

Worship transcript for December 13, 2020

Prelude (All Souls Jubilee Singers)

“Al haNissim” (Dov Frimer; arr. by Joshua Jacobson and Hankus Netsky)

Al hanisim v'al hapurkan v'al hag'vurot v'al hat'shuot v'al hamilchamot sheasita lavoteinu
bayamim haheim baz'man hazeh

[For the miracles and for the deliverance and for the heroism and for the rescue and for the battles waged for our ancestors, in those days and these.]

Call to Worship and (Rev. Kathleen Rolenz)

Come in and be welcomed, All Souls. Come into this space which we make holy by our presence. Come in with all your vulnerabilities and strengths, fears and anxieties, loves and hopes, for here you need not hide, nor pretend, nor be anything other than who you are and who you are called to be. Come into this space where we can heal and be healed, forgive and be forgiven. Come into this space where the ordinary is sanctified, the human is celebrated, the compassionate is expected. Come into this space – Together we make it a holy space (Rev. Becky Edminston-Lange)

It is in this spirit we gather and invite the Metzler-Finlayson family to kindle the flame of our chalice.

Chalice Lighting (The Metzler-Finlayson family)

For millennia, the Fire has been in the centre of human communities. Our ancestors used to gather around it. Today, we are assembling around this flame to renew our community. May the flame of our Chalice make this community warmer and stronger.

Hymn

“Tis a Gift to Be Simple”

‘Tis a gift to be simple ‘tis a gift to be free,
‘Tis a gift to come down where you ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
‘Twill be in the valley of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gained to bow and to bend we shan’t be ashamed.
To turn, turn will be our delight
‘Till by turning, turning we come ‘round right.

‘Tis a gift to be loved and that love to return,
‘Tis a gift to be taught and a richer gift to learn,
And when we expect of others what we try to live each day,
Then we’ll all live together and we’ll all learn to say,

When true simplicity is gained to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed.
To turn, turn will be our delight
'Till by turning, turning we come 'round right.

'Tis a gift to have friends and a true friend to be.
'Tis a gift to think of others not to only think of "me."
And when we hear what others really think and really feel.
Then we'll all live together with a love that is real.

Welcome (Elizabeth Zitelli)

Welcome to All Souls Church.

Since 1821 the members of this church have been walking and rolling together toward an important place, a place that Martin Luther King called the Beloved Community. With joy and determination we journey 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. We acknowledge that the physical building of All Souls sits on the ancestral homelands of the Piscataway Conoy Tribe, whose existence pre-dates All Souls church.

So for members of All Souls – Welcome! For those of you visiting us for the first time – Welcome! For those of you who make up our virtual church – We are glad you are here!

If we were in the sanctuary, we would turn and physically greet one another. We can still do that – only in a ritual which we are calling "Beholding" We invite you to remain on mute, but to scroll through the gallery of faces. Express gratitude for one another in the chat – for being able to safely see each other while listening to music.

play sound, unmute/no headphones 😊 People are greeting one another. Music, "My Favorite Things," in background.

Congregational Concerns and Prayer (Rev. Tony Coleman)

Good morning, friends – my name is Tony Coleman, and I serve as All Souls' Minister of Adult Spiritual Development. I come bearing news about the life of our community.

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 our incredible Adult Spiritual Development Team. We're making this December into a time for Soul sustenance and nourishment. There are offerings to explore the power of poetry, ways to center your body and mind, opportunities to become better acquainted with others in our community and also with yourself. 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/>.

Looking ahead, we're very excited to share a little bit about the many ways that All Souls is celebrating the Winter holidays and observances this year.

We first want to remind you of the Solstice Stroll – held next Sunday, December 20, from 2 – 5 PM. In anticipation of the longest night of the year, join us for a time of in-person 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.

A few days later, we will have two Christmas Eve services, the 7:00 PM service will include the Christmas Pageant and the 10:00 o'clock service will be the traditional lessons and carols. The links to both services will be on the homepage of the website.

In addition to these services, All Souls has a whole host of other ways for you to observe Christmas and other winter holidays, including a

Drop-In Covenant Group on Ritual and Song with Rose and Rev. Louise.

You can donate toys to support some of our community partners; there's a Holiday Ornament Exchange, and you can find details for all of these opportunities on the All Souls website.

Let us turn now to a time of prayer and mediation as we name the joys and sorrows of our community.

We joyfully hold in prayer all who are in the midst of the Jewish celebration of Hannukah right now. We also celebrate alongside all those who marked Bodhi day this past week and all those who are observing the 3rd Sunday of Advent in the Christian Calendar.

Just as we make space to hold celebration, we make space to hold sorrow and concern.

This morning we are holding Paree Roper who was recently diagnosed with Covid -19. His symptoms are mild, but he appreciates the support of All Souls who have already reached out to him.

We remember Eugene Hanes, uncle to Peter Hanes who died on December 10th. He loved his family, community, Jazz, home improvement projects, his dog, sports, and travel. Nephew Peter once teased Gene that he visited Home Depot so often for projects that it should be renamed the Hanes Depot. Eugene was a retired DC Public Schools educator/administrator.

We hold Alex Wilson, who lost his mother, Patty, to COVID in a Binghamton NY senior community on 12/4.

We hold Chris Milner, whose father Jim died after 5 weeks of hospice for pancreatic cancer on 12/6. Chris shared that his father “passed peacefully with his wife of 56 years and 2 children at his side, singing him home.”

We hold Laura Sailer, whose sister Janice was found dead in the home where she lived alone, multiple health issues.

And, finally, we mourn the death of Bob Bloomfield, after four months of home hospice, and recurrence of cancer in the fall of 2019. We especially hold in our community’s love Barbara McCann, Bob’s loving and devoted spouse. A Zoom Celebration of Bob’s life is pending for Jan/Feb 2021.

In the silence that follows, I invite to speak aloud the names of the people or places you’re carrying in your heart this morning, for sorrowful or celebratory reasons.

Let us continue in prayer:

Great Spirit beyond comprehension,
Infinite Love beyond all measure,
Deepest Silence that yields every sound,
we gather this morning
to remember and to celebrate
the beauty of simple things—

an innocent newborn,
a crescent moon,
a lotus blossom,
a burning candle.

It is so easy to lose touch with life’s gifts,
so easy to get lost in the
unrelenting stresses and
unrelenting dramas and
unrelenting violences
of our broken, breaking world.

Let us find, in our shared and individual
practices of the spirit, in our shared and individual
efforts to reclaim Center, let us find
a mechanism to simplify.

Let us see,
in the complexity and the chaos,
a single thread connecting us.

Let us hear,
in the cacophony and the confusion,
a single tone beneath the noise.

Let us feel,
in our aloneness and in our fragility,
a single sense that we are held.

Great Spirit beyond comprehension,
Infinite Love beyond all measure,
Deepest Silence that yields every sound,
we gather this morning in You.
Help us to remember and
help us to celebrate
the gift of simple things.

Ashe and 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 (Rev. Coleman)

“This Holiday Season” (Addae A. Kraba)

Let this holiday season be a time for engaging heart to heart.

For those who, like the innkeeper, turned us away;
For holidays that didn't live up to our expectations.

For ghosts of Christmas past that haunt us;
For those who have us gifts, but never their presence.

For gifts we yearned for, but did not receive,
For things we received, but never wanted.

For those who offered us cheer when we needed comfort;
For those who offered us love that we could not accept

For those we rejected, offering no room in our homes or our hearts,
For ourselves, who could not give through fear;

For the times we saw a star in the East, but failed to follow it;
For times we followed the star, but it did not lead where we hoped;

For miracles gone unnoticed;
For wise men and women, whose gifts we rejected.

All these we remember, we forgive, we love.
In doing so, may we be granted an abiding peace.

Sermon (Rev. Rolenz)

“The Gift Keeps Moving”

The stealing began with a pair of electric foot massaging hot pink fuzzy gopher slippers. At least, I think it was a gopher – it was hard to tell. But it was one of those gifts that was so weird and that no one really needed, but everyone wanted. Perhaps I'd better explain. It was the annual staff holiday Yankee Swap White Elephant Gift Exchange. I'd imagine that most of you know the rules of this game, but – let me tell you how it's supposed to work. Everybody brings a gift and places it on the table. We are all given random numbers and when your number comes up, you get to pick a gift. Now the next person has the choice to either pick up a new gift or steal someone else's. Now the rules are that you can only steal another person's gift once, but in this case, the electric foot massaging fuzzy gopher slippers became THE gift of the party. Everyone kept swapping and stealing it back and forth until it finally landed with a newly married staff member who desperately wanted it for his bride who was convinced that she would just love it.

It was so much fun, but I'm sure glad I didn't wind up with those electric foot massaging hot pink fuzzy gopher slippers, because like many gifts I've received over the years, they would likely be relegated to the back of the closet.

'Tis the season where we turn in earnest to gift buying and gift giving. I don't know about you, but I find shopping for gifts pretty anxiety producing – as I ask myself: Do they already have

something similar? What if they don't like it and they have to put on their ritual "oh this is lovely face!" so as to not make me feel bad? Is the gift too cheap? Too expensive? Not the person's taste? More a reflection of me than the recipient? These kinds of thoughts at the holiday season spin me into a spiral vortex of Scrooginess – just wanting to say "bah humbug" to the whole ordeal. And then, I wonder – how did we go from this story about the Magi bringing somewhat inappropriate gifts to newborn Jesus to advertisements about waking up on Christmas morning to a new car in the driveway? Or giving the gift of a diamond encrusted cross necklace? What's that really got to with the meaning of gift-giving?

So, to dive into these questions, I went back and looked at a classic book that explores the meaning of gift-giving. The book by Lewis Hyde was originally published under the title "The Gift" but the subtitle is what first grabbed my attention: "Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property".

Hyde's book is an anthropological deep dive into the rituals around gift giving in different cultures, but he opens his book with the story of when the Puritans first encountered Native Americans. The Puritans discovered that Native Americans did not have a concept of private ownership of property or objects. The Puritans would accept a gift from the Native Americans and keep it. The Native Americans would insist that the gift be given back or given away. In other words, Native Americans recognized that gifts circulate, when you connect with another person, you have a golden opportunity to be generous by sharing a gift that was previously shared with you. However, the English settlers kept the Native American's gift as their new possessions, missing the circulation idea, the Puritans misunderstood their gift-givers as 'wanting something back.'

Hyde continues, "the Indian understood a cardinal property of the gift – whatever we have been given is supposed to be given away again and not kept. Or, if it is kept, something of similar value should move on in its stead, the way a billiard ball may stop when it sends another scurrying across the felt, its momentum transferred. You may keep your Christmas present, but it ceases to be a gift in the true sense unless you have given something else away. As it is passed along, the gift may be given back to the original donor, but this is not essential. In fact, it is better if the gift is not returned, but is given instead to some new, third party. The only essential is this: the gift must always move."

What does it really mean to say that a gift has to move? Am I talking about the practice of re-gifting as an antidote to the over abundance of stuff in many of our lives? Does it mean we get to unload unwanted items on other people under the guise of frugal gift-giving? No, the impulse to give is rooted in something deeper than the practical accomplishment of a mandatory seasonal ritual. Gift giving represents the interdependent web of life within which we live our lives. The gift of the womb which gives us life; the gift of the slap on the back that invites the first breath of air to connect us with all living things; the gift of milk to sustain us. Our lives begin through giving. We give a part of ourselves away with every breath we exhale. Throughout our lives, we all are in possession of the most important gift that you can give. No matter what you might buy and wrap to give away this season, there is one gift you must offer that will always be assured of moving. That gift is You.

Amidst the advertisement and flurry to find the perfect gift either out of ritual habit or to show our love and affection, we do forget that simple truth – we are the gift to one another – and it’s up to us – to use whatever gifts we have – to do our part in creating the great chain of giving that keeps the world moving. In “The Gift” Lewis Hyde describes another form of Indian giving in tribal communities in the Pacific Northwest, where the same gift was given and given back among tribes in adjacent territories as a socially binding ritual, as a gesture of peaceful living side by side, and as a representation of the larger world in which the tribes lived within the Great Spirit that had created them all.

I’ll bet each one of us remembers a gift that we once received that meant so much more than the physical gift itself, a gift that inspired us give back, to keep the gift moving. I recall one such a gift in my life. When I was in college I was obsessed with making art from collected mannequin heads. That fall I was visiting my parents and I had brought my favorite mannequin head to show my mother. While getting into my car, I accidentally dropped the mannequin head and it broke into pieces. I broke into tears. That broken head was symbolic of everything that had gone wrong for me that semester; a break-up, a bad grade, a broken friendship. I packed the pieces up and took them home and showed them to my Mom and told her my sad story. That Christmas morning, I opened up a hat box under the tree to discover that my mother, herself an artist, had taken that mannequin head, glued the pieces back together and then painted it in such a way so that I could not discern the broken places. I no longer know or care what happened to that restored mannequin head, but I will always remember the gift of her love and artistry. Such gifts require no reciprocity; only that whatever kindness has been extended to us; whatever generosity of spirit we ourselves have experienced – it is incumbent upon us to then extend that to others.

I remember that gift not only because it has come to represent all that my parents gave to me and that I try to pass on in the way I live my own life. I remember it also because my world was broken that Christmas and my mother’s gift helped put it back together. “It’s healing behavior”, says adrienne marie brown, “to look at something so broken and see the possibility and wholeness in it. That’s a tangible gift that has long outlived the actual object.” At a time when the world seems broken, we have to ask ourselves whether the gifts that we give are part of the glue that helps restore wholeness and healing.

So maybe the most important question for us to ask this season is not “what gift will I give?” But rather – what will you do with your gifts?

Former President of Starr King and adjunct minister of this congregation, the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker wrote a poem which asked this very question. When I first encountered it many years ago, I didn’t know what gifts I possibly could offer the world at the time, and that’s why these words struck home with me. They have become a gift of sacred text I have come back to again and again. Parker writes:

“Your gifts—whatever you discover them to be—can be used to bless or curse the world.

The mind’s power, The strength of the hands,
The reaches of the heart,
The gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting

Any of these can serve to feed the hungry, Bind up wounds,
Welcome the stranger, Praise what is sacred,
Do the work of justice or offer love.

Any of these can draw down the prison door, Hoard bread, Abandon the poor,
Obscure what is holy, comply with injustice or withhold love.

You must answer this question:
What will you do with your gifts?

One of the things I love about church is that it is here where you get to offer your gift to each other and to the world. When you teach our children in Religious Education, you are offering something of yourself that far surpasses the amount of time you spend in the classroom. When you sing in the choir or the Jubilee singers, when you serve on a committee, when you teach a class, when you make the coffee or hold open the doors, when you crunch the numbers, when you stand in protest, when you insist on justice – whatever gifts you bring – these are the gifts that extend deep into one another’s lives. This year we have received Legacy Gifts from those who have died; gifts which will expand our ability to minister to, among and beyond the walls of the church. It is my intention that before I leave All Souls we will have a robust Planned Giving Committee to receive, thank and properly celebrate such gifts, which we now – are the beneficiaries of – because I believe not only in maintaining the financial health of institution but because this is one example of the gift that moves. It requires our stewardship and our care.

“What will you do with your gifts?” Dr. Parker answers her own question:

Choose to bless the world. (she says)
The choice to bless the world is more than an act of will,
a moving forward into the world with the intention to do good.
It is an act of recognition, a confession of surprise, a grateful acknowledgment
That in the midst of a broken world
Unspeakable beauty, grace and mystery abide.
There is an embrace of kindness that encompasses all life, even yours.

If somehow in the midst of all that is broken we can still see unspeakable beauty, grace and mystery – we will have enough. If the only gift we pass on this holiday season is patience with ourselves and to show kindness to one another – it will be enough. Parker continues:

And while there is injustice, anesthetization, or evil
There moves a holy disturbance, a benevolent rage, a revolutionary love,
Protesting, urging, insisting—that which is sacred will not be defiled.
Those who bless the world live their life as a gesture of thanks
For this beauty and this rage.

After a bitter election, after an administration’s response to the global pandemic that borders on criminal neglect, after the horrifying murder of George Floyd and many other lives lost to state violence, we may be tempted to say there is no reason to bless the world. We may be tempted to

use our gifts to rage at all that is wrong – yet, Parker reminds us that those who choose to bless the world live their life as a gesture of thanks for this beauty AND this rage. The choice becomes not between giving this book or that one; but rather which parts of yourself will you freely and easily give away in order to bless the world?

The choice to bless the world can take you into solitude
To search for the sources of power and grace;
Native wisdom, healing, and liberation.

One of the gifts that I've found as a result of so much time in solitude is how important faith is at times like these. Early on in the pandemic, there was great fear that this pandemic would finally put the nails in the coffin of institutional religion. Without our ability to gather in person, the church would wither and die. That has not happened. The pandemic has revealed so much ugliness; so much economic wealth hoarding, and –at the same time – it has revealed the power and grace of faithful people to “look at something so broken and see the possibility and wholeness in it.” ...”Because... just beneath the surface, something strong, invincible, true, some new, as yet undiscovered gift is already moving, awaiting its season, silently preparing to erupt into some fresh, newly impossible adventure..” What will you do with your gifts?

“... the choice will draw you into community,
The endeavor shared, the heritage passed on,
The companionship of struggle, the importance of keeping faith,
The life of ritual and praise, the comfort of human friendship,
The company of earth, the chorus of life welcoming you.
None of us alone can save the world.
Together—that is another possibility waiting.”

What will you do with your gifts this holiday season? Give them away. Keep them moving.
Choose to bless the world. Amen. May it Be So.

Acknowledgment of Rev. Coleman's Ministry and Farewell

We wanted to take a moment to recognize the ministry of Rev. Tony Coleman publicly at this service. Although you will be in next Sunday's service and providing one last sermon on the 27th of December, we thought it important to recognize the many gifts that YOU have brought to All Souls, Rev. Tony. While I'm talking, I am inviting members to write their own notes of appreciation to Rev. Tony.

Tony – working with you as a colleague has been a great joy. You have a scholar's mind, a poet's heart, an artist's eye and a pastor's presence which has been a source of inspiration, comfort and stability during your tenure with us. Your sermons are memorable in their depth and breadth – but even more than that – you have brought your full self to this ministry – even when you have physically moved to DC. I'm sure I speak for my colleagues, the staff and the church when I say we wish we could have kept you among us forever. But – we are so proud and pleased of your work and know that the good people of First Congo in Memphis are just as thrilled to have you among them! So Tony – let me now turn the time over to you to address the congregation.

May you go forth from this time in your life and bless the world with your ministry and your presence. We leave you with the gift of love...

Anthem (Jubilee Singers)

“The Gift of Love”

Though I may speak with bravest fire, and have the gift to all inspire
And have not love, my words are in vain, as sounding brass and hopeless gain.

Though I may give all I possess, and striving so my love profess,
But not be giv'n by love within, the profit soon turns strangely thin.

Come, Spirit, come, our hearts control, our spirits long to be made whole.
Let inward love guide every deed, by this we worship and are freed.
Amen, amen.

Offering (Traci Hughes-Trotter)

Hello All Souls!

I'm so glad you see all of you!

My jam, as my colleagues like to say, are people. I LOVE people.

I love hearing about their families, learning about their journeys, laughing with them and crying with them...

And sometimes just sitting in silence with them.

At my core, I am magnetically drawn to that certain thing that connects us. And boy, does that certain thing come through at All Souls!

There is such beauty and power in the connection we share in our dedication to building and nurturing beloved community.

It is a gift that we are sharing in big ways and small ways. But it is surely a gift worth paying forward one person, one step at a time.

It's been a hard and challenging year. There are so many in our community who need the church now more than ever. We feel the need, and are answering the call, but we cannot do it without you.

So if you are able, please fulfill your annual pledge by month's end. Your gift to All souls will allow the staff to continue to do the good and important work of taking care of the that thing: the ties that bind us to one another in spirit and compassion.

May our hearts expand when we give of ourselves, one to the other.

Thank you.

Hymn

226 “People, Look East”

People look east. The time is near for the crowning of the year.
Make your house fair as you are able, trim the hearth and set the table.
People look east and sing today: Love, the Guest, is on the way.

Furrows, be glad. Though earth is bare, one more seed is planted there.
Give up your strength the seed to nourish, that in course the flower may flourish.
People look east and sing today: Love, the Rose, is on the way.

Stars, keep the watch. When night is dim, one more light the bowl shall brim,
Shining beyond the frosty weather, bright as the sun and moon together.
People look east and sing today: Love, the Star, is on the way.

Benediction (Rev. Rolenz)

“A Gift” (Denise Levertov)

Just when you seem to yourself nothing but a flimsy web of questions,
you are given the questions of others to hold in the emptiness of your hands,
songbird eggs that can still hatch if you keep them warm,
butterflies opening and closing themselves in your cupped palms,
trusting you not to injure their scintillant fur, their dust.
You are given the questions of others as if they were answers to all you ask.
Yes, perhaps this gift is your answer.

Music (Jubilee Singers)

“This Christmastide” (Donald Fraser)

Green and silver, red and gold, and a story born of old.
Truth and love and hope abide this Christmastide.
Holly, ivy, mistletoe, and the gently falling snow,
Truth and love and hope abide this Christmastide.
From a simple ox’s stall came the greatest gift of all.
Truth and love and hope abide this Christmastide.
Children sing of peace and joy at the birth of one small boy.
Truth and love and hope abide this Christmastide.
Let the bells ring loud and clear, ring out now for all to hear.
Truth and love and hope abide this Christmastide.

Trumpets sound and voices raise in an endless stream of praise.
Truth and love and hope abide this Christmastide.