

Plymouth Sunday Service, 27 August, 2023

Led by Stephen Crowther

Prelude *Agnus Dei*

Welcome – let us pause to be still, to breathe slowly, to re-centre our scattered senses....

Music: *Vespers*

Welcome to our service this morning - may you find a sense of belonging during our time together and a deeper sense of connection.

Opening Prayer: from Thomas Merton (Thoughts in Solitude)

*My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself,
 and the fact that I think
 that I am following your will,
 does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
 does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything
 apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this,
You will lead me by the right road,
 though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore, I will trust you always,
 though I may seem to be lost
 and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.*

Chalice lighting:

*And so, as is our custom, for the last time, I light the chalice to warm our spirits, and to kindle the flame of Love and hope.
We light it as a symbol of welcome. May its flame be a beacon of hope to all those seeking refuge and comfort. May it light the way home for those wandering in the wilderness. May it connect with the light of Love in all our hearts reminding us that we are never alone.*

We have gathered once again for worship. That makes this a holy moment – a sacred moment.

As Unitarians, we have no fixed statement of beliefs or creed to which we have to agree in order to be accepted. Our attitude is that religion is wider than any church or faith-group, and deeper than any set of beliefs. Here we practice a free faith unfettered by dogma. As such, when I speak of God, as ever, I invite you to bring your own unfolding, personal and intimate understanding to the name – for it is yours and yours alone and may just be your most intimate relationship of all....

Opening words: from Frederick Buechner

Religious faith, the Epistle to the Hebrews says “is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” Noah, Abraham, Sarah, and the rest of them, it goes on to say, “all died in faith, not having received what was promised but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people like that, make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.”

Faith, therefore, is distinctly different from other aspects of the religious life and not to be confused with them even though we sometimes use the word to mean religious belief in general as in phrases like the Christian faith or the faith of Islam. Faith is different from theology because theology is reasoned, systematic, orderly whereas faith is disorderly, intermittent, and full of surprises. Faith is different from mysticism because mystics in their ecstasy become one with what faith can at most see only from afar. Faith is different from ethics because ethics is primarily concerned not, like faith, with our relationship to God but with our relationship to each other. Faith is closest perhaps to worship because like worship it is essentially a response to God and involves the emotions and the physical senses as well as the mind, but worship is consistent, structured, single-minded and seems to know what it’s doing while faith is a stranger and exile on the earth and doesn’t know for certain about anything. Faith is homesickness. Faith is a lump in the throat. Faith is less a position *on* than a movement *toward*, less a sure thing than a hunch. Faith is waiting. Faith is journeying through space and through time.

Hymn 1: *Bring Many Names*

Intro to last service for me. *Ebb and Flow. Retirement and reasons why. First Uni service I came to was in 2004. The first service I led was 31.7.11. Some of the words that have fed me along the way....*

My Story:

I used to live in NYC. In the aftermath of 9/11 and at the suggestion of my therapist, I attended a workshop over the course of a weekend. I had what I can only describe as an ecstatic experience.

My therapist was a Jungian one and when I spoke with him about my experience, he told me that in an interview toward the end of his life, Carl Jung was asked if he believed in God, to which he replied, 'I don't need to believe, I know'.

These words made sense to me - they opened a door and light flooded through, illuminating the idea that God and faith didn't have to be based on belief or dogmatic thoughts but rather, God can be experienced – what an idea! I EXPERIENCE GOD!

So, I found myself drawn to sitting in churches. I became curious and open-minded. Something had awoken in me. Then, one Sunday, a friend invited me along to a church called Unity of New York. The service was moving, joyful, funny. The choir was made up of Broadway chorus boys and girls, so, the singing was amazing and well worth the cost of the offering!

The minister, Paul Tenaglia, talked about the singularity of God. Responding to the charge: 'if there is a god, then why does he punish us with tsunamis or earthquakes or genocide – why does he let these things happen?'; Paul said: 'those disasters are acts of nature or of man. God is always with you, not in the tragedy. God is the principle of absolute good, the power of the universe itself, revealing everything we need to know to heal. God would never punish His, Her or It's children. God is not in the earthquake or the tsunami but is in the quiet still voice within that holds us as we integrate tragedy, helping to relieve our suffering. We have forgotten to listen to that voice.'

It was around this time, that I first heard the Footprints story. Please try and look past the dated, patriarchal language:

One night I dreamed I was walking along a beach with the Lord. Many scenes from my life flashed before me. In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand. Sometimes there were two sets of footprints, at other times there was only one set of prints. This really bothered me because I noticed that during the low periods of my life, when I was suffering and in anguish, sorrow or defeat, I could see only one set of footprints.

So I said to the Lord, "You promised me Lord, that if I followed you, you would walk with me always. But I notice that during the most trying periods of my life there have only been one set of footprints in the sand. Why, when I needed you most, were you not there for me?"

The Lord replied, "My precious, precious child, I would never leave you - the times when you see only one set of footprints, are the times when I carried you."

(adapted from Mary Stevenson)

I cried the first time I heard this story. I drew comfort and hope from it. It helped make sense of my life up until then. Talk of God or the Lord no longer invoked groaning rejection and disbelief. Instead, something in me started to open and grow. The flame that had been ignited was being gently fanned.

For much of my life, I have felt a sense of loss and yearning and an emptiness within me which I have since heard described as a 'God-sized' or 'God-shaped hole'. Some would say that it's a longing for connection – a call to undo a separation from God and from ourselves. For me, that yearning gets evoked in the presence of beauty – a sunset, music, a face, singing. I became drawn to all sorts of world sacred traditions and music – of feeling connecting to something 'beyond' something 'other'. I still couldn't articulate what it was I was feeling. But, I began to realise that my faith and beliefs and values were developing through my own lived experiences and not some dry text book or ideas adopted without thought. I wept when I saw dervishes whirling – falling in love with them. The plaintive yearning in their music and their way of being, called to a deeply buried part of myself. I heard it echoed in the poems of Rumi and Hafiz and in naming The Beloved.

How did the rose ever open its heart and give to this world all its Beauty?

It felt the encouragement of light against its Being,

*Otherwise, we all remain
Too
Frightened.*

(Hafiz, It Felt Love trans. Daniel Ladinsky)

Story: Finding God. *One day a little boy decided to go and look for God. He set off after breakfast and headed to the nearby park. He was only a small boy with short legs, and so, by the time he reached the park, it was time for a snack.*

He sat down on a bench and got out his sandwiches and lemonade. Soon an elderly lady came and sat down on the bench beside him. She looked tired, and the little boy was sorry for her and offered her some of his lunch. She accepted his kindness with a grateful smile.

After lunch, the two of them sat on the bench and chatted together. The boy told the woman about his family and his school and his hopes and dreams for the future, and the more he told her, the younger the woman felt, and the more inspired and energised. She in her turn listened to his story with a loving, knowing smile, and told him a few stories of her own.

When the little boy got back home, his mother asked him, 'So, did you find God?'

'Oh, yes,' he replied without hesitation. 'And she has the most amazing smile.'

And that evening, the old lady told her husband of her day's encounter: 'I met God in the park today,' she said, 'and he is much younger than I expected.'

(pause)

Whoever or Whatever God is for you, whatever your understanding is or isn't, my hope and invitation is that you surrender to that relationship, not making it about language and ideas but basing it on your own lived experience. Trust that experience.

And trust, that God becomes who God needs to be in order to enter your heart. I say that we are invited to put aside our resistances and open our minds and hearts to mystery and possibility....

Hymn 2: *Come and Find the Quiet Centre*

To take us into a time of prayer, some words from Teilhard de Chardin:

*Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
We are quite naturally impatient in everything
to reach the end without delay.
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something
unknown, something new.
And yet it is the law of all progress
that it is made by passing through
some stages of instability—
and that it may take a very long time.*

*And so I think it is with you;
your ideas mature gradually - let them grow,
let them shape themselves, without undue haste.
Don't try to force them on,
as though you could be today what time
(that is to say, grace and circumstances
acting on your own good will)
will make of you tomorrow.*

*Only God could say what this new spirit
gradually forming within you will be.
Give Our Lord the benefit of believing
that his hand is leading you,
and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself
in suspense and incomplete.*

Let us **Pray**. You may want to close your eyes and bring the focus of your attention inwards to your heart – penetrating its walls and breathing into it deeply – your very centre.... And as you do so, picture yourself breathing in God's unconditional love – breathing it in, breathing it out – filling the space around you with it....

Let us rest in this place for a moment – breathing together....

Psalm 23 Nan C Merrill

*O my Beloved, You are my shepherd,
I shall not want;
You bring me to green pastures
for rest
and lead me beside still waters
renewing my spirit;
You restore my soul.
You lead me in the path of
goodness
to follow Love's way.*

*Even though I walk through the
valley of the shadow and
of death,
I am not afraid;
For You are ever with me;
your rod and your staff
they guide me,
they give me strength
and comfort.*

*You prepare a table before me
in the presence of all my fears;
you bless me with oil,
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy will
follow me
all the days of my life;
and I shall dwell in the heart
of the Beloved forever.
Amen.*

Silence

Reflective music: *Mother of God*

Prayer: *May this group be a true spiritual home for the seeker, a friend for the lonely, a guide for the confused. May those who pray here be strengthened by the Holy Spirit to serve all who come, and to receive them as Jesus Himself. In the silence of this room may all the suffering, violence, and confusion of the world encounter the Power that will console, renew and uplift the human spirit.*

May this silence be a power to open the hearts of men and women to the vision of God, and so to each other, in love and peace, justice and human dignity.

May the beauty of the divine life, fill this group and the hearts of all who pray here, with joyful hope. May all who come here weighed down by the problems of humanity leave giving thanks for the wonder of human life. We make this prayer in God's many names.

Amen

(Laurence Freeman)

Music: *Benediction from The Prayer Cycle, Jonathon Elias* (STOP AT 6.37)

Reading: *The Promised Land* by Rachel Naomi Remen.

In the book of Mormon, there is another version of the Exodus story. In it, the Jaredites, forced from their homes by conditions that stifle their freedom, set out across great unchartered waters to reach the land of promise in boats sealed up tightly against the sea. Jared speaks to god about the difficulty in steering these boats in total darkness. He is told that if he brings stones with him, God will touch them and they will shine forth light.

The voyage is long and difficult in the extreme; there are mighty storms and the boats are plunged deep beneath the water over and over again. But their seal holds, and their stones, touched by God, continue to shine.

According to Jung, the stone is one of the two archetypal symbols for the soul. The image of a people sailing through heavy seas in search of freedom steering only by the light that the touch of God kindles in their souls, is a particularly beautiful one for me. The journey to freedom and the Promised Land may take many forms.

In the course of any lifetime there are times when one has to sail into the unknown without map or compass. These can be times of despair and terror; they can also be times of discovery.

Having accompanied many people as they deal with the unknown, I find that the most moving part of the Mormon exodus story is a single line. Despite the challenges and great difficulties of this sea journey, 'the wind always blows in the direction of the promised land'. I have seen many people spread their sails and catch this wind.

There is a grace in life that can be trusted. In our struggle toward freedom we are neither abandoned nor alone.

Hymn 3: *Be Thou My Vision*

Closing words: HEART SONG Kathryn Robbie

*The song of your heart and the heart of your song is the essence of you.
Your song is within you.*

*The sound of your song in always echoed back to you.
God sings your song to you all the time -
That's how you recognize God's voice*

*You are not called to write or finish your song - it is already complete.
You are called to live it - to sing it joyfully - and to embrace it fully -
trust your harmony within - you know it - you have heard it before.
You are drawn to its sound*

*Your heart song awakens you in the morning.
It plays in your spirit as you rest.
It calls you when you are restless – 'dance with me and find peace'.
It carries you from your first breath to your last.
One day it will leap forth to return to the heart of God.
Your song is unique and will never be heard again.
- learn to live it.*

*Within you is your heart song.
And the purpose is to sing your heart song.
It is a melody of truth and wisdom - a symphony of strength.
The heavenly choirs sang your song to you as you were birthed from the mind
and heart of God into your mother's womb.
Don't let the noise of this world drown it.
Pay attention to it - listen to it – learn to sing it.
It is the most beautiful sound you will ever know.*

And a **Blessing** from Jan Richardson

*If you would enter into the wilderness,
do not begin without a blessing.*

*Do not leave without hearing who you are: Beloved,
named by the One who has travelled this path before you.*

*Do not go without letting it echo in your ears,
and if you find it hard to let it into your heart, do not despair.
That is what this journey is for.*

*I cannot promise this blessing will free you from danger,
from fear,
from hunger or thirst,
from the scorching of sun
or the fall of the night.
But I can tell you that on this path there will be help.*

I can tell you that on this way there will be rest.

*I can tell you that you will know the strange graces
that come to our aid only on a road such as this,
that fly to meet us bearing comfort and strength,
that come alongside us for no other cause than to lean themselves
toward our ear
and with their curious insistence
whisper our name:*

Beloved.

Beloved.

Beloved.

(Beloved Is Where We Begin, Jan Richardson)

*And so, may the wind of the Spirit blow through our world, giving the answer of
God's everlasting love. That when you leave this place, may you do so with peace
and joy in your heart.*

Amen

Music: *May The Road Rise*