

Worship transcript for December 6, 2020

Prelude (Jen Hayman, Rochelle Rice, and Amelia Peele, trio)

“Humility” (traditional Shaker tune; arr. by Ron Jeffers)

I will bow and be simple
I will bow and be free
I will bow and be humble
Yes, bow like the willow tree

I will bow, this is my token
I will wear the easy yoke
I will bow and be broken
Yes, I'll fall upon the rock.

Call to Worship and (Rev. Kathleen Rolenz)

(by Robert French Leavens)

Holy and beautiful the custom which brings us together
In the presence of the Most High
To face our ideals
To remember our loved ones in absence
To give thanks, to make confession, to offer forgiveness
To be enlightened and to be strengthened.
Through this hour breathes the worship of ages,
The cathedral music of history.
Three unseen guests attend, faith hope and love
Let all our hearts prepare them place.

Chalice Lighting (Chris and Olivia Fields Figueredo)

We Light Our Flaming Chalice to illuminate the world we seek.

In the search for truth, may we be just;

in the search for justice may we be loving;

and, in loving, may we find peace.

Hymn

“Where Do We Come From?”

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?
Mystery. Mystery. Life is a riddle and a mystery.

Welcome (Morgan Duncan)

Good Morning! Welcome to All Souls Church! My name is Morgan Duncan and I get to be your worship associate this morning

Since 1821 the members of this church have been walking together toward an important place, a place that Martin Luther King called the Beloved Community. We are moving ever forward toward a place where walls that separate us fall away so that we can stand together as one human family. With joy and determination we walk this path together, regardless of where you began your journey, how much or how little you carry with you, or with whom you choose to hold hands along the way. We are all going there to lend our hands to the creation of a diverse, justice-seeking, spirit-growing community that is true to the dream of all souls. We invite you to join us on this grand adventure.

I'd like to extend a special welcome to those of you who are visiting this morning. We're glad you're with us. Feel free to let us know in the chat where you're viewing us from, and if you'd like to receive our weekly e-newsletter.

We move now to our moment of "Beholding". As the music plays, scroll through the Zoom gallery and share a wave or a greeting in the chat with some of the other folks who are part of the great family of All Souls.

Story for All Ages (Dolores Miller and the children of All Souls Church)

"Goodnight Moon" (Margaret Wise Brown)

In a warm cozy room there was a telephone, and a red balloon.
And a picture of a cow jumping over the moon.
And there were three little bears sitting on chairs.
And two little kittens.
And a pair of mittens.
And a little toy house.
And a young mouse.
And a comb and a brush.
And a bowl full of mush.
And a quiet old lady whispering "Hush."

Goodnight room.
Goodnight moon.
Goodnight cow jumping over the moon.
Goodnight phone.
Goodnight red balloon.
Goodnight bears. Goodnight chairs.
Goodnight kittens.
Goodnight mittens.
Goodnight little house. Goodnight little mouse.

Goodnight comb. Goodnight brush.
Goodnight everybody.
Goodnight mush.
And goodnight to the old lady whispering “Hush.”

Congregational Concerns and Prayer (Rev. Rob Keithan)

Good morning All Souls. I’m Rev. Rob Keithan, and I have the honor of serving as your Minister for Social Justice. Even in these COVID times, All Souls has a lot going on! And I should say—if you’re feeling discombobulated or disconnected with All Souls, and/or your life in general, it’s OK. These are strange times. That said, if you’re intentional about participating in a class or small group ministry, we think it’ll help. So here are a few updates and invitations.

First a reminder that we offer Religious Education for Children and Youth every Sunday, beginning at 9:30 AM. In addition to that, other activities are planned and can be found on the church’s website and in the e-newsletter.

We also have many offerings from are incredible Adult Spiritual Development Team: explorations of poems, book groups, and starting this Tuesday, Dec 8, a two-session experience facilitated by psychotherapist and ASD committee member, Claudia Esteve entitled Making Friends with Our Emotions. You can find out about these offerings, and more, on the Adult Spiritual Development page of the website under Spirituality and Lifelong Religious Education. <https://all-souls.org/spirituality/re/asd/>.

And my monthly drop-in covenant group meets tomorrow from 1:00-2:30 PM to reflect on December’s Theme, which is ritual. The Zoom info is on the homepage and all are welcome.

And check out all Holiday events happening this month.

Our monthly Vespers service, is this Wednesday, December 9, at 7:30 PM. And we’re excited to announce a special new event—a Solstice Stroll – on Sunday, December 20, from 2 – 5 PM. In anticipation of the longest night of the year, join us in community on the outdoor grounds of the church.

The meditation labyrinth will open at noon; from 2:00 to 5:00 pm, join us for a “night and light” tableau, luminary walk, live music with jazz combo, and a bonfire. The event will conclude with a Solstice blessing of community and sanctuary at 5:02 pm, exactly twelve hours before the winter solstice. This all-ages event is free and socially distanced. Per DC COVID guidelines, registration is required; please register for one of the hour-long time slots.

We turn now to our pastoral concerns.

First, an institutional concern for Middle Collegiate Church in New York City, our longtime partner on interfaith racial justice organizing and also the Revolutionary Love conference this past April. Middle Collegiate’s sanctuary, and perhaps their entire church, was destroyed by a massive fire early Saturday morning that spread from a vacant building next door. Their building

has stood on that spot since 1892, and so our hearts go out to our siblings in faith as they grieve the loss of their sacred space.

Here at All Souls, we offer our deepest condolences to Chris Green on the death of his mother a few weeks ago. Our hearts go out to Chris, Merrie, and their children Sean and Iris.

In the silence that follows, please say aloud the names of those you carry on your heart this morning.

Spirit of Life and Love, God that we know by many names,
In a time with so many challenges, with so much that is different,
remind us of the strength, the creativity, and the resolve that endures.
As we grieve the rituals and traditions we must set aside this year, help us find new ways to connect. New ways to celebrate that which we hold dear.
Remind us that every sunrise brings a new day and new possibility.

Amen.

Hymn 123

“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 (Morgan Duncan)

“A Ritual to Read to Each Other” (William E. Stafford)

If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood
storming out to play through the broken dike.

And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail,
but if one wanders the circus won't find the park,
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk:
though we could fool each other, we should consider—
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;
the signals we give — yes or no, or maybe —
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

Sermon (Rev. Rolenz)

“Rituals That Shape Us”

Somehow as a child, I was never read the classic book, “Good Night Moon.” So when Dolores proposed it as the Story for All Ages, I asked “what’s that got to do with the December theme of ritual?” Her wise response was to simply give me a copy of the book – and then, I understood. Anyone who has tucked a child into bed at night knows how important those bedtime rituals are. So when I visited my granddaughters at Thanksgiving, I brought my copy of Goodnight Moon. And although they are too young right now to fully appreciate it, I read it to them, as they appeared to listen intently, watching as I touched the things around them and said “Goodnight crib, goodnight favorite binky, goodnight rubber slobbery thing, goodnight Runa, Goodnight Ellis.” And we did the next night as well, and I realized the reason why that book has had such staying power all these years, since it was first introduced in 1947. It creates a kind of blessing of objects as a way of thanking them and calling them – and us – to rest. It’s because of the power of ritual to shape and sustain us.

The theme for December is ritual, and the reason is fairly obvious. This is a season of year when we turn to rituals, almost instinctively. Our ancient world ancestors knew that daylight appeared to be lessening, and the nights lengthening and that the winter solstice was a time of rich, deep darkness making the stars and moon appear that much brighter in the night sky. Christianity appropriated and adapted these seasonal rituals and featured the birth of its most prominent star – Jesus – around the Winter Solstice. Judaism’s Hannukah, which begins this Thursday evening, remembers an ancient victory over oppression through the family ritual of a week of lighting of menorah candles.

Beyond these religious rituals that are so prominent in our culture during December are all the personal, secular rituals which have come to frame this season. For me, the Christmas season cannot begin until Santa Claus comes down 5th Avenue in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. All the stores who put their Christmas stuff on the shelves by Halloween incur my irritation and wrath. No Christmas songs are to be played until after the big dude arrives. Watching The Christmas Story movie with my family and reciting the lines together have all been part of what used to make this season bright for me.

Yet, we also know that this holiday season will be like none other we have experienced. All the experiences surrounding this season that we cherish and take for granted must be different this year. With the latest spike in covid-19 cases, it's very likely that most of us will be staying home and telling our kids and grandkids that Santa will be zooming into our homes this year. The things that we may have grumbled about in the past— the crowds at the malls, the non-stop Christmas songs over the airways, having to buy gifts for people we barely know — we may now look at those things with nostalgia, remembering that the malls weren't really that bad after all and well — I'd kinda like to hear "Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer" while shopping for that gift.

Let's acknowledge that for many, the holiday season is a time that can be difficult enough as it is — a time of missing who isn't with us any more — but the pandemic has heaped upon us a whole new level of grief. Since the pandemic began, I've lost eight colleagues this year, all of them deaths unrelated to Covid. While some of these colleagues were closer than others, their deaths have left a hole. For over a quarter of a million Americans who have lost their lives to this virus, their families will be mourning their absence. The usual rituals which we create to acknowledge death and to grieve in person has been temporarily taken from us as well. And while I have found the on-line memorials surprisingly moving and meaningful, it is no substitute for our bodies grieving together in real proximity.

So I've been thinking a lot about the role that ritual plays because of the absence of them in my life — and perhaps our common life as members and friends of All Souls. Ritual — as understood in religious terms, are those enactments, behaviors, gestures, habits and traditions which deepen your understanding of meaning. Rituals are intended to help us feel a sense of connection to the mystery that is the self, to the mystery of other human beings and to the mystery beyond both our comprehension. They can be framed as grand religious enactments, such as the Christmas or Easter Mass or the culmination of a Yom Kippur service — or they can be as simple sitting zazen and having ceremonial tea; or walking the labyrinth in quiet contemplation.

One of my tasks as your interim minister is explore your history and how that history has shaped your identity. The rituals a church enacts over and over again are a form of communication — they say "This is what is important to us." My task is to find out "why." Where did these rituals come from? What do they mean? What role do they play in the identity of a congregation? So, I was fortunate this week to be able to ask those questions of some All Souls members who participated in the drop-in group to talk about ritual. I told them they were going to be my beta test group for this morning's sermon.

“Tell me about what rituals you think are important to you around this holiday season?” I asked. “Ringing the bells” one member said. “Say more,” I asked. “Every Christmas Eve when we sing a particular hymn, we ring bells – everybody brings a bell or gets a bell...” it’s so chaotic another person laughed, “the sanctuary is just full of bell sounds...” “Silent night, of course” said another. “We darken the sanctuary – and in the darkness of that full sanctuary, the candles are lit one by one and we sing together, and I know Christmas has begun...” And other things too were named – while not a ritual – they are like ritual objects – a beautifully decorated Christmas tree; the way the church looks and smells during the holiday season; these are all touchstones that mark the time, knowing that like time – all things will pass away. The season will be over – the decorations will go down – and we will then go into what the Christian calendar calls “Ordinary Time” for a while.

So All Souls, I want you to know that while we can’t re-create these beloved rituals, we are reinventing them. We will have two Christmas Eve services, at 7 and 10 pm as usual. The 7 PM will feature the Christmas pageant. It won’t be as chaotic as you’re used to – but heart warming nevertheless. And at 7 PM you’ll still hear the organ, and in the darkness of your own living rooms, you’ll light a candle with hundreds of other souls, and sing Silent Night together, just as always. In addition, we’re offering you a chance to come to the church in person on Sunday, December 20th for the Solstice Stroll – to enjoy music, the labyrinth, and to connect with the church, while being physically – but not emotionally or spiritually – distant from one another.

These rituals are imbued with meaning – not from some distant deity, but because of the power they have to shape our lives. I asked the drop-in group another question: “what do you feel are some of the ritual anchors in All Souls liturgy that shouldn’t be changed?” One person answered immediately: “Spirit of Life. We have sung Spirit of Life every Sunday for over 20 years.” But, I thought to myself, “what if your next minister or ministers wanted to sing something else instead? Would that be a deal-breaker?” As an interim, I’ve learned the hard way that even for ritually allergic Unitarian Universalists, there are some touchstones of worship that have grown deep roots in the life of a congregation. “What other rituals do you think are important to members of All Souls?” I asked. Someone said “Carrying the chalice in during the processional.” Another member jumped in “I’ve never liked the fact we light it from the back of the sanctuary, hidden away. I’ve always thought it should be lit in the presence of the community.” Yes,” I said, “so that the fire of commitment of the gathered ignite the flame and begin that portion of the worship service.”

Covid-19 has both upended many beloved traditions and rituals; and has forced the innovation of many more. So while I would still much prefer to be with you in the embodied ritual we know and love as All Souls worship, crisis does create opportunity and innovation. How might we create new rituals post-Covid, in a world that will certainly include both on-line and in person worship? How can we include, welcome, support and sustain members who are not able to be physically present?

For now, the grand spectacle of corporate worship must give way to a quieter, smaller, but not lesser form of ritual. In fact, people are figuring out all kinds of ways to create rituals in their homes and with friends. One of the book discussions being offered this month was the inspiration for this month’s theme “The Power of Ritual: Turning Everyday Activities into

Soulful Practices.” In that book, Casper Ter Kuile invites his readers to think beyond the traditional – that the ordinary things we do can be transformed into sacred ritual by our awareness and our attention. We can read – or we can practice *lectio divina* – sacred reading, by savoring instead of speed-reading texts where we find deep meanings. We can create the Sabbath intentionally – whether by walking away from our computers or investing time in nature without the ever-present cell phone in our pockets. And of course, mealtime can be a ritual of attention and presence; of gratitude and grace. It’s all available to us, if we but pay attention.

One of the rituals I’ve always appreciated about All Souls liturgy is your love for poetry as sacred text. Rabbi Chaim Stern once wrote about ritual that it is “poetry in action”. In other words, “ritual does for behavior what poetry does for words; religious deeds grace ordinary activities the way that poetic language elevates commonplace communication.” [1] Other than the title, this morning’s poem at first glance may appear to have little to do with ritual. It’s an odd poem – it’s a bit hard to unpack – not unlike real rituals, that have a mysterious hold on us even though the elements are ordinary – bread, wine, the sounding of a bell, a rose touching the forehead of an infant. Yet, when I think of the rituals that sustain us, it’s a bit like this line “and as elephants parade holding each elephant’s tail, but if one wanders the circus won’t find the park.” We can create rituals by ourselves that are satisfying and meaningful, but it is community I believe, where we hold each other’s tail and finally find the park – lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

This is what we’re doing here – this little ritual as we gather around our screens – trying to stay awake and alert and grateful for being alive, even when so much around feels to be in peril. It’s important, says the poet, for the darkness around us is deep. So when the night is too long, and you yearn for daybreak, don’t be discouraged. Remember to enact this one simple ritual– to bundle yourself and-or your children up and go outside to gaze up into the night sky. First, greet the moon. And then, look up at the vast sky and even with the city lights diminishing the brilliant darkness, discern one star to steady your heartbeat by. Don’t miss its brilliance by following the wrong god home – the God of what if’s and what’s next. No, instead, just stay your mind on its constancy and be sustained. May it be so.

Anthem (Teddy Nagel, solo; Jen Hayman, piano)

“Being Alive” (Stephen Sondheim)

Someone to hold me too close.
Someone to hurt me too deep.
Someone to sit in my chair,
And ruin my sleep, And make me aware,
Of being alive. Being alive.

Somebody need me too much.
Somebody know me too well.
Somebody pull me up short, And put me through hell,
And give me support, For being alive.
Make me alive. Make me alive.

Make me confused. Mock me with praise.
Let me be used. Vary my days.
But alone, Is alone, Not alive.

Somebody crowd me with love.
Somebody force me to care.
Somebody let me come through,
I'll always be there, As frightened as you,
To help us survive, Being alive. Being alive.
Being alive!

Offering (Duncan Morgan)

I've been doing a lot of proselytizing lately. Yeh. I know. Not really a UU endorsed behavior. Still, I have been fortunate enough to have made a number of new acquaintances recently. It's generally a bad idea to open the conversation with someone you don't know with a discussion of comparative religion. But as a friendship ripens, there will come a point at which curiosity about each other's spirituality will occur naturally. I'll be asked about my religion and I will say that I'm a Unitarian Universalist. This is often met with blank stares. My response to their looks of confusion, though, is a smile of anticipated pleasure – few things please me more than being able to talk about Unitarianism in general, or All Souls in specific. I am happy to talk about a religion that can be clearly understood in eight principles. I'm happy to talk about our bell and our building and about all the history that has occurred beneath that spire. I'm happy to mention our music and our religious education and or inspiring ministry, I am happy to describe this bright, active, talented, compassionate, diverse congregation. But I am most proud when I get to talk about all the real world, tangible work that we do, not just in your church, but our neighborhood and our nation, to talk about the various ways we at All Souls can be seen acting out our principles on a daily basis. Perhaps proselytizing is not a traditionally Unitarian activity – but, with a place this good, I kinda can't help myself.

I do more than talk about All Souls, though. I give as generously as I can, I hope you will, too. On the screen and in the chat you will find a link to be able to give in real time. This morning's offering will now be received.

Hymn

298 "Wake Now My Senses"

Wake, now, my senses, and hear the earth call; feel the deep power of being in all; keep, with the web of creation your vow, giving, receiving as love shows us how.

Wake, now, my reason, reach out to the new; join with each pilgrim who quests for the true; honor the beauty and wisdom of time; suffer thy limit, and praise the sublime.

Wake, now, compassion, give heed to the cry; voices of suffering fill the wide sky; take as your neighbor both stranger and friend, praying and striving their hardship to end.

Wake, now, my conscience, with justice thy guide; join with all people whose rights are denied;
take not for granted a privileged place; God's love embraces the whole human race.

Wake, now, my vision of ministry clear; brighten my pathway with radiance here; mingle my
calling with all who will share; work toward a planet transformed by our care.

Benediction (Rev. Rolenz)

Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.

Music (All Souls Choir; Jen Hayman, piano)

“Choose Something Like a Star” (Randall Thompson; text by Robert Frost)

O Star (the fairest one in sight),
We grant your loftiness the right
To some obscurity of cloud—
It will not do to say of night,
Since dark is what brings out your light.

Some mystery becomes the proud.
But to be wholly taciturn
In your reserve is not allowed.

Say something to us we can learn
By heart and when alone repeat.
Say something! And it says, ‘I burn.’
But say with what degree of heat.

Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade.
Use language we can comprehend.
Tell us what elements you blend.
It gives us strangely little aid,
But does tell something in the end.

And steadfast as Keats' Eremite,
Not even stooping from its sphere,
It asks a little of us here.
It asks of us a certain height,
So when at times the mob is swayed
To carry praise or blame too far,
We may choose something like a star
To stay our minds on and be staid.