

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Keeping Faith

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## FIRST READING

from the *Book of Genesis* and from the *Gospel of John*

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In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.  
Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

... And God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.” And it was so. God called the dry ground “land,” and the gathered waters he called “seas.” And God saw that it was good.

...And God said, “Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years, ... And it was so.

God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day.

And God said, “Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky.”

In the Beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

## SECOND READING

“Before Words” by Dan Bellm

Find it here:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=38925>

## Keeping Faith

*Evil. Mortality. Mystery. Magic. Money. Mercy. Death.*

These are some of the themes, spiritual, theological themes, we have pondered since introducing in 2010 the idea of monthly guiding themes for our services and small groups.

*Redemption. Salvation. Incarnation.*

*Submission. Simplicity. Joy.*

*Justice. Silence. Grief. Grace. Race.*

*Compassion. Covenant. Sin. Soul. Sabbath.*

*Brokenness. Wholeness. Holiness. God.*

There are many others, some repeated, others only once, up to and including *faith* this month (last visited in 2015 and also in 2012, and followed closely that year by *wonder* and *doubt*). Every month, in services here but also and more importantly in small groups, through readings, questions, journaling, and generous sharing, we turn these old words inside out, shaking out their pockets to see what's still valuable in there. The theme is always coupled with a practice, to help us think about it in new and twisted ways we maybe wouldn't have. *Faith – practice of living our questions. Mortality- the practice of being alive.* Words are playful. Words are holy. Words are hot potatoes, sometimes, burning our mouths as we speak them and singing our ears where they fall. The “Theme Team,” comprised of ministry and music staff and some courageous volunteers, says *The intention of the themed year is to help Unitarian Universalists build a robust spiritual and ethical vocabulary. The themes are not “topics,” but instead points of departure for religious liberals seeking to think, speak and act theologically, prophetically and prayerfully.* Loaded terms, right? *The themes reclaim religious language, casting old terms in a new key to deepen spiritual grounding and sharpen moral reasoning.*

We are reclaiming, resurrecting, not just words but the power that infuses words. Some of these are words that some of us rejected at some point on our spiritual path: we just dropped them in the ditch as too hurtful, too heavy, too worn out, too loaded, too churchy or preachy or pious or disingenuous. Some we outgrew; some never fit. The theme project is asking if we're sure before hit “delete,” and asking also who gets to own these words and what they represent. Is there any way that we could hold them in new light, own them on our own terms, pour new wine into those old skins? Who gets to say what *salvation* is, with its root in *salve* meaning *health*, and *healing*, meaning *whole*? Who defines *communion* or *covenant* as anything except the ordinary, daily, human ways that we promise (give our word) to travel together through this life, side by side and hand in hand, mustering respect and love for each other and ourselves and for the *holy* (another banished word)? *Communion* is our common cause. We're calling these words back from exile to see if there's anything they need still to say, anything we can't say well without them. We're testing to see whether we can in good faith keep *faith*, keep *grace*, keep *prayer*, keep the *spirit* and the *soul*.

I remember my mother teaching me when I was very small how to polish silver – not that we had a lot of it: a dented sugar bowl, a gravy boat, some spoons, a little tray. They came out of the cabinets black with tarnish, and she showed me how to rub them with the the flannel, turning them gently because old silver is so soft it scratches, and I'd think "What a waste of time! These things are so old fashioned and so ugly and filthy" till all of a sudden there they were: shining, sparkling, reflecting our faces, and I'd beg to drink from the bowl and eat with the spoon. Three months later, we'd do it all again, because these things were special; we didn't use them every day; we had plastic. These theme words are like silver, passed on through the family, and we're trying to get the tarnish off.

What matters is our practice. It's so important that our spiritual practice be not only one of speaking with integrity, and listening with generosity, but also asking, with respectful, loving clarity, *What are you talking about?* when someone tells you something about their God, or their hope, or their faith, or sin or hell on earth or grace. *What are you talking about?* is the most loving, generous, and courageous question we can offer one another. Because what you mean by *faith* may be what I mean by *hope*, the slender thread that holds me to this earth when the world is spinning and I fear I might let go, the very lifeline that anchors me to the will to keep on living; and what I mean by *faith* may be what you mean by shallow superstition at best, and at worst a dangerous, lethal kind of mind control or glib denial of the facts. Your faith may not be my faith, and so we clarify our terms, which is an act of courtesy, and courage, and an act of love. We agree to disagree on definitions. We admit together, laughing, that much conversation, certainly most preaching, and even the whispering head to head, mouth to ear from the country of one pillow to another, side by side in the intimate dark – all these ways of talking are really ways of dancing in a circle, a narrowing circle, orbiting the thing itself which cannot be held in words at all.

I have no fear of language, of religious language, and I grew up in a church where the words often made no sense to me and could at times be hurtful. I grew up, as has every person in this room, in a culture where the language sometimes makes no sense to us and can at times be hurtful. But I have no fear of words themselves, in and of themselves – only words thrown around, carelessly, without examination and cross-examination: loving examination here in this house and I hope in yours; and fierce examination in the public square.

*Use your words* we say to children, who are screaming, raging, rolling on the floor. *Use your words* we say coaxingly to children who are silent, who are sullen, who maybe are afraid. *Use your words*. We forget how hard it is.

A few years back I was invited by a group of Unitarian humanists to give the first lecture in a year-long series on the continuing relevance of the humanist perspective to Unitarian Universalist identity. Their project was all about the historical emphasis in our movement on the use of reason, rational thought, pragmatism and intellectual rigor in the religious adventure. It was important work, but I have to admit, my heart sank when they sent my assigned topic: "If We're So Right, Why Are We So Few?"

We got along better than I thought we would, even though during the response time afterwards they all lined up at the mic to challenge everything I'd said. One man said, "I just wish that you

would use more accurate language, less ambiguous words. When you say *soul* and *sacred* and *spirituality* I don't know what you're talking about. I wish you'd choose concrete words, with definitions everyone agrees to." "That's fair enough," I said, "Like what?" and he was flustered for a moment, searching for his word. He answered in frustration, "I don't know! Something more clear-cut, empirical and easily defined. Maybe something more like *love*." We just stood silent looking at each other for a long moment, kind of appalled at this absurdity, while the whole room held its breath. I thought, "how can he define it?" Then -- his voice cracked, he covered his eyes with his hand, and he said, "All my life, I have known that when some people say *God*, they mean what I mean when I say *love*. *There is no word for what it is*, and so all my life I've run from it." There were no more questions after that – except of course there were, there are. The whole point of this "faith" of ours is living the questions, within and out loud.

It is a miracle to me that we communicate at all, that we humans have invented (in really a short time) these symbolic noises, these markings on the page, to name that which is within us and beyond us and offer it across the chasm of our separateness. It is one thing, and miracle enough, to make words to stand for objects in the world (stone, dog, house, food, atom, ion, molecule, mouse); it's one thing to label the material world, and it is something else to try to talk intelligently and honestly about those things which are not things, which are intangible, ineffable, unspeakable, but are in fact the surest things we know sometimes – ideas, emotions, memories, dreams, sorrows, fears, faith, intimations of the holy, glimmers of hope. It's like grasping for light. Conveniently, confusingly, we are miraculously multilingual, almost from our birth; we are fluent both in metaphorical language and in literal, concrete speech – and every day, I wish there were a traveler's dictionary I could carry and consult just to be sure (especially up here) I'm saying what I mean, or hearing what you meant, even if it's spoken plainly, in my native tongue.

What words can hold the abstract, the immaterial, all that things that matter but are not matter: our happiness, our apprehension and anxiety, our grief, our gratitude, our reverence? What are the thousand names of god?

Adrienne Rich, a poet, speaks in a prose essay about poetry. She's writing about art, but could also be speaking of spiritual vocabularies:

*Forms, colors, sensuous relationships, rhythms, textures, tones, transmutations of energy, all belong to the natural world. ... To touch their power, humans had to name them: whorl, branch, rift, stipple, crust, cone, striation, froth, sponge, flake, fringe, gully rut, tuft, grain, bunch, slime, scale, spine, streak, globe. Over so many millennia, so many cultures, humans have ... made art [made words]: to celebrate, to drive off evil, to nourish memory, to conjure the desired visitation. The revolutionary artist, the relayer of possibility, [speaks] in opposition to a technocratic society's hatred of multiformity, hatred of the natural world, hatred of the body, hatred of darkness and women, hatred of disobedience. The revolutionary poet loves people, rivers, other creatures, stones, trees ... is not ashamed of any of these loves, and for them conjures a language that is public, intimate, inviting, terrifying and beloved.*

*[Words] can't free us from the struggle for existence, but they can uncover desires and appetites buried under the accumulating emergencies of our lives, the fabricated wants and needs we have had urged on us, have accepted as our own. They remind us in some way of our need.*

We are learning, through the monthly themes, languages of reverence, vocabulary, grammar, syntax, learning, for example, the subtle difference between saying “I believe...” and “I believe in...” Both are beautiful beginnings, but they may end in different places.

*I believe the world is beautiful.*

*I believe the world is round.*

*I believe it is endangered.*

*I believe **in** the cycles of the seasons,*

*what my eyes can see,*

*the wisdom of the ancestors.*

We're learning that a statement like *I have faith*, tells us almost nothing, and makes the word itself a little suspect, like a smokescreen. But to say, *I have faith **in** something... or in someone...*, is different. *I am faithful **to**... something... or someone....* There's a nuance there, that maybe can redeem a tired word, a lazy word, for new and rigorous work. Amy Peterson Derrick, who was raised Unitarian Universalist and now does ministry with all our children here, said recently, “I find it interesting that UUs have such an allergy to the word *faith* when our whole religion is about learning to be a faithful people,” faithful to each other, faithful to our promises, our past, faithful to our children and their future.

In so many religious traditions, including Christian tradition and Judaism, in so many creation stories, the world is made by words.

*In the beginning was the Word and Word was with God and the Word was God... In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Darkness was over the surface of the deep, the spirit of God hovering over the water. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was.*

God said further, let there be sky and dry ground and seas; let there be sun and moon and stars. God said let there be fishes and birds, animals and trees. And thus it was and it was good, because God said so. God used God's words. In making this story the storytellers gave to God the power that was actually their own – it's ours – to create the world by naming it, to make a story by telling it, to understand a thing, even a complicated thing, by speaking it, clothing the invisible in images spoken and heard.

I remember hearing this story as a child in Sunday School, this sparse, mystical story, a story aligned in some weird way with the actual formation of the planet and all life upon it. I remember feeling awe when they told me this story, but not when they told me other, less elegant stories about what all God went on to say. I didn't like the little comic speech bubble coming out of the burning bush, or out of the clouds giving orders to Noah, or interrogating Elijah in the cave, or hollering at Moses on Mt. Sinai, or lecturing Mary through his angel-agent. Those all seemed too literal, like advertising copy. The stories were better cast as metaphor, as mystery, as poetry, not dreary, lead-footed prose trying so hard to convince my mind of what my heart already sang with no lyrics at all.

From Dan Bellm, poet,

*A baby is singing in the morning  
before anyone is up in the house*

*Before he has decided  
which of all the languages he will speak  
he is trying the sounds of his own voice  
in the first light*

*He hears a man  
come up the street collecting bottles  
just ahead of the garbage truck...*

*He hears the shriek of glass  
It is like the vessels of Creation  
breaking in God's hands*

*He hears the wind around the house  
and in the wind  
every word he will ever say  
and what will stay unsaid*

*and stops to listen to the silence  
and sings to it  
the way the body addresses the soul  
lending it shape*

*lending it comfort and sorrow...*

*This is the way we awaken  
He remembers he is alone  
and cries for us*

Use your words, the language you knew before you could speak, that spoke to you and through you of sorrow and comfort, wonder, salvation, redemption, contrition, hope and love and

mother's milk, belonging, brokenness, wholeness and God. What words would we not want to claim, not need to use, if we could get the tarnish off?

There was a man who was dying – a lifelong Unitarian, an atheist-geologist-empirical-humanist Unitarian, brilliant and cranky and deeply kind, underneath. (He was a singer, I remember, a tenor in the choir, and he used to say, “As long as it’s in Latin, as long as it’s in German, I don’t care what God Bach believed in!”) In the hospital, to my surprise, he asked to hear the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. He smiled weakly, and said, “I’ll bet you never knew I was a Christian after all.” It was a joke -- but instead of resting in it, I just barged right in. (This was many years ago.) Tone-deaf to mystery and poetry, I said, “Well, you know John, it’s really not a Christian verse. It comes from the Hebrew Bible, before the birth of Jesus. It’s a Jewish text, actually... blah, blah, blah...” He breathed a deep sigh – the sigh of someone with no time to waste, the sigh of someone who is thinking, “I wish I weren’t dying now, but at least I take consolation in the knowledge that when I’m dead I won’t have to suffer the ministrations of pedantic little pastors.” He sighed patiently, impatiently, and said softly, “I know where it comes from and I don’t care where it comes from. It comes from where I come from, and from where I’m going. I’d like to hear it please.” And chastened, I began, *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want... Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil...* He didn’t believe a word of that, but he believed **in** it, dwelt within it somehow, in the rock-solid mystery, underneath and within and in spite of the imperfect words. He was keeping faith, keeping solace, keeping this old song, and was in this way like the baby in the poem:

*He hears the wind around the house  
and in the wind  
every word he will ever say  
and what will stay unsaid*

*and stops to listen to the silence  
and sings to it  
the way the body addresses the soul  
lending it shape*

*lending it comfort and sorrow*

What I love about the poem about the singing baby is the last line: *He remembers he is alone, and cries for us.* Because what else are words for but to cry out to one other, across our loneliness, our differences, our sameness, our awkwardness, our tribal-ness, our fear? We reach for any good word we can possibly use, and some of them are ancient, holy words, archaic, clumsy, tarnished, not accurate, not literal, not scientific or efficient, but still possibly, everlastingly true.

- silence -

From Denise Levertov come these words in closing, her poem called *Immersion*:

*There is anger abroad in the world, a numb thunder,  
because of God's silence. But how naïve,  
to keep wanting words we could speak ourselves,  
English, Urdu, Tagalog, the French of Tours, the French of Haiti...  
Yes, that was one way omnipotence chose  
to address us—Hebrew, Aramaic, or whatever the patriarchs  
chose in their turn to call what they heard. Moses  
demanded the word, spoken and written. But perfect freedom  
assured other ways of speech. God is surely  
patiently trying to immerse us in a different language,  
events of grace, horrifying scrolls of history  
and the unearned retrieval of blessings lost for ever,  
the poor grass returning after drought, timid, persistent.  
God's abstention is only from human dialects. The holy voice  
utters its woe and glory in myriad musics, in signs and portents.  
Our own words are for us to speak, a way to ask and to answer.*