

*I want to suggest a strong note of reserve, of pessimism, of the ambiguous which it seems to me are of the very nature of life today . . . and then to ask: In spite of it all, what are we to do with our lives?*

—Daniel Berrigan

## After the Good News

### Welcome

Rev. Clare Petersberger

### The Covenant

*First Parish of Norwell Unitarian Universalists*

WE PLEDGE TO WALK TOGETHER  
IN FELLOWSHIP AND LOVE,  
TO CULTIVATE REVERENCE,  
TO PROMOTE SPIRITUAL GROWTH  
AND ETHICAL COMMITMENT,  
TO MINISTER TO EACH OTHER'S NEEDS  
AND TO THOSE OF HUMANITY,  
TO CELEBRATE THE SACRED MOMENTS OF LIFE'S  
PASSAGE,  
AND TO HONOR THE HOLINESS AT THE HEART OF BEING.

### Opening Words

“Let Them Go”

The Reverend Gretchen Haley

From *Soul Matters*

Our spiritual question for September is, “What does it mean to be a people of expectation?”

Expectation means to be on the lookout for what is about to happen. We humans do a lot of thinking about what is going to happen next. Sometimes it's good—when it leads us to create something new. Sometimes it's bad—when it leads us to fret about things over which we have no control, or to worry about something that may never happen. In our opening words, the Reverend Gretchen Haley invites us to rest for a few moments from anxious anticipation. She says:

Whatever you have come in  
Anticipating  
Whatever you expect  
Or worry  
For our world, for the future  
For our lives—  
Let it go  
Make space in your heart

to be surprised  
Make room in your soul  
For a new story to take shape  
Let astonishment be  
Possible  
At this life that  
Remains  
a miracle  
Imagine here the bursting of joy  
Relentless and resilient  
Coming in waves  
Washing over us  
with music,  
and story  
silence,  
and still this dreaming together  
Being hope for each other  
and courage  
to believe  
in this new day  
dawning  
for us all.  
Come let us worship, together.  
Whatever you have come in

## **Chalice Lighting**

(Read responsively)

Rev. David Breeden

We kindle this flame in expectation.

NOT THE EXPECTATION THAT JUSTICE  
WILL SOON PREVAIL.

Not the expectation that the struggle will soon be won.

YET IN THE EXPECTATION THAT COMPANIONSHIP  
AND JOY WILL BE OURS ON THE JOURNEY.

We kindle this flame in community and expectation.

## **Prelude**

“Rondo” from *Sonata No. 8* (Op. 13, C minor)

Ludwig van Beethoven

Tracy Hall, piano

## Time for All Ages

*Bartholomew and the Oobleck*

Dr. Seuss

Delivered by the Rev. Clare Petersberger and Lora Powell-Haney.

What does it mean to be a people of expectation? There's an anonymous saying, "What will mess you up most in life is the picture in your head of how it's supposed to be."

Dr. Seuss wrote about a king who learned this the hard way in his story *Bartholomew and the Oobleck*.

"They still talk about it in the Kingdom of Didd as The-Year-the King-Got-Angry-with-the-Sky. The page boy, Bartholomew Cubbins, had seen the King get angry many, many times before. But that year, when his Majesty started growling at the sky, Bartholomew Cubbins just didn't know what to make of it. . ."

[Summary: King Derwin, it seems, was angry about the weather. Spring rain, summer sun, autumn fog, winter snow, all aroused the king's ire. His page boy, Bartholomew, tried to comfort him with a reminder that this was what had *always* happened, but the king remained irate, both demanding and promising that something new would fall from the sky. And with that, he ordered Bartholomew to summon the magicians. The royal magicians didn't disappoint. They promised him . . . oobleck.

What, they were asked, was oobleck? They didn't know what it was, only that it was different. And with incantations and magic fires, they called it down. Called the oobleck to fall down as did the rain, sun, fog, and snow. And the next day, fall it did.

The weird little green blobs restored the king to humor. He declared a holiday, and demanded the pealing of the bells to urge everyone out to dance in the oobleck.

But there could be no tolling of the bell to announce a holiday and inspire dancing. The oobleck was heavy and sticky, incapacitating the bell. The wings of birds stuck together. The trumpets were unable to sound a warning, clogged as they were with oobleck.

Meanwhile, the oobleck had changed from small blobs to giant blobs, gluing animals to animals and farmers to their tools. The palace itself was being pelted by the enormous sticky, soupy blobs. The king's head was stuck in his crown, his pants stuck to his throne. Frantically, he ordered Bartholomew to recall the magicians.

But Bartholomew could not. The magicians, like everyone else, were mired in oobleck.

Desperate, the king began to chant what he hoped were magic words remembered from the spell which had first called down the oobleck. Nothing happened, except that oobleck continued to fall.

Now it was Bartholomew, the humble page boy, who became angry, and he upbraided the king, yelling, "This is all *your* fault! The least you can do is say the simple words, 'I'm sorry.' You may be a mighty king, but you're sitting in oobleck up to your chin. And so is everyone else in your land. And if you won't even say you're sorry, you're no sort of king at all."

It was a moment of clarity for the king. He'd never been addressed in that way before. But as Bartholomew started to leave, the king began to sob, and then, to accept responsibility—and to apologize. He said, “You’re right! It *is* all my fault! And I *am* sorry! Oh, Bartholomew, I’m awfully, *awfully* sorry!”

And, like magic, which those words of apology may well have been, the sun began to shine. The oobleck blobs grew smaller, and melted away as the sun grew brighter. And the holiday bell was rung to celebrate those perfect offerings from the sky: the rain, the sun, the fog, and the sun.]

Oobleck was not what anyone expected. It didn’t fall like gentle rain. It fell in great green sticky globs. And Bartholomew was not what people expected in a page boy—someone who was less powerful than the King telling the king what he was doing wrong. And old King Derwin of Didd was not what people expected in a powerful leader—someone who would be willing to show his tears and sadness and apologize for doing something wrong.

We humans don’t always get what we expect. Sometimes we have to take a risk like Bartholomew or fail like King Derwin of Didd in order to learn a better way. As a people of expectation, we know that while we won’t always get what we want and expect when we let love guide us, we will always find a way.

## **Hymn #131**

“Love Will Guide Us”

### **Prayer/Meditation**

Rev. Vanessa Southern

Delivered by Lora Powell-Haney

So much undone.  
So much to do.  
So much to heal  
in us and the world.  
So much to acquire:  
a meal  
a healthy body—  
a fit one—  
a lover  
a job  
a better job  
proof we have and are enough  
just around the corner of now.

And up against it the reality  
of all that falls short and the limits of today.  
We honor the limits:  
If your body won’t do what it used to, for right now let it be enough.  
If your mind won’t stop racing or can’t think of the word, let it be enough.  
If you are here utterly alone and in despair, be all that here with us.

If today you cannot sing because your throat hurts or you don't have the heart for music, be silent.  
When the offering plate goes around if you don't have money to give or the heart to give, let it pass.

The world won't stop spinning on her axis if you don't rise to all occasions today.  
Love won't cease to flow in your direction,  
your heart won't stop beating,  
all hope won't be lost.

You are part of the plan for this world's salvation,  
of that I have no doubt.  
The world needs its oceans of people striving to be good  
to carry us to the shores of hope and wash fear from the beach heads,  
and cleanse all wounds so they can heal.

But oceans are big and I am sure there are parts that don't feel up to the task of the whole some days.  
Rest, if you must, then, like the swimmer lying on her back who floats,  
or the hawk carried on cushions of air.  
Rest in space made to hold weary lives in space carved out for the doing of nothing much  
but being.

Perhaps then you will feel in your bones,  
in your weary heart,  
the aching, healing sense that  
this is enough—  
even this.

That we are enough.  
You are enough.  
Enough.

## Hymn

#123 "Spirit of Life"

## Reading

from *After the Good News*

Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd

Our reading this morning comes from The Reverend Nancy McDonald Ladd, Senior Minister of the River Road Unitarian Universalist Congregation. In her recently published book, *After the Good News: Progressive Faith Beyond Optimism*, Nancy writes:

"My Gen X colleagues and I came into ministry in the immediate aftermath of 9-11, in the looming shadow of the war in Iraq. We rode the lashing waves of congregational life atop the rising tide of school shootings, over the cresting waters (of Katrina) that burst through broken levees and onward, into the unflinching flood of honesty emerging from the Black Lives movement. Many of us found ourselves approaching the mid-

points of our careers just in time for the post-election era of 2017, when the racial animus that had long served as the unspoken underpinning of American democracy rose up and called itself by name.

For most of our careers, people have been coming to church to dissect and respond to a series of tragic events whose meaning has not often been clear. People also come to find hope amid these meaningful but continually evolving crises. The liberal church becomes a place to hold on to when everything else seems to swirl out of control, and those who fill our congregations on Sunday morning crave not only meaning but also ready access to comfort and assurance. Thus, when the headlines break, which they do with dizzying speed, the people we serve in the liberal churches move quickly from wanting to know what it all means to wanting to know that it—whatever it is—will all be okay in the end.

This rapid shift from meaning-making to assurance of comfort makes sense for many among the progressive worshippers we encounter. It is not a sin to hope for relief from the pressure of the headlines and the persistent drumbeat of bad news. It is not wrong to yearn for quick relief from existential and moral dis-ease. However, the rapidity with which we move to meet this yearning for comfort and self-assurance is a conditioned response that sometimes arises from the racial and sociopolitical location of most worshippers in our pews. We are in a hurry to find comfort because we are used to living fundamentally comfortable lives . . .

We cannot offer the cheap grace of eventual societal perfection in times of systemic desolation, and we cannot sell one another on the idea that it's all going to be just fine in the end. The liberal church is being called to a new way of being, a less self-assured but equally faithful approach to living and serving in these times. Daniel Berrigan, one of the late great radicals of my liberal Catholic heritage, once said, 'How do we build a life worthy of human beings in the darkness? We are called to grow new organs, by new conditions of life and death. New ways of perceiving, of living in the world, new ways of moving over, to give room for others to live at our side.'"

The Reverend Nancy McDonald Ladd on being a religious community in 2019.

## **Offertory**

*"Everybody's Cryin' Mercy"*

Mose Allison/Bonnie Raitt

Patty Barry, voice; Tracy Hall, piano

## **Sermon**

*After the Good News*

Rev. Clare L. Petersberger

Many years ago, the late Reverend Gordon B. McKeeman delivered a sermon representing all of his colleagues who had served for 50 years as Unitarian Universalist ministers. He did so in terms of statistics. He said: "Fifty years is 2,600 Sundays. That's about 2,000 sermons—a few memorable, most mercifully forgettable." The line that got the most laughs of recognition was: "Books, bought, borrowed: 1,143. Books read: 27. Books told I should read: 7, 025."

But then Gordon got to moral issues and justice and said: "Social problems—let's see—was it 20,200 or 2,000? I forget. Social problems solved? None that I can remember."

His assessment of social problems solved—none—stuck in my head. I was just starting out in ministry with great idealism and was optimistic. In seminary, I had read William Ellery Channing’s sermon, “Likeness to God.” Channing preached that we humans contain within us the image of God. I had been raised in a Unitarian Universalist congregation shaped by such a view of human nature, reinforced by the First Humanist Manifesto. Members taught in Sunday School classes that given the freedom, opportunity, and resources, people will choose compassion, fairness, and love. My mentors had modeled working for justice—with a faith that when we work together, our common problems can be solved. And, at the time Gordon shared his 50-year sermon, I had experienced a societal problem that, if not being solved, then at least being ameliorated.

When two members of the congregation I served in West Texas announced in 1989 that they tested positive for HIV, members of the congregation and the community were scared. So leaders of the congregation created a forum—a panel of medical experts to speak to us and the wider community. At least most of the congregation were persuaded not to shun these two members and to bring their children to Sunday School in the same building with them. That felt like progress—even though we were still years away from ART therapy to keep the virus in remission.

So how could Gordon B. McKeeman assert that after 50 years of ministry, no social problems had been solved? Now that I am more than halfway to 50 years of ministry, I understand.

Planned Parenthood of West Texas—an organization on whose Board I had served for nine of its 40 years—no longer exists. It closed in 2013 because of legislation state lawmakers passed to restrict abortion providers. With its closure went cervical cancer screenings, STD tests, family planning, and other health services for 2,000 low-income women. This year, Alabama, Georgia, Missouri, and Ohio have passed laws restricting abortions after the fetus is anywhere from six to eight weeks. Although such restrictive laws have yet to be passed in Maryland, many women in the United States feel like we are now actually living in the fictional *Handmaid’s Tale* when it comes to men returning to their demand to control women and their bodies.

Many of us worked for years for same sex marriage. We rejoiced when Massachusetts enacted legislation in 2004 allowing the plaintiffs, Hillary and Julie Goodridge, to marry in Arlington Street Church—a Unitarian Universalist congregation. And we shed tears of joy and posted rainbow flags on our Facebook pages on June 26, 2015 when marriage equality became the law of the nation in all fifty states. But now the current administration is asking the Supreme Court to rule that gay employees are not protected from discrimination. This administration has further sought to reverse healthcare protections for trans people; has sought to ban trans people from serving in the military; and is pushing for businesses to be allowed to turn away gay and trans customers on “religious” exemptions. This administration has weakened access to health care for the poorest; promoted the morally indefensible judgment that there were good people on both sides in Charlottesville; and denied climate change.

On so many social issues it feels not only like we are not moving forward; it feels like we are regressing. The Baptist minister the Reverend Miguel De La Torre points out that in Spanish, “to hope” is translated as *esperar*, a word that asks us “to wait in apprehension of either good or evil.” He goes on to say, “History is not defined through triumphant meta-narratives, but instead is a kaleidoscope comprised of contradictory and complex untold stories and struggles of the very least among us who remain unnamed.” He continues, “History is full of stories of evil vanquishing good, brutality crushing peace. We presently live in a world that is not getting better for the global marginalized, rather, due to the widening wealth gap, it is getting worse.”

So where does progressive faith go when the story and expectation of inevitable progress has been proven to be untrue?

The insight Nancy McDonald Ladd offers is not unlike the one King Derwin of Didd and Bartholomew learned together in terms of oobleck. Bartholomew shared his perspective that the King had abused his power. And King Derwin apologized. Similarly, Nancy McDonald Ladd urges us to return to a certain point in our faith history—specifically, 1937, when *Hymns of The Spirit* was published. It contained liturgies of confession and atonement that lifted up the reality that we humans, individually and collectively, are not always good. Through pride, ignorance, privilege, and power, we hurt each other, sometimes even on purpose.

She wrote, “Between 1937 and 1964, Unitarians stopped confessing to anything. We just weren’t into that anymore. It wasn’t our thing . . . We got so darn busy celebrating life every Sunday that we forgot how to authentically examine it . . . Existential reckoning was . . . I suppose, too much of a bummer.”

That is changing now. As an association of congregations, we Unitarian Universalists are openly discussing ways we have failed one another—especially when it comes to dismantling white supremacy and patriarchy in our congregations. The basis for these conversations is trusting relationships, in which people are invited to share their stories—including those of experiences of oppression, pain, and suffering that are rarely posted on Facebook. The intention is for these stories to not only be shared, but also to be heard—like when Bartholomew told the king that he didn’t need magic words; he needed simple words of regret and apology.

The basis of such relationships is not striving for perfection, but accepting that risk-taking and failure are necessary to progress. I heard more public apologies at General Assembly this year than I had heard in the previous 14 I had attended. And the basis of these relationships is an understanding that the inherent worth and dignity of every person is less about our human actions—which are sometimes anything but worthy and dignified—and more about the nature of God, or if you prefer another word, love—with a capital L.

Nothing can ever make us unworthy of love—nothing. After the good news of 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarianism comes the good news that we are enough—when we form deep and authentic relationships to work *with*, and not *for*, the marginalized and oppressed.

Perhaps this good news is neither modern nor post-modern. The Reverend Barbara Brown Taylor notes that “The wisdom of the Desert Fathers includes the wisdom that the hardest spiritual work in the world is to love the neighbor as the self—to encounter another human being not as someone you can use, change, fix, help, save, enroll, convince, or control, but simply as someone who can spring you from the prison of yourself, if you will allow it. All you have to do is recognize another you ‘out there’—your other self in the world—for whom you may care as instinctively as you care for yourself. To become that person, even for a moment . . . may be the only real spiritual discipline there is.”

## Hymn

#346 “Come, Sing a Song with Me”

## **Closing Words**

Rev. Victoria Safford

The Reverend Victoria Safford reminds us:

“Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of Hope—not the prudent gates of Optimism, which are somewhat narrower; nor the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense; nor the strident gates of Self-Righteousness, which creak on shrill and angry hinges (people cannot hear us there; they cannot pass through); nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of “Everything is gonna be all right.” But a different, sometimes lonely place, the place of truth-telling, about your own soul first of all and its condition, the place of resistance and defiance, the piece of ground from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be, as it will be; the place from which you glimpse not only struggle, but the joy of the struggle. And we stand there, beckoning and calling, telling people what we are seeing, asking people what they see.”

GO NOW IN PEACE.