 23.

Since the advent of the 20th century, families often ask for Psalm 23 to be part of a service to memorialize their loved ones.

The Psalm evokes a sense of victory and faith, suggesting that even though the speaker, “walk[s] through the valley of the shadow of death, [she] will fear no evil.”

The psalmist sings, “[The Lord] prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies...surely,” as most translations go, “surely goodness and mercy shall follow me/all the days of my life.”

We can all use some of that certainty right about now, couldn't we?

What a blessing it would be to look at all that we face right now, to walk in the valley of the shadow of death as we do now, and to still be able to say that goodness and mercy “surely” shall follow us.

In doing a bit of research about this psalm, I discovered that the sense of trust and faith goes even further than most translations would suggest. The word “follow” in the phrase “surely goodness and mercy shall follow me” is, in Hebrew, *yirdphuni*.

What's fascinating is that in most other places in the Hebrew Bible, a more literal translation of this word is “pursue,” or even in some cases, “chase.”

In other words, the Psalmist very likely wasn't just saying that goodness and mercy will “follow” him. He was saying, in fact, that these two blessings, these two rays of light in the valley's shadow, shall surely “pursue” him.

Goodness and mercy don't just follow behind our lives like some wide-eyed sheep.

They pursue us, according to the Psalmist, actively, directly, intentionally, chasing us down wherever we may go, no matter the valley, despite the darkness, regardless of circumstance.

It's that sense of pursuit that, for me, rests at the foundation of the emotional power of Linda Pastan's poem, “The Answering Machine.”

The speaker finds herself in a valley of her own. In the poem's second stanza she laments the tear in the fabric of her life that will not be mended soon or easily.

Someone dear to her has died, the speaker tells us. Someone so dear to her, in fact, that she knows the person's phone number by heart, she says, a mark of real intimacy nowadays when folks store such information in their SIM cards rather than in their hearts.

The speaker is in grief, languishing in stillness as the people around her “roll up rugs, pack books, [and] drink coffee at your antique table.”

She sits, heavy and heart-broken, but from within those broken pieces, she finds the phone number for the person she mourns and calls.

“Ashamed and resisting but compelled,” she calls, and hears the voicemail recording of the one she misses, and she finds a moment of respite, a recorded blessing, a reason for gratitude—The speaker changes, from languishing in grief to being “thankful in a diminished world/for the accidental mercy of machines.”

Even though she was mourning, even though she was ashamed and resistant, even though she was uncertain and maybe even afraid, the speaker in Linda Pastan's poem found mercy.

Perhaps, it was, as the speaker suggests, merely accidental.

But, perhaps also, friends, what appears as accidental to us, is, in fact, the result of intentional, holy pursuit.

Perhaps, the universe of things, perhaps the Spirit of Life, perhaps the Lord God who shepherded the author of Psalm 23, maybe the forces of goodness and mercy had been in pursuit of the poem's speaker all along until, finally, she made the call and discovered the mercy, the joy, the connection with her dearly departed that had been waiting for her, all along.

Friends, like the speaker in this poem, we are in the valley, we are swallowed up, in one way or another, in the shadow.

There are forces all around us that threaten us with death.

A sickness seems to have the power to strike at any moment; white supremacy clearly has the power to infect our communities and, for some of us, end our lives without announcement or hesitation.

We are in the valley of the shadow of death, friends. And yet, what Psalm 23 tells us, what "The Answering Machine" shows us is that goodness and mercy don't just follow behind.

They pursue us, actively and unrelentingly, showing up in the intimacy of Zoom calls with loved ones we went from speaking to a few times a year to virtually gathering with once a week.

Goodness and mercy pursue us in the whimsy and joy of the children and grandchildren with whom we've been sharing 24 hours of everyday, even as those children might wear on our nerves, too.

Goodness and mercy show up in the art, the poetry, the stray creative interest that we've finally found time to dedicate our energy to.

Goodness and mercy pursue us in the unexpected kindnesses that show up in our lives: the connections with dear folks near and far; the connections with ourselves as we dive into hobbies we never thought we'd have the time to take up; and the connections with the Spirit of Love who shows up to remind us just how resilient life can be.

In other words, rather than being a distraction, joy may be the perfect thing to make this summer's theme.

There may not, in fact, ever have been a better time to focus on joy, because, thanks to goodness and mercy's loving pursuit of our lives, joy is there to be found. It is the sunlight that peeks in through all the broken places in our lives.

Where is joy peeking into your life?

Where do you see examples of goodness and mercy not just following but indeed pursuing you?

What have the broken places in your life let in, now and maybe for the very first time?

Friends, the point is this: whenever we find ourselves in the valley, joy is there, somewhere, waiting to be found, the sometimes quiet and the sometimes overwhelming blessings of a holy pursuit.

Joy is the reminder that we shall forever dwell in the house of God, as the Psalmist puts it.

We are forever wrapped in the embrace of Love, the power of sacred Presence, the never-ending arc of the moral Universe.

And so, even while we walk in the valley of the shadow of death, friends, let us fear no evil. Goodness and mercy shall surely pursue us, all the days of our lives—now and forever.

Ashe and Amen.

*Music (Rochelle Rice, vocals; Janelle Gill, piano; Romeir Mendez, bass; Dante Pope, drums)*

“Mountains” (Rochelle Rice)

We went up to the mountain  
Way up in the hills  
The wind was still and sweet, yeah  
And took away my will  
Blowing all your mercy down  
Wipe away my face clear  
Still and moving, devastating and life giving

Don't know why we came here  
What lesson to learn  
I know that I'll accept my fate  
Crushed and lifeless under all my hurt  
“No, that's not your path, my child.  
Not the way it should be,  
But the journey will kill you, so rest yourself a little while here with me”

We went down in the valley  
Where the trees knew my name  
I laid my face in soil  
Used my hands to till up all my shame  
You bent down kissed my filthy hands

Laid your clean face to mine  
And said, "Breathe. Pray. I love you. You're still mine."

Hold me close, hold me close and never let me go  
And make my arms to fly  
On my own, on my own in this old world  
Nothing's all right  
Meet me up on the mountain

I go back to that mountain  
I know you're not there  
And 'tho I cannot see your face  
The scent of you is still real clear  
We both know that I'll falter  
Misstep most the time,  
But I'll never forget the way you healed me and fixe

*Offertory/Benediction (Danielle Garrett)*

As we near the end of our service, I invite you to make a donation to support the ongoing ministry of All Souls. You can make a one-time or recurring donation by going to our homepage, by mailing a check to the church, or by texting your gift. We are so grateful for your generosity.

And, if you've joined us on Sunday morning, I invite you to return at 11am and join your fellow congregants for fellowship and conversation during our weekly Coffee Hour. You can find the log-in information on the All Souls homepage.

I leave you with a prayer from former All Souls minister A. Powell Davies.

"Oh God, we know we are a long way off, yet we can love no other journey. So guide us then, that be it soon or late, we shall arrive."

Go in peace. Amen.