

## 19<sup>th</sup> May 2024: PLYMOUTH UNITARIANS

Rev Kate Whyman – Breath of God

### 1. **PRELUDE** – ‘Sacred Ground’ Native Spirit

<https://youtu.be/ZaeTj7NyjDE?feature=shared>

### 2. **OPENING WORDS**

Welcome to you all, here in the church as well as online. And a special welcome to anyone here for the first time.

Today is Pentecost in the Christian Calendar. According to the New Testament, it was on Pentecost that the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles. It's not a festival we often mark, being Unitarians! However, it felt like a chance to explore our own understanding of the spirit – in is as far as we can understand it, for perhaps one of the defining characteristics of spirit is its mystery.

Our opening words come from the poem, rather lengthily entitled ‘Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798’, by William Wordsworth

“.....And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  
A motion and a spirit that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.”

Let's light our chalice, as a symbol of our free religious faith.

And may the spirit be with each of us this morning.

Spirit is sometimes described or imagined as the Breath of God. So let's sing our first hymn... 'Breathe on me, breath of God'

### **3. Hymn 45 (G) Come down, O Love divine**

Come down, O Love divine,  
seek thou this soul of mine,  
and visit it with thine own ardour glowing;  
O Comforter, draw near,  
within my heart appear,  
and kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.

O let it freely burn,  
till earthly passions turn  
to dust and ashes in its heat consuming;  
and let its glorious light  
shine ever on my sight,  
and clothe me round, the while my path illuming.

Let holy charity  
mine outward vesture be,  
and lowliness become my inner clothing;  
true lowliness of heart,  
which takes the humbler part,  
and o'er its own shortcomings weeps with loathing.

And so the yearning strong,  
with which the soul will long,  
shall far outpass the power of human telling;

for none can guess its grace,  
till we become the place  
wherein the Holy Spirit makes a dwelling.

*Music Ralph Vaughan Williams, words Bianco de Siena, tr Richard Littledale*

#### **4 PRAYER** We come now to a time of prayer.

Divine Spirit, Breath of God, Spirit of Life and Love, Great Mystery

We understand you and experience you, each in our own way.

May we know your presence here with us, within us and around us.

May we open our hearts and our minds to your creative impulse and your unfathomable yearning that would lead us towards the fullness of life and the depth of love.

As we grapple to understand you, to glimpse you, to grasp you – even in just some small way, even for a moment – may we also simply rest in you, and trust that, inspired by you, the universe is unfolding exactly as it must.

May we feel the force of you at work in our own lives and know that you will lead us well and drive us forever forward towards greater communion with you.

May it be so. Amen.

Pause for our own silent prayers.

Blessed be.

Pentecost already existed as a Jewish festival, and it was while the disciples were celebrating this that the spirit descended on them.

### **READING Acts 2:1-4 (NIV)**

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Spirit came as violent wind, tongues of fire, and the miracle of speaking in other tongues, then.

### **POEM The Voice of the Precambrian Sea, by Pattiann Rogers**

It was Tessa Hall who sent me this poem many years ago. The poet is a scientist and the poem seems to describe the time before life on earth, through the millions of years of evolution, from single cells up to the present – all of it driven by one force.

Lots of types of plants and animals referred to – bryozoan (simple aquatic invertebrate), peccaries (pig-like animals), saguaro (tree-cactus), gourami (a fish). They add to the sense of mystery and deep time. The poet refers to ‘one’ – one wished, one yearned. Who or what is this ‘one’?

During the dearth and lack of those two thousand  
Million years of death, one wished primarily  
Just to grasp tightly, to compose, to circle,  
To link and fasten skilfully, as one  
Crusty grey bryozoan builds upon another,  
To be anything particular, flexing and releasing  
In controlled spasms, to make boundaries—replicating  
Chains, membranes, epitheliums—to latch on with power  
As hooked mussels now adhere to rocky beaches;  
To roll up tightly, fistlike, as a water possum,  
Spine and skin, curls against the cold;  
To become godlike with transformation.

And in that time one eventually wished,  
With the dull swell and fall of the surf, to rise up  
Out of oneself, to move straight into the violet  
Billowing of evening as a willed structure of flight  
Trailing feet, or by six pins to balance  
Above the shore on a swollen blue lupine, tender,  
Almost sore with sap, to shimmer there,  
Specific and alone, two yellow wings  
Like splinters of morning.

One yearned simultaneously to be invisible,  
In the way the oak toad is invisible among  
The ashy debris of the scrub-forest floor;  
To be grandiose as deserts are grandiose  
With punctata and peccaries, Joshua tree,  
Saguaro and the mule-ears blossom; to be precise  
As the long gleaming hairs of the gourami, swaying  
And touching, find the moss and roughage  
Of the pond bottom with precision; to stitch  
And stitch (that dream!) slowly and exactly  
As a woman at her tapestry with needle and thread  
Sews each succeeding canopy of the rain forest  
And with silver threads creates at last  
The shining eyes of the capuchins huddled  
Among the black leaves of the upper branches.

One longed to be able to taste the salt  
Of pity, to hold by bones the stone of grief,  
To take in by acknowledgment the light  
Of spring lilies in a purple vase, five white  
Birds flying before a thunderhead, to become  
Infinite by reflection, announcing out loud  
In one's own language, by one's own voice,  
The fabrication of these desires, this day  
Of their recitation.

## 5 2<sup>nd</sup> Hymn 46 (G) Breath of God

Breathe on me, Breath of God,  
fill me with life anew,  
that I may love what thou dost love,  
and do what thou wouldst do.

Breathe on me, Breath of God,  
until my heart is pure,  
until with thee I will one will,  
to do or to endure.

Breathe on me, Breath of God,  
till I am wholly thine,  
till all this earthly part of me  
glows with thy fire divine.

Breathe on me, Breath of God,  
so shall I never die,  
but live with thee the perfect life  
of thine eternity.

*Music Charles Lockhart, words Edwin Hatch*

## 6 READING Gale Force, Elizabeth Tarbox

Nothing I could imagine, no weather-driven fantasy could quell the thrill of this storm. The cat and I paced about indoors until we could resist no longer. We opened the door, staggered against the wind along the dock, heard the waves cracking and spraying, and smelled the marsh's perfume. Ducks flew into the air and the wind carried them backwards. Smaller birds skimmed the surface and seemed able to move beneath the howling draft. I wondered how it would feel to be blown off this dock and dropped into the marsh grass. I was keenly aware of the neutrality of the

dock. Its last six feet already had blown askew, wrenched from the piles and wedged under the remaining boards. A dock that would let go its own would soon dispose of me.

I thought of Thoreau wanting to suck out all the marrow of life, to know it fully. I wasn't fearful or anxious. I was awake, caught up in the deeper call of *Ruah*, the spirit wind, the breath of God that roars over the bay and through my bones. I wanted to be reduced to my lowest terms, my simplest elements: salt water and a few minerals, with nothing to hide. My skin contains me, but just barely. This morning I wanted to dissolve into the roaring wind, no longer standing in opposition to the elements, but becoming one with them.

**7 REFLECTION:** Let us come to a quiet time of reflection and contemplation.

**8 INTERLUDE:** Vision 1 "The fire of creation": Et audivi. Hildegard of Bingen  
<https://youtu.be/DK-T41pIDbU?feature=shared>

## **9 ADDRESS**

What is spirit? Or the spirit?

In Genesis (2:7) we read that 'the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being'.

And in the book of Job (33:4) Job says: 'The Spirit of God has made me; the breath of the Almighty gives me life.'

In America Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his famous essay 'Nature' (1838): "That which, intellectually considered, we call Reason, considered in relation to nature, we call Spirit. Spirit is the Creator. Spirit hath life in itself."

According to Cliff Reed: "The Spirit, for many Unitarians, is the divine mystery moving among us and within us as we work and worship. Indeed, for many, God as loving, creative spirit, is the primary concept of the divine."

Just recently I re-read the extraordinary novel 'Fugitive Pieces' by Anne Michaels. In it, one of the characters, Michaela, says: 'I imagine that somehow our bodies surround what has always been.'

'I imagine that somehow our bodies surround what has always been.'

I found this incredibly simple and beautiful – it has stayed with me.

Spirit has always been.

Pattiann Rogers's poem seems to suggest this too. That there is a 'drive' at the heart of everything, a force that has always been, and which has (or is) the desire to create, and to give form, ultimately in order to know itself. Is this what spirit is? The very breath of God that gives life to all beings and dwells in all things everywhere? A force that is sometimes gentle enough to be symbolised by a dove, and yet can also be as consuming as fire, or as raging as a hurricane? It's tempting to think of spirit as the shape-shifting energy of God, or even the mood of God (if that were not too anthropomorphic a notion).

Quakers aim only to speak in their Sunday meetings when they are 'moved by the spirit' – which we might recognise as heartfelt, authentic, speaking from our deepest selves. After all the spirit is not a gossip or a chatterer, surely. Not interested in idle nattering. But when it moves, it moves. When it's stirred, we know about it. It has truthfulness. It speaks and acts through us. And in Pattiann Roger's poem it is the force that has driven – that has desired – evolution from no life at all, to single celled life, all the way through to us, we who are not only living, highly complex beings, but



are even able to reflect on, and wonder about, our very experience of being alive. Self-conscious beings. And who's to say we are the end of the line? Why would desire stop here?

The spirit *is* God, surely, but understood in a different way. And how many ways are there to know God, after all? The spirit is just one more metaphor for the ineffable. Another aspect of the divine. So we cannot possibly grasp it, or hold it, or conquer it. The best we can do is get ourselves out of the way enough to notice its presence, to feel it when it moves within us, and to follow its call. I say 'it'. There is of course no suitable pronoun for Spirit, for indeed for God. Our language gives up like a horse stalling at too high a jump.

I have mentioned before that my Biblical Studies tutor believed that the main message of religion is to 'start again'. Hence the major festivals are so often about new beginnings, reawakenings, resurrections. Indeed Pentecost is another 'starting again'.

But my first Unitarian minister – in fact my only one – believed the most important message was not an instruction but a blessing: 'May the force be with you.'

Or we might say, 'May the spirit be with you', or 'May the breath of God be in you'.

I mentioned earlier that Cliff Reed said 'God as loving, creative spirit' is the main understanding of Unitarians, and I would agree. And yet it feels a little too easy. A bit too nice. Where is that deep – almost greedy – are we allowed to say that? – that all-consuming yearning to express and to become? Where is the spirit as wind, as storm, as gale even, as Elizabeth Tarbox describes it, that can reduce us to our simplest elements? Loving is not passive, after all. Love is action, and potentially greater and more awe-inspiring action than we can imagine. Love that moves mountains, hurls stars across the skies, and churns oceans up from their depths in its insatiable desire to be fully itself, fully alive, and fully known to itself?

For all that potential forcefulness, spirit may yet seem elusive, yet surely it is always present. How can it not be – after all, it has always been. It might seem to be asleep – but more likely it is we who are slumbering. Cat-like, I imagine that spirit is ever

alert, one eye half open, one ear twitching, ready to stir and even to leap into action in a moment. Making it suddenly clear in an instant what needs to be done, or not done; what needs to be said, or not said, right now.

As Wordsworth so eloquently and beautifully put it...

'And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  
A motion and a spirit that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.'

'A motion and a spirit that impels all thinking things'

'May the force be with you.'

### **10 3<sup>rd</sup> Hymn 165 (P) The Spirit lives to set us free**

The Spirit lives to set us free,  
walk, walk in the light.  
It binds us all in unity,  
walk, walk in the light.  
*Walk in the light, walk in the light, walk in the light, walk in the light of love.*

The light that shines is in us all,  
walk, walk in the light.  
We each must follow our own call,  
walk, walk in the light.  
*Walk in the light, walk in the light, walk in the light, walk in the light of love.*

Peace begins inside your heart,

walk, walk in the light.

We've got to live it from the start,

walk, walk in the light.

*Walk in the light, walk in the light, walk in the light, walk in the light of love.*

Seek the truth in what you see,

walk, walk in the light.

Then hold it firmly as can be,

walk, walk in the light.

*Walk in the light, walk in the light, walk in the light, walk in the light of love.*

The Spirit lives in you and me,

walk, walk in the light.

Its light will shine for all to see.

walk, walk in the light.

*Walk in the light, walk in the light, walk in the light, walk in the light of love.*

*Music traditional arr David Dawson, words Anon.*

## **CLOSING WORDS**

Within each of our hearts there is a most glorious light.

Go forth, and let its spark help you understand what troubles both you and others;

Go forth, and let its light of reason be a guide in your decisions;

Go forth, and bring its ray of hope to those in need of help in both body and spirit,  
that they may find healing;

Go forth, and fan the flames of passion to help heal our world;

Go forth, and spread the warm glow of love, pushing back the darkness of the world;

Go forth, and share your glorious light with the world.

Amen

## **CLOSING VIDEO 'When the spirit says do'**

<https://youtu.be/Mcqvf7SJI6g?feature=shared>