

WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

April Showers
Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer

Sunday, April 2, 2017

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church
"Grow Your Soul & Serve the World"
328 Maple Street | Mahtomedi, Minnesota 55115
651.426.2369 | www.wbuuc.org

READINGS

A reading from Emily Dickinson

Some keep the Sabbath going to church—
I keep it, staying at Home—
With a bobolink for a Chorister—
and an Orchard, for a Dome—

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice—
I, just wear my Wings—
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
Our little Sexton—sings.

God preaches, a noted clergyman—
And the sermon is never long,
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last—
I'm going, all along.

A reading from Annie Dillard

What does it feel like to be alive? Living, you stand under a waterfall. You leave the sleeping shore deliberately; you shed your dusty clothes, pick your barefoot way over the high, slippery rocks, hold your breath, choose your footing, and step into the waterfall. The hard water pelts your skull, bangs in bits on your shoulders and arms. The strong water dashes down beside you and you feel it along your calves and thighs rising roughly backup, up to the roiling surface, full of bubbles that slide up your skin or break on you at full speed.

Can you breathe here? Here where the force is the greatest and only the strength of your neck holds the river out of your face. Yes, you can breathe even here. You could learn to live like this. And you can, if you concentrate, even look out at the peaceful far bank where you try to raise your arms. What a racket in your ears, what a scattershot pummeling!

It is time pounding at you, time. Knowing you are alive is watching on every side your generation's short time falling away as fast as rivers drop through air, and feeling it hit.

A reading from Gary Young, entitled, Drought

I have somehow managed
another winter, another
failed season without rain.

Outside, the ground separates,
breaking open like sores
that appear without reason
and take too long to heal.

Pepperweed curls and dries
dropping its black seed
at the edges of the paths
I take to the back of the orchard.

Here the plum and apricot
release their hard, unripe fruit,
and the vermilion shoots of the roses
wither and slant toward the grey earth.

It is spring. Winter
is behind me, like a room
I dared not enter, the door shut,
boarded and nailed against snakes
driven out of the hills by drought.

A reading from Wendell Berry

I was born in a drought year.
That summer my mother waited in the house,
enclosed in the sun and the dry ceaseless wind,
for the men to come back in the evenings,
bringing water from a distant spring.
veins of leaves ran dry, roots shrank.

And all my life I have dreaded the return
of that year, sure that it still is
somewhere, like a dead enemy's soul.
Fear of dust in my mouth is always with me,
and I am the faithful husband of the rain,

I love the water of wells and springs
and the taste of roofs in the water of cisterns.
I am a dry man whose thirst is praise
of clouds, and whose mind is something of a cup.

My sweetness is to wake in the night
after days of dry heat, hearing the rain.

SERMON

The ground separates writes the poet, breaking open like sores.

*Ease my spirit, ease my soul,
please free my hands from this barren soil.
Ease my mother, ease my child,
earth and sky be reconciled.*

Rain. Rain. Rain.

There is something about spring rain
that has a freshness to it.

You smell it, in this time of year,
as a harbinger, an old friend returned –
not with the strength of a mid-summer storm, yet,
but with a soft reminder that the earth is tilting toward the sun.

There can be harshness at either extreme of rain and drought –
a harshness to the land, to all life dependent on a certain balance of sun
and rain.

You experience it even in simple ways,
even when it is not a dire situation,
even when it is just an experience in a relatively safe place and context
reminding us of our dependence on the natural world
and the strength of its force.

Like the waterfall that Annie Dillard described in the reading.

I remember an extreme of rain - a camping trip a several years back.

We were at a campground in southern Minnesota,
after a blazing hot day,
one of those days where I would, perhaps annoyingly to my wife,
quote the movie *Sandlot*
I'm bakin' like a toasted cheeser, it's so hot out!

The sun set and the day's heat lingered in the valley.
We skipped the campfire – no need to add any flames that day –
and went to bed in our tent.

We awoke, in the middle of summer countryside darkness,
to wind – flapping the tent fly more and more –
then gusts of wind
the kind of wind making you question your skill at setting those tent
stakes.

The wind grew more fierce,
the rain began pounding from all sides
and the walls of the tent seemed to be just a moment
from flying into the sky –
it felt as if the only thing holding the tent to the saturated ground
was me, Jenna, and our now anxious dog, Lily.

We were tenting near family who had a camper,
(that's how we “rough it”)
so we decided to abandon our tent
and headed for shelter in the camper.

It was the type of rain that drenches you in seconds.

I remember my father in law,
nick-named the *human forklift*
for how he carried carpet rolls with ease at their family store
was struggling to unhook the canopy that covered the camper door –
it was filling with water, bowing from the weight...

And finally, he got it unhinged,
it came crashing down under the weight of the water
which splashed out like a massive water balloon had exploded,
almost washing away our tent.

We shut the door
huddled in
and just sat there, hearing the pounding rain on the metal roof -
in awe and wonder and the magnitude of wind, of rain,
of our own fragility
and our gratitude for one another.

There are those moments,
where gratitude and awe and wonder,
hope and resilience and possibility
shower down on us...

There are also days of *dry heat*, or *dry winters*
of the seasons and cycles
where it feels like the earth beneath us is dried up
where it feels like our own hearts and souls
are dried up
used up
tired, arid – like dust - no roots
ready to just float away
at the lightest breeze –
void of sustenance, vibrancy –
seemingly void of life-

There are days,
and perhaps there have been many in your life
or just a few really rough ones –
perhaps we're living through a kind of dessert of the heart right now –
and perhaps we, as humanity,
have been living through it,
some knowing, some unknowing,
for a long, long time.

It's like when a sponge has been sitting without moisture
for days, months, years – and it is as hard and dry as a rock – even when
you try to put water on it at first, it just slides off.

Sometimes the soul feels like that.

And the spiritual question is –
What is your taproot?
What are your wellsprings?
What are your sources of fresh, living water?
How many little creeks
are there flowing to sooth your soul when the air is harsh?
What, who, where, are your fresh water sources
to soak your soul in sacred waters
when you need nourishment and strength –
when you need life.

Our faith is in a tradition, dating back to ancient texts and mystics, poets
and teachers spanning culture and generation, in different language and
vocabulary, which has proclaimed this world, this earth, being infused
with the presence of the Holy, the Sacred, the Divine – of a thousand
names.

The transcendentalists – Margaret Fuller, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau – spoke of the natural world being an experience of the miraculous, the sacred – enveloping us.

Emerson critiqued views of things being called “miraculous” that were outside of the laws and experience of nature. He said the best sermon ever delivered was the falling snow outside the church windows.

At which I only take slight offense.

Emerson wrote that the miraculous is the blowing clover, the falling rain – that there is no veil between us and the realm of the divine, the presence of the sacred.

Quaker Rufus Jones wrote it this way,

*Beauty breaks through not only at a few highly organized points,
it breaks through almost everywhere.*

*Even the minutest things reveal it as well as do the sublimest things,
like the stars.*

*Whatever one sees through the microscope,
a bit of mold, for example, is charged with beauty.*

And yet beauty has no function, no utility.

Its value is intrinsic, not extrinsic.

It is its own excuse for being.

It greases no wheels, it bakes no puddings.

It is a gift of sheer grace, a gratuitous largesse.

*It must imply behind things a Spirit that enjoys beauty
for its own sake and that floods the world everywhere with it.*

Wherever it can break through, it does break through,

and our joy in it shows that we are in some sense

kindred to the giver and revealer of it.

This is a theology, a perspective of *Immanence* – our monthly theme.
Immanence, like something is imminent, about to happen; near; close –
our faith tradition, among others,
is rooted fundamentally in a belief of *immanence* –
the nearness, the closeness, of that which is sacred.
Both in the world of nature
and in the way we live our lives.

Immanence is a belief
that the earth is infused –
that our daily living is saturated,
like soaked ground after a heavy rain,
with a sacred, a holy, a sanctified dimension.

Immanence
is the belief
that there is no veil, no separation,
between the sacred and this world –
between the Holy and our lives.
It is a belief in the sacred, sanctified dimension
of the common – the ordinary – the daily presentations.

Immanence is where the natural world is the body of God –
where our work and our play
are like sacraments –

our actions and our service like prayers –

our daily routine like a ritual, a liturgy,
infusing meaning and purpose
into our living

It is naming, as sacraments and holy acts
our ordinary tasks -
drafting lesson plans,
firing up a skillet,

proclaiming as holy

the tending of gardens and fields,
the crafting and creating of art,
weaving together words
bolting together metals
polishing a shine onto a floor -
wiping a nose, getting out the crayons,
changing the diapers again and again

It is naming as holy
every drop of water, blade of grass, grain of sand,
it is blessing as beautiful
because of its intrinsic existence
every creature great and small
every human heart longing for life, for freedom,
and every expression of hope and resilience
that fills our wells again.

It is this belief,
in the inherent worth and dignity of every person,
and reverence of the interdependent web of all existence -
this belief
that this world and this life
are infused with the holy
that we are called to know and to name
when there is desecration -
de-consecration,
to rob something of its sacred dimension -
to lack the due honor of holiness and divinity in all things.

Is that not happening all the time?

We desecrate our planet with greed and indifference,
we desecrate people with prejudice and fear,
we desecrate ourselves
by neglecting the truth
that none of us is free until we all are free.

As poet Warsan Shire writes,
i've been praying,
and these are what my prayers look like;
dear god
i come from two countries
one is thirsty
the other is on fire
both need water.
later that night
i held an atlas in my lap
ran my fingers across the whole world
and whispered
where does it hurt?
it answered
everywhere, everywhere, everywhere.

Sometimes it feels like that, doesn't it.
Just the moment you see all this,
all this life, this world, these stories –
complex and messy as they are –
you begin to notice the sacredness of them all –
and that's when the heart breaks open a little more
and you realize the desecration of it all –
when we fail to honor each other, the planet itself,
in whatever language you use - as the body of God.

If we are to notice
glimpses of glory in our midst –
to notice the sacred dimension of our work and play,
to honor the divine spark within all that is,
then we quickly come to the place
where there is a whole lot to hold.
A whole lot to notice.

But Immanence need not mean immensity –
it might actually mean the opposite –
something as close as your own breath –
something magnificent, and miraculous – and manageable.

A colleague of mine has said
There are a thousand things every day that break my heart.
And there are a thousand and one things every day that give me hope.

What are your reasons,
what are your moments,
what are your sources
that are like holy, healing balm
that are like glimpses of glory in your midst
mending your heart, giving you hope,
like rain falling from heaven.

How are you opening your heart,
your spirit, your soul,
to the holy water that is falling
all over the place?

Quaker poet Carrie Newcomer writes about such moments this way,

*Riding my bike down a narrow country road
To one side a dense forest
On the other side a wide summer meadow.
Then right there beside me,
A graceful young doe
Was bounding in beautiful unhurried leaps.
And for just a moment
We were moving together
In the blue evening light.*

*Then with a burst of beautiful speed
She dashed across the road
And disappeared into the woods,
Leaving me breathless
With a feeling of visitation,
Of holy communion,
Like I'd been touched
Ever so briefly
By something wild and unbroken.*

*Since that moment,
The world has felt less weary
And I've felt surer of the promise
That what I do not know,
or might not see coming,
could leap out in unexpected glory,
at any given moment.*

Sometimes, the experience of beauty
overwhelms us,
like standing under a waterfall of mighty water

Sometimes, the experience of beauty
falls like a gentle mist
barely aware that it is there
but nourishing the ground and earth beneath us
bringing a gentle freshness to everything
that is filled with life and growth and possibility.

Recently, at a graveside, a family gathered.
There, years after the loss,
the grief is still as close as the air we breathe.
It's a community of grief –
row after row of loved one gone.
But something happens in that place.

The daughters place fresh spring flowers
in the metal vase.

And the grandchildren run through the line of trees –
climbing on the statues of Mary,
the monuments of scripture,
picking up pieces of bark
and proclaiming – “look at this one I found!”

They try to gather the grandchildren for a picture –
but the bright sunlight
is too much for the little eyes of those three baby cousins –
which all begin to cry –
and, honest to God, begin holding each other
crying on the grave.
And the mothers pick them up
and the toddlers bring them tree bark
and the pinwheels they found in the garden
and the crying stops –

because when we hold each other
and we say to each other "wow – look at this!"
it becomes so clear
that when faced with death and loss and heartache
people find their way, together,
facing their grief with armfuls of joy
baskets of beauty,
and simple, sacred rituals
of laughter and play.

After the days of heat,
the places where joy seems distant and drained and dry,
it is out of the words of beloved friends,
the beauty of music,
the cry of a newborn babe
or the breeze which moves the leaves in the afternoon sun,
it is in the deepening relationship,
or the sacred memory of loved ones gone,
it is in the voices speaking truth to power.

Like a thunderstorm coming from nowhere across the prairie,
when you least suspect it,
the rain begins to fall
on the dry land of the heart
and again you are baptized
in the beauty of it all.

In the face of desecration –
in our own lives and the wider world –
desecration of land, water,
people, cultures –
desecration new and so, so old at the same time,
people keep blessing the world

through simple laughter
and sacred stories
common work
and resilience of spirit
that can outlast generations of struggle –
with a simple belief
that there is still beauty
even in the most broken –
that the holy
is more imminent
than the surface might tell us.

Just take a moment –
to notice.
Stop. Breathe. Be.
Use whatever senses you have
use whatever practices you use
use whatever language that speaks of
the miraculous within the ordinary;
Suddenly,
while you're just going along
or sleeping in your tent
or walking along a dirt road
or gathering at the grave
a glimpse of glory leaves you breathless,
and after the days of dry heat
and scorched and cracked earth,
the wind picks up
and the gentle rain turns into
steady April showers
into hard drops of storm
into a wall of water – covering you.

And you wake in the darkest night
and the holy ground you are on
is soaked through
with possibility, with beauty,
and you wake up – every part of your ability to be aware of your
surroundings and the beauty it holds –
you wake up
hearing the rain.

Benediction

In the words of St. Francis,

Such love does
the sky now pour,
that whenever I stand in a field,

I have to wring out the light
when I get
home.