

## Worship transcript for August 16, 2020

*Welcome (Rev. Kathleen Rolenz)*

From many places of the spirit, we gather this day. From places of anticipation and excitement for a new beginning in a beloved space. From many places of the spirit, we gather with uncertainty and trepidation for all that we do not yet know. From many places of the spirit, we gather this day with our eyes and our ears, hearts and minds open to the new possibilities that change will bring.

Come let us worship together.

Welcome and thank you for joining us for worship at All Souls. I'm Reverend Kathleen Rolenz and I am serving as your interim minister, sharing today's service with Reverend Louise Green, minister of congregational care, and the worship team at All Souls. This is a special service for a number of reasons. This Sunday marks the beginning of recording our services in the sanctuary of All Souls. And since you cannot come to the sanctuary just yet, we, your ministers, your worship team and staff at All Souls wanted to come to you and bring it to you.

This place holds deep history, tradition and memories, and we are so glad that you're part of it today.

This is also a special Sunday for me as it marks my first Sunday with you in worship. As I stand in this historic pulpit, I am mindful and I recall the ancestors and forebears who were inspired to begin All Souls of 200 years of ministers and laity, of guest preachers and renowned speakers from your pulpit. It is with honor and with joy that I join you for this first time together. We appreciate you, all of you, in the Washington, D.C. area and everywhere else who are joining us this morning. And we are so grateful to welcome you as part of All Souls' community.

Come let us worship together.

*Pastoral Concerns, and Prayer (Rev. Louise Green)*

I'm Reverend Louise Green, the Minister of Congregational Care. It's good to be with you this morning or evening, whenever you watch. Each week, we name into the sanctuary some of the joys and concerns of our congregation, our country and world. First of all, big congratulations to Emily Hildreth and Chris Nekarda on the birth of their son, Elliot George Lewis Nekarda, on July 28. Elliott joins older brother Joaquim (Quimy), and everyone is doing well. Warm wishes to Ryan McChristian for safe travel and new beginnings. This week, Ryan moves to Conakry, Guinea, in West Africa for a two-year appointment with the Foreign Service. I want to also celebrate the historic choice of a Black woman for vice presidential candidate this week, Kamala Harris. So exciting to witness this breakthrough. An inspiring moment in the U.S. that means so much to so many. Brenda Barbour and Laton Palmer let us know that their 21 year old daughter, Lane Palmer, was hospitalized for seven days. Lane was struggling with pneumonia and breathing issues and was finally able to come home Tuesday night. We send healing love to Lane and the family after a very stressful week. And our hearts are with our All Souls religious educator, Dolores Miller, on the death of her mother, Leona, on the night of August 7. We mourn

with Dolores, her partner Eddie, and all the extended family as they grieve and celebrate Leona's life.

And now a moment for your names and situations which we will hold into this space and in the chalice of your hearts, a moment of silence.

Would you pray or meditate with me? Holy One of many names, sacred beyond naming. We gather in great change. There are hours when things come together and more days when they fall apart. We feel waves of coherence and clarity and then patches of deep fog and confusion. This time is full of challenges and we need each other to be with each beating heart gathered in this deep mystery of life, in the struggle and the power of community. May we at times have the wisdom to utterly let go. May we give up perfection, may we ask for help, that we might receive new resources flowing in? Let us move knowing that under all the waves of change there is ground. The ground is what connects us to love.

Blessed be. 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 Message (Rev. Rolenz)*

For all those joys and concerns spoken and those unspoken we hold in our hearts this day. Amen.

The reading is entitled “Some Kinds of Forever” by Brenda Hillman.

“The unknowns are up early, they browse through the bronze porch bells, crows call and late apples blaze towards Western emptiness.

In your illness, the edges hesitate like the revolt of workers, they will take a while.

Here comes the fond, mild winter, other realms are noisy and unanimous.

You tap the screen and dream while waiting. Four kinds of forever visit you today. Something, nothing, everything and art, greater than you are and of your own making.”

Last January, I was headed for Annapolis and lost my way and I got stuck in the ice on this side of forever. I suppose I'd better explain.

I was up early. Just like the unknowns in Brenda Hillman's poem. The unknowns that morning were all about one of those tricky winter storms we get around here that could miss us entirely, could turn into black ice rain or dumped three inches of snow in an hour. I thought if I was up early enough, maybe I could beat the unknowns and head to Annapolis, where I was serving as their interim minister.

Now, I'm originally from northeast Ohio, where it snows all the time. So I look skeptically at the snow warnings on the TV around here. And I had a job to do. So I set forth.

20 minutes later, the rain had turned indeed to heavy, wet snow and it was falling fast. My usual route 29 North was closed because of a series of accidents. No problem, I thought. I plugged in an alternative route on Google Maps and I was humming along pretty well, or so I thought, until I realized that the back roads were also getting heavy with snow and quite slippery, and I seemed to be going farther and farther in the wrong direction. I realized I was way off course and that little blue dot I was following was stuck and so was I.

After spinning my wheels in a snowbank for a time, I got out of the car to look for a street sign, anything that could tell me where I was.

And I found that I was stuck on Forever Lane. Well, it didn't take long to realize. I just needed to take a snow day. So I got unstuck. And I'm here to tell you about it today. So you may be wondering, why am I telling you this story about what happened last January in the middle of August? Well, in so many ways, this Covid time has felt like a forever snow day, like our lives are perpetually on hold.

We want this to be more like a snooze button that we can hit for a defined time and then return to normal as we knew it. We also know that our desire to return to normal has revealed ever more clearly the deep fissures and cracks of economic and racial disparities which have been there all along.

So nothing about this time of life is normal, and I think we all recognize that we must envision a new normal together.

This is exactly what happens when you invite an interim minister to walk with you during this time of congregational transition. It is a time to reflect on what was good about your past, what lessons were learned, what you might need to let go of or change, and what will be helpful to move you into the next time, the next phase of your congregational life. You know, I know that for some of you, you may think of this interim time as kind of one big snow day to get from one

minister to the next. And I get that. I really do. You've had a lot of transitions in your congregational life, and some of you may really just want to get through these two years of interim ministry to find your next forever or settled minister. However, just as our nation is experiencing two culture changing shifts, this global pandemic and a renewed commitment for racial justice, so do congregations experience huge cultural shifts. So what can we use as a guide to help us navigate this terrain?

As your interim I have what's called five developmental tasks that provide us with a road map. You could even call it like a treasure map for congregations in transition. So I got to tell you what they are. This is the short version. The tasks of interim ministry typically 1) engage with the congregation's history, 2) explore and recognize a congregation's unique identity, 3) clarify leadership roles, 4) broaden and deepen a congregation's relationship with denominational resources, and then — getting closer towards the end of the interim time, here's a quote from the interim handbook — 5) ensure that a congregation is ready to embrace the future with anticipation and zest.

Don't forget about the zest part.

So over the next two years, you are likely to hear at least one sermon from me focused on each one of these five tasks. And we will spend some time unpacking what that means for where you are.

But for today, I just want to go back to those three questions that we sang earlier as a hymn in our service, the three questions, which for me frame a kind of descant for our time together.

Where do you come from? What are you? Where are you going?

So remember the first of those five tasks for interim ministers: engaging with the congregation's history? I have to tell you, I am having a blast reading Lawrence Staple's book "Washington Unitarians" as a way of introducing myself to your history. I am learning about your humble beginnings. From June 2nd, 1820, where it was announced, "the long room over the public bath in C Street shall be engaged by the Unitarian Christians for carrying on public worship on Sabbath days," And then later to Edward Everett Hale's 1904 comment that said, "Washington is no longer the mudhole you remember. It is really a beautiful city with many of the conveniences and luxuries of civilized life."

I wish Hale could see what an amazing and vital city Washington, D.C. is today.

I haven't yet spent much time in your city, in our city, but I have already fallen in love with it.

So as we move closer to All Souls' 200th anniversary in November 2021, we will continue to mine your history as it illuminates not only where did you come from, but those other two questions.

Who and what are you, and where are you going?

Where did you come from? What are you?

Well, I'll be asking that question of you as members of All Souls. Where did you come from? What formed you? But you can also ask me the same question, where did I come from? Who am I? It's a fair question.

Well, my own DNA test told me pretty much what I already knew, that I came from Hungarian and Croatian peasants. It didn't mention that I also come from Tennessee tobacco farmers who saw higher education as a way out of digging ditches and harvesting tobacco. And it didn't say that I came out of the white flight suburbs of Akron, Ohio, the one time rubber capital of the world, which built tires and a middle class lifestyle for my parents. It also didn't mention that I came from two parents who would burst into song on road trips, much to the embarrassment of their three children.

Where did I come from?

I come from a Missouri Senate Lutheran church until they kicked me out of confirmation class at age 13.

And then I come from the Unitarian Universalist Church of Kent, Ohio, where I found a radical, non dogmatic, life affirming faith in college that has completely captivated my mind and my heart and my spirit.

And finally, I came to Unitarian Universalist ministry serving as a minister of two congregations, Knoxville, Tennessee, Cleveland, Ohio, for a total of 20 years as their settled minister.

And when my husband retired in 2016, the co-ministry we shared ended and I embarked upon the phase of my career, which is serving as an accredited interim minister.

And one of the questions I'm often asked usually at the beginning of an interim time is: why do you choose interim ministry instead of a settlement, instead of seeking a settled position?

Well, as the song goes, I've looked at life from both sides now, experiencing a deep joy and satisfaction of serving in a long time settled ministry, as well as the clarity of a ministry that has a defined beginning and end. Because in truth, all ministries are time bound from the start, even when we call a minister to stay with us for an indefinite tenure.

And while long time ministries are desirable for many reasons, they can also feel like driving down a road that you thought would go on forever and instead find yourself spinning your wheels in a rut at the end of a dead end street.

The interim minister's job can involve showing up with a metaphorical shovel and bag of salt to help a congregation move from one of those stuck places into their new future. So when we asked together, What are you? Who are you? I always remember that my job as your interim minister is not to change you, but to illuminate you, to describe what I see and what I feel about who you are now.

You know, in some ways, it's not unlike what happened when my husband and I recently sold our home. The realtor came over and asked if he could make suggestions about staging our house. I was pretty nervous about that. I had heard horror stories of realtors insisting that clients buy new furniture or artwork which they wouldn't use past the staging process. But our realtor came over and looked at the furniture arrangement and he said, you know, have you ever tried doing it just this way?

And with a few adjustments, it opened up more space, I swear it seemed to bring in more light, new possibilities, and happily a buyer for our home.

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

That last question, of course, is the big question for the rest of 2020 and beyond.

Where are we going? That's my job to help you discern where you are going as a congregation, given your past, understanding your identity in all its complexity in a new way, making necessary leadership changes, reaching for outside consultations if necessary, and getting ready, really ready, for your next ministry.

So our next big question is, how will we use the time we have?

So do you remember Brenda Hillman's poem that framed the sermon today? She wrote in response to friends of hers who were experiencing chronic illness, which also speak to these pandemic times?

She wrote, in your illness, the edges hesitate, but it's the beginning and the end of the poem that reverberated with me the most as I thought about this particular service with you. Because the unknowns are indeed up early.

How long will this pandemic last? How will we be able to sustain beloved community while practicing social distancing well, into 2021. And personally for me, how in the world am I going to get to know you, to build trust with you, to build a relationship with you, if we can't meet in person, if we can't sit down over a cup of coffee?

All of these questions, of course, are real and legitimate, but here's the last part of the poem I want you to think about. You tap the screen and dream while waiting. Four kinds of forever visit you today: something, nothing, everything and art.

My experience as an interim, while working with congregations who are hoping for their next forever minister, is that at any given time something, nothing, and everything happens sometimes all at once.

And although I've been your interim for just over 16 days now, I can tell you that something and everything is already happening here at All Souls.

I am learning about your triumphs and your failures, your pride and your wounds. I'm learning about what a dedicated, ambitious, passionate, resilient and loving congregation you are.

I'm learning about your incredible staff and worship team who care deeply about you, the members whom we serve.

I'm learning about this historic place of All Souls, the place it has in the city and in our faith tradition.

So much is already happening.

But look, there are going to be times when it feels like nothing is happening, but that is when I believe our best and our hardest work will be done.

Because it is sometimes in that holy pause, that liminal space of not knowing, when our truest self is revealed, when our deepest values are strengthened, when our mission and our purpose become crystal clear.

It is also in the arts for which this church is known, and it is the arts that provide both a score and a frame to hear and to see All Souls in a new way.

Four kinds of forever visit you today: something, nothing, everything, and art. For art is both greater than you are and of your own making.

You know, sometime in the summer of 2022, I'll deliver my last sermon to you, and we'll look back on this Sunday to see all that has transpired between now and then, and how you and I both have been changed by this time. And we'll reflect on the words from musician Dawes, who says the only point of clocks and maps, the only point of looking back, is to see how far we've come.

All Souls, we won't get to forever together because it doesn't really exist. But we will get to someplace even better. For all that has happened along the way will remind us of how far we've come. Welcome to the journey, dear ones. I am so happy to be here with you.

*Offertory (Rev. Green)*

In this time of virtual distance, we don't have as many times to say thank you, thank you for your generosity of your time, your treasure and all the ways that you keep our congregation going. We do appreciate your gifts and we need them, because they fund tangible things, programs, staff, all the ways that we do good in the world with our 10% offering. So please give as generously as you can in love for this congregation. Thank you.

*Benediction (Rev. Rolenz)*

Here now, these words by Audre Lorde.

“And I dream now of our coming together encircled, driven not only by love, but by lust for a working tomorrow. The flights of this journey mapless, uncertain and necessary as water go forth from this place.”

Knowing you are good, knowing you are loved, go forth from this time, renewed and refreshed. Our worship has ended, letting our service begin.