

Worship transcript for April 11, 2021

Prelude (All Souls Jubilee Singers; Esther Strongman, vocal lead)

“Move Mountain” (Margaret Douroux)

Let me tell you how to move a mountain that’s hard for you to climb.
Let me tell you how to move a mountain that hide’s the bright sunshine.
When your hands are bleeding and torn and your feet are weary and worn,
When you try to climb up, but the rocks and reels make the going tough,
Just say “Move mountain! Move mountain! Mountain get out of my way!”

If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, just say:
“Move mountain! Move mountain! Move mountain! Move!
Mountain get out of my way!”

Call to Worship (Rev. Kathleen Rolenz)

Let there be joy in our coming together this morning
Let there be truth heard in the words we speak and the songs we sing.
Let there be help and healing for our disharmony and despair
Let there be silence for the voice within and beyond us
Let our joy be the spark that kindles our chalice flame.

Chalice Lighting (Rev. Rob and Eleanor Keithan)

We light our chalice today for the power of love and the beauty of spring.

Hymn 327

“Joy, Thou Goddess”

Joy, thou goddess, fair immortal, offspring of Elysium,
Mad with rapture, to the portal of thy holy fane we come!
Fashion’s laws, indeed, may sever, but thy magic joins again;
Humankind is one forever ‘neath thy mild and gentle reign.

Joy, in nature’s wide dominion, mightiest cause of all is found,
And ‘tis joy that moves the pinion, when the wheel of time goes round;
From the bud she lures the flower, suns from out their orbs of light;
Distant spheres obey her power, far beyond her mortal sight.

Welcome (Danielle Garrett)

Welcome to All Souls Church! Greetings All Souls. My name is Danielle Garrett, my pronouns are she/her/hers and I’ll be your worship associate today. I’m greeting you this morning from

Nashville, TN, where I moved last summer to begin my studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School. All Souls is a very special place to me- it is where I felt my own call to ministry and where I found tremendous support and inspiration as I prepared to pursue this path. So I am delighted to welcome you this morning.

In an effort to acknowledge and support Indigenous communities, it is important to recognize the land on which our church stands. The closest tribe was Nacotchtank, from which the name Anacostia is derived. They were part of the Piscataway group of tribes. We acknowledge that indigeneous peoples were here before us, are here with us now, and will continue to be with us, as we look forward to the future. Let's take a moment of silence to reflect on whose land we each reside, in our individual and collective locations around the U.S. and our planet Earth. [Silence]

If we were together in the building, we would turn and greet one another. While we are still on-line, we do something called "beholding." Take a moment to scroll through the gallery view, say hello in the chat to one another, and behold one another's faces as we together, create community.

Announcements and Prayer (Rev. Keithan)

Good morning, All Souls. I'm Rev. Rob Keithan, my pronouns are he/him, and I have the pleasure of serving as your Minister for Social Justice. All Souls continues to provide not only worship services, but programs and events that may be of interest to you.

After today's service, you are invited to stay for coffee and conversation OR to attend an After Hour Conversation with Rev. Kathleen and the Transitions Team. The topic for our conversation is "The Interim Time: It's Not a Holding Pattern" The zoom link can be found on the website and in the chat. 11:45 – 12:30 PM

<https://zoom.us/j/94041900703?pwd=cDV0RjNSVnhVTFBnendFYmg0MzBBQT09>

Next Sunday's After Hour Conversation will be "Governance as a Spiritual Practice, "and will include a review of our governance system and conversation about why good governance is also a spiritual discipline and practice." 11:45 – 12:30 PM

Our monthly Vespers service will be held this Wednesday evening, April 14, at 7:30 PM. Vespers is a simple service of poetry, chants, and time for silence and reflection. The Zoom information can be found on the church's website.

And finally, the Adult Spiritual Development Team is offering a one hour dive into poetry as sacred text, from 7:30 – 8:30 PM, on Wednesday, April 21st. All are welcome to attend; the zoom link can be found on the website.

We turn now to our pastoral concerns. First, a communal prayer for justice as the trial of Derek Chauvin continues, and our nation continues to wrestle with racism and sexism, transphobia and xenophobia. We pray for healing, and for equity, especially for black, brown, indigeneous, asian-pacific islander, and other people of color.

The memorial service for Emily Dyer will be held on April 24th at 6 PM; Zoom information to follow.

We heard good news from member Jose Luis Sanchez who tells us he's feeling stronger than he was in January. Jose writes: "Please thank ASC friends on my behalf for the many expressions of concern and support. I look forward to functional recovery in order to reciprocate!"

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

Tomorrow, Monday April 12, begins the holy month of Ramadan. One of the defining features of the Muslim faith, and one that we have much to learn from, I think—is that it is highly embodied. Practices like bowing in prayer, making the pilgrimage to Mecca, and fasting during Ramadan are physical reminders of the commitment made to the Ummah, to the community, and to people in need.

In the guidance they put out to the American Muslim community, nearly every page of their practical safety tips has a footer that reads: "the National Muslim COVID-19 Taskforce and the National Black Muslim COVID Coalition pray that Allah (SWT) continue to protect our communities, healthcare/frontline workers, and vulnerable populations from this pandemic, and accepts our fasts, duas, and prayers during this blessed month of Ramadan."

So, today, let us join together in a prayer of solidarity:

Dear God that is known by names,

Spirit of Love and Liberation,

Remind us that we are connected in community, across time, and geography, and distance.
Remind us that we are all members of one human family.

And Dear God, remind us of our obligations to ourselves, and to each other. For those of us in need, remind us that it's OK to ask for help. For those of us who have energy to give, remind us of our spiritual and ethical obligation to care for each other.

Let us join with our Muslim colleagues in calling for the protection of healthcare/frontline workers, and vulnerable populations from this pandemic. As the vaccine becomes more widely available here in the United States, remind us that we must advocate for the vaccine to be available in other countries with less resources. We should not and must not allow our response to the virus to deepen global inequality.

Instead, Dear God, help us to be collaborative and creative and courageous together. Help us rise to the challenges of our time, with greater insight and greater resolve. And may we, through our hearts and our actions, transform ourselves and our world.

Amen.

Hymn 123

“Spirit of Life”

Fuente de amor, ven hacia mi
Y al corazon cantale tu compasion
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 (Danielle Garrett)

“Miracle” (Elana Bell)

What else to call the way the bare branches
I’d bought at the neighborhood bodega
came back to life that winter.
I’d carried them home — dry, wrapped
in paper — stuck them in the square vase,
and, as an afterthought, filled it with water.

I don’t know when I noticed the pale
pink shoots sprouting from the submerged
ends: wild, reaching roots, like ginseng, or the hair
on an old woman’s chin. Then tiny green
leaves began to appear at the tips,
curling over themselves with the sheer effort
of growing.

I’d thought they were dead.

And now I recall being in the choke
of a fog I did not have a name for
and didn’t think I’d survive. I could try
to describe it for you now: the nights
I woke with my pulse pounding through,
the heaviness of each breath,

how the effort of being inside my body
felt like burning —

But what I really want to tell you is this:
how, in the parch of that long drought,
the people I loved kept bringing me water.

Water.

Though I turned my back, and did not answer to my name, though I flung the cup away —

Let me say it plain: I wanted to die.
But something in me, some tiny bulb
still alive under all that rotted wood,
kept drinking, kept right on drinking.

Sermon (Rev. Rolenz)

“The Miracle You Don’t Want”

The last thing I remember asking my surgeon before the anesthesia was administered was “you still think this is a medical necessity, right?” She laughed and said: “wait until you open your eyes.” And then everything went dark.

Perhaps I’d better explain. For years I suspected that I wasn’t seeing as clearly as I could. I chalked it up to aging until an optometrist suggested I take a visual field test. It’s like playing a video game – they give you a clicker and every time you see a dot of light you hit the button. After the test was over, the ophthalmologist came in smiling.

“I must have passed the test, I said.

“No,” she said. “just the opposite. You failed the test with flying colors. Your eyelids are occluding your peripheral vision.”

“Well, I asked, what can be done about it?”

“An eye-lid lift,” she said.

“No.” I said. “I’m not that vain.”

“Well, suit yourself,” she said, “but you’ll be amazed at how more of the world you’re going to be able to see.”

The theme for this month is miracles, which, when we chose it way back last year, I wasn’t sure how I felt about it. There were no vaccines on the horizon, only escalating numbers of people getting sick and dying. We had heard that it took years, not months to identify an effective

vaccine, to test it, to ensure its safety and then at least a couple of years to manufacture it and to distribute it. So all hunkered down and some of us wished for a miracle cure from God and others put their faith in science, but one thing we all had in common – we hoped and prayed for an intervention.

That's what miracles are – an intervention. It's not a topic Unitarian Universalists tend to dig into much, because historically, we've rejected the idea of miracles as they are commonly and popularly known. Here is a fairly standard definition: "A miracle is an event that seems inexplicable by natural or scientific laws. In various religions, a phenomenon that is characterized as miraculous is often attributed to the actions of a supernatural being, magic, a miracle worker, a saint, or a religious leader."

Our religious ancestors rejected this idea outright. Thomas Jefferson's now famous "Jefferson Bible" took a razor and glue to the Bible, cutting out all references to anything supernatural, angels, deities, supreme beings and yes, miracles. He edited out the miracles because they conflicted with his rational understanding of religion. Later, Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson was critical of those religions that attempted to convert another to Christianity using the miracles of Jesus as proof of his superiority.

Emerson said: "To aim to convert someone by miracles is a profanation of the soul. I can believe a miracle because I can raise my own arm. I can believe a miracle because I can remember. I can believe it because I can be understood by you." Emerson's Transcendentalism shaped our own understanding of miracles today. He said "The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common." If Emerson were able to attend a concert by UU singer songwriter Peter Mayer, he would be nodding his head in agreement, when Mayer sings: When I was in Sunday school, we would learn about the time, Moses split the sea in two Jesus made the water wine, And I remember feeling sad that miracles don't happen still, but now I can't keep track cause everything's a miracle. Everything, Everything's a miracle. Wine from water is not so small, but an even better magic trick, is that anything is here at all. So, the challenging thing becomes not to look for miracles, but finding where there isn't one.

Mayer's music "Holy Now," continues to give me chills every time I hear it because it encapsulates in a lovely song that feelings that I suspect many of us have – that so much of what we take granted can be seen as a miracle, but too often our state of mind prevents us from seeing it as such. We spend time regretting the past, anxious about the future or bored with the present, that it is difficult to lift up our eyes and see and hear, feel and taste and touch the astonishing beauty that lay before us. If we did, I suspect it would feel like Moses standing before the burning bush, averting his eyes because of all the light he could not bear to see.

I was in the recovery room. I heard the murmur of voices, the sound of water in the background. A voice came to me out of the darkness. "On the count of three, I want you to open your eyes "One, two, three." I opened my eyes and gasped out loud.

Seeing is a metaphor used to describe a kind of knowing. We say things like we have deeper "insight," or sing "I once was lost, and now I'm found was blind and but now I see." Before I go much further with this metaphor, I want to acknowledge that those who do not see have other

ways experiencing the world which is just as powerful as the sighted. But the metaphor of going from a state of not seeing clearly to deep perception is also an important spiritual truth, and that's why I gasped.

Although there was no divine intervention, other than the skilled hand of a surgeon, who had performed this procedure thousands of times, it was astonishing to me how much I could see. It was as if I had been walking around with curtains shuttering half my vision and those curtains were suddenly flung open and I could see – really see. Everything so bright, so clear, so much more than I imagined was out there – and it was, at first – overwhelming. I had just experienced a miracle – and for just a moment, it was one I wasn't sure I wanted. When you can see more, more is required of you.

All of us who have travelled together on the Journey Towards Wholeness, our anti-racist anti-oppressive journey towards wholeness, know this to be true – and it has to be especially true for white people. With greater insight, you must accept greater responsibility. Part of the process of becoming woke – of waking up to the realities that we had previously ignored – is to change that awareness into alertness – alertness to when you can accept a different kind of responsibility for being a white anti-racist activist. What if the gift of this insight enables us to manifest a different kind of miracle — a capacity for awe and wonder and wisdom while doing this anti-oppressive work together – not out of duty, but out of love? What if the outcome of this miraculous awareness might be that people of color didn't have to do most of the heavy lifting?

Usually in our everyday lives, the miracle you don't want is that intervention that changes you – that forces you to see things about yourself, about the institutions we serve, and the world in which we live, which means we can't go back to experiencing the world in that same way as before. The miracle we don't want is the experience that challenges us to live into the world as it truly is, as we understand it anew, and as we understand how it could be different.

In last Sunday's Easter sermon about being threatened by resurrection, I made a claim that alarmed some of you – that the church as you have always known it is dead. The metaphor was a prediction about the familiar ways that we have thought about how we do church together being challenged by new realities on the other side of the pandemic. But when I found Elena Bell's poem, "Miracles" that we heard earlier today, I realized there was something more to say about this metaphor of the church being dead. It's dead like those bare branches she bought at her neighborhood bodega and brought back home skeptical that they might ever come back to life. You remember that Elena then recounts in the poem a time in her life of great drought – of a time when she didn't think she would survive. She said "I could try to describe it for you now, the nights I woke with my pulse pounding through the heaviness of each breath, how the effort of being inside my body felt like burning – but what I really want to tell you is this: how, in the parch of that long drought, the people I loved kept bringing me water. Water." All year long, during a time when the church home we love has been closed and dark, we have understood that the things that are most important about this church and this faith have been kept alive by the way we have kept bringing water to one another. The fact that All Souls has not only survived but thrived this past year, is, by my estimation, nothing less than a miracle, but it didn't take divine intervention. It took loving attention to watering branches that at times looked dry and dead. It took you.

Let's go back to that definition of a miracle for a moment. Remember it said: In various religions, a phenomenon that is characterized as miraculous is often attributed to the actions of a supernatural being, magic, a miracle worker, a saint, or a religious leader." In this faith tradition, unlike some others, we say that we all have to be religious leaders – in other words – we are ALL the miracle workers – but we first have to see the opportunity for miracles that can happen once we really open our eyes to the possibilities.

So let's talk for a minute about the nitty-gritty of a miracle we don't want in the life of our church. In this week's e-newsletter column, Executive Director Traci Hughes Trotter wrote about the fact that we have people living on the front portico of the church. Last December, one of those persons died with his head resting on the threshold of the door to the sanctuary. One man has pitched his tent on the church property. This is not new news for All Souls; several years ago you made the decision to remove the fence that would have prevented these un-housed persons from staying at the church. But what may be new is the number, the persistence and the frequency of persons who consider All Souls their home.

Your executive and ministry team and facilities staff have all been struggling with what's the right thing to do, especially as we move towards re-opening this fall. We know that calling the police is a morally unacceptable option. We have a feeling that there is a better way – a more humane way – one that is consistent with our values and that truly honors and recognizes human worth and dignity. To be honest, my first reaction is simply "I don't want to deal with this." Yet, there's this other part – this God-Part – this Spirit-Part that keeps tugging at me as well – and it's saying "maybe there is a blessing in disguise here that we haven't yet uncovered; in this thing-you-don't-want." Traci's thoughtful essay moved me to think perhaps there is something we as a congregation can do collectively, together. That's why we have issued the invitation to hear from you; to see if there is something we can do. We'd have to be able to do it together – there's no miracle workers on your staff that can make something new happen to engage with this challenge without you. But religious leaders in community have been known to bring about miracles all the time. We hope to hear from you by April 30th to determine whether or not this is a ministry to which members of this congregation feel called to serve.

So, as Peter Mayer sings, the challenging thing becomes –not to look for miracles, but finding where there isn't one. And I would add, finding out that the miracle you think you want, isn't the one you really need. The miracle I needed the most in my life was one that others had to coax out of me like a new leaf from a dead stick with their persistent watering. It was the miracle of a shift in insight, a change from walking around with blinders on, to seeing the world more clearly, and knowing you have the capacity to handle it. When we begin to individually experience this miracle together, then we find we have the ability to move more skillfully, more deliberately and more assertively into fully embracing living in Beloved Community together. Now that's a miracle of human endeavor I think we all need. May it be so.

Anthem (All Souls Jubilee Singers; Bob Jayes, vocal lead)

"Faith" (Richard Smallwood)

There are times when adversities seem to overtake your life.
Doubts and fears come to cloud your mind and confusion's all inside.
But there's a message for you my friend, and I know this word is true.
Just have the faith of a mustard seed and there's nothing you cannot do.

Refrain

If you have faith you can move mountains.
Just keep the faith nothing is impossible.
Hold on to your faith you shall overcome
According to your faith just believe and it shall be done.

Your river may seem too hard to cross and your mountain too hard to climb.
But you can conquer your circumstance if you keep this thought in mind.
Faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.
If you walk by faith and not by sight, you can realize your dreams.

Refrain

Bridge

Faith faith
Faith got to have it
Faith faith
Faith really need it
Faith without faith
Impossible it's impossible
It's impossible to realize your dream

Refrain

Tag

Faith faith
Faith faith
Faith faith
Mustard seed mustard seed

Offertory (Anna Hargrave)

I'm Anna Hargrave. As a life-long member of All Souls, I've served on quite a few volunteer committees and projects. At the moment, I have the pleasure of serving on the Steering Committee of the Beckner Advancement Fund. Each year, this fund makes grants to jumpstart projects within the church and provide support to organizations working to dismantle systemic oppression and facilitate economic opportunity, justice, and liberation throughout Washington, D.C.

I bet half of you are thinking, "We have a volunteer committee that gives out money?" The answer is yes and it's just as much fun as it sounds.

But I'm guessing some of you are asking, "Hold on! If the church has all this money, why do you keep bothering us about making an annual pledge?"

That's because the founders, Earl and Meta Beckner, specified that the fund could not support general operating expenses. They understood that, no matter how generous or well-intentioned, no single donor can create a diverse, sprit-growing, justice-seeking community like All Souls. It takes all of us making a commitment of time, talent, and treasure to sustain this work.

During my tenure on the committee, we've been on a journey to think about –not just how to honor the Beckner's wishes, but how do we convert these dollars into meaningful action?

What does it mean to pursue justice in ways that truly center communities?

And what does this moment in time demand of us?

I realize, All Souls has been asking me these questions my whole life.

I can't think of another institution that so lovingly comforts us in times of difficulty while also challenging us to continuously grow, and become the best versions of ourselves.

When I make my annual pledge, I see it as both a thank-you and an investment to ensure this vibrant community can continue to support and inspire all of us in the coming year.

We so appreciate everyone who gives when we pass the virtual collection plate. But as you think about what this community has meant to you over the last year and your hopes for next, I encourage you take that next step by making a pledge too.

Hymn 20

"Be Thou My Vision"

Be thou my vision, O God of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that thou art.
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, and thou my true word;
I ever with thee and thou with me God;
Thou my soul's shelter, thou my high tower,
Raise thou me heavenward, O power of my power.

Riches I heed not, nor world's empty praise,
Thou my inheritance, now and always;
Thou and thou only, first in my heart,
Sov'reign of heaven, my treasure thou art.

Benediction (Rev. Rolenz)

We leave this gathered community,
But we don't leave our connection,
Our concerns, our care for each other.
Our service to each other, to the world, and to our faith continues.
Until we are together again, friends,
Be strong, be well, be true, be loving.

Music (All Souls Jubilee Singers; Nicole Rumeau, vocal lead)

“Expect a Miracle” (The Clark Sisters)