

## **Theodore Parker Church**

### **Marking a Year in the Life of Zoom Worship**

**March 14, 2021**

It's hard to believe our first Zoom worship service was a year ago. Let's take some time to look back and consider how we've managed, how we've grown, and how we're looking forward.

#### **OPENING WORDS** (used in the service on March 15, 2020)

#### **The Great Teachers in Life** by Jason Cooke

We seekers are on a quest:

A quest to discover truth and meaning.

Sometimes we think we've found it—

Wrapped up, glimmering with newness

Straight off the intellectual assembly line.

All the answers right here for us

And others, if they'd only listen.

But truth has a way of coming in disguise,

Sometimes wearing rags and sometimes finery,

But so often cloaked from our immediate sight.

And sometimes, that which we have rejected,

That which we have let go of

Or decided was only for others

But not us—

Can be our teacher.

Let our time of worship be an acknowledgment

Of the never-ending journey toward truth and meaning,

and our appreciation of those we learn from along the way.

#### **Meditation/Prayer** the Rev. Anne Bancroft

Dear and mysterious giver of life, spirit of life and love infused in all we do, help us to heal from this strange and unfamiliar year. Help us, at least, to begin our healing as we find ourselves moving towards resolution. Wash over us like waves of clear cool water, carrying away our frustrations, our disappointments, our loneliness. Let the sun return to shine us clean again - looking toward the time when we can touch without fear; sing with abandon; gather and laugh and share and be, just be, without the protection of cloth between us. We'll want to rush, of course . . . help us to pace ourselves as we work to make sense of our world and this thing we call life. Oh, and help us, at each pause, to find joy again.

**HOMILY      the Rev. Anne Bancroft**

I've mentioned that a number of the elements of our worship service this week have been drawn from the service a year ago – the first of our Zoom services. Many of you may remember that I brought things to each service last spring that represented the number of services we had shared together at a distance. I didn't write down exactly what they were, but I know they were things I had around the house: one candle, maybe; two doves, three bowls. We had 15 services last spring, the final one being June 21<sup>st</sup> – so I'm guessing I brought a collection of stones, or at least something that didn't take up too much room. None of us imagined another year so I stopped doing it this fall because I was running out of room to display things. But since we continued our Sunday gatherings with Lectio Divina during the summer, I have brought 52 colored pencils this morning, representing a colorful year's worth of Zoom services!

And I want to offer again a poem I shared by the Rev. Lynn Unger, called Pandemic – and then I'm going to go back and add in some comments along the way. Remember that this poem was written at the very beginning . . . when we had no idea of its impact or longevity.

*What if you thought of it  
as the Jews consider the Sabbath —  
the most sacred of times?  
Cease from travel.  
Cease from buying and selling.  
Give up, just for now, on trying to make the world  
different than it is.  
Sing. Pray. Touch only those  
to whom you commit your life.  
Center down.*

*And when your body has become still,  
reach out with your heart.  
Know that we are connected  
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.  
(You could hardly deny it now.)  
Know that our lives are in one another's hands.  
(Surely, that has come clear.)  
Do not reach out your hands.*

*Reach out your heart.  
Reach out your words.  
Reach out all the tendrils  
of compassion that move, invisibly,  
where we cannot touch.*

*Promise this world your love —  
for better or for worse,  
in sickness and in health,  
so long as we all shall live.*

**Let's just take a moment and breathe into those thoughts . . .**

She began:  
*What if you thought of it  
as the Jews consider the Sabbath —  
the most sacred of times?*

It's hard for me to imagine a more sacred time than this year – a year when we have been, literally, responsible for each other's lives all over the world. Many among us have cared for the sick – those front-line responders for whom we are so grateful; and then many of us have been caring for each other by simply staying away – a most active passive caretaking. It's almost as though those of us staying distant have been cast in the role of hermit or contemplative, experiencing a year of "retreat" from each other, that previously might have been, at best, a long weekend away in silence, a week, or perhaps ten days but surely not more, surely not a year. Is it even possible for sabbath to last a year? Jesus, after all, was in the desert only 40 days, and yet here we are – in the longest sabbath.

*Cease from travel.* (she wrote)  
*Cease from buying and selling.*

Well, the travel ban applies. Most of us have been hardly anywhere, but not so much the ceasing of buying and selling. We just did it differently, right? We shopped minimally in-person, but ordered our needs on-line . . . or had them delivered. Some of us, actually, delivered to others – and (of course) for many, commerce was interrupted by unemployment or other demands on our time. But cease? . . . no.

*Give up, just for now, on trying to make the world  
different than it is.*

*Sing. Pray. Touch only those  
to whom you commit your life.*

Well, we think, we could pause trying to make the world different, except this year has needed us. Other events have intersected with this particular pandemic sabbath and also many of us have awakened to what those needs are and know that time is of the essence and WHILE we sing and pray and touch only those to whom we commit our lives, still we have found we cannot allow the world to continue other than working to make it different than it is.

*Center down.*

*And when your body has become still,  
reach out with your heart.*

I love this idea, but I love this idea always – not just now. This is a practice learned, perhaps, by this year . . . the lesson that even when we can reach out with our hands, we must always be reaching out with our hearts.

*Know that we are connected*

*in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.*

*(You could hardly deny it now.) she says.*

*Know that our lives are in one another's hands.*

*(Surely, that has come clear.)*

*Do not reach out your hands.*

Well, just for now, we think: look, ma, no hands! But only if we're very, very literal about not reaching out with our hands, because we know, in truth, it is our proverbial hands that co-create the world we want to be living in, and we can't take too much of a pause from that work.

*Reach out your heart.*

*Reach out your words.*

*Reach out all the tendrils*

*of compassion that move, invisibly,*

*where we cannot touch.*

Absolutely and this year has been about that, right? Even when it has been so painful . . . paying attention, reaching out with all the tendrils of compassion because we know that's what enlarges us, and changes us . . .

*Promise this world your love —  
for better or for worse,  
in sickness and in health,  
so long as we all shall live.*

I want to share a story from the book, *The Impossible Will Take a Little While,* edited by Paul Rogat Loeb.

The Buddhist, Joana Macy, "writes of visiting a group of monks in Tibet. The monks were reconstructing their ancient monastery, (their place of solace and sabbath) which had been reduced to rubble by the Chinese. . . . When the monks were asked about Chinese policies and the likelihood of another period of repression, Macy saw that such calculations were conjecture to the monks. Since you cannot see into the future, you simply proceed to put one stone on top of another, and another on top of that. If the stones get knocked down, you begin again, because if you don't nothing will get built."

We have been putting our stones one on top of the other this year, not entirely sure what we were building – perhaps we were more accurately simply maintaining – because our calculations of ending have been conjecture at best. And to be honest, I think it has left us all feeling somewhat numb, this stacking of stones, because we have not been able to share it with each other the way we are accustomed to, the way our bodies and minds and hearts need to.

Which is why we MUST promise the world our love . . . because in the midst of this impossible and to our memories unprecedented year, it is what we have to give – in sickness and in health, as long as we all shall live.

Yukiko mentioned Joan Didion's book, **The Year of Magical Thinking**, in her choosing the Mompou pieces she is sharing this morning, the Magical Songs. I went back to look at this amazing and poignant book that speaks to Ms. Didion's losses – her child and her husband – and how she rebuilt her life.

"We are imperfect mortal beings, aware of that mortality even as we push it away, failed by our very complication, so wired that when we mourn our losses we also mourn, for better or for worse, ourselves. As we were. As we are no longer. . . ." (Joan Didion, [The Year of Magical Thinking](#))

I think we are mourning ourselves at this time of anniversary, the selves we are no longer – selves that could not have imagined this year, could not have imagined the amount of change that has been foisted upon us.

Yet even as we mourn, and remember, and feel the experiences, we pack up pieces of our tender hearts and offer them to the world – an offering attached to each stone that we place knowing it is our job, our very purpose of existence, to keep building. The numbness will subside. We will find ourselves among each other again, changed but resilient. And in the meantime, we keep building.

Let us invite the spirit of life that renews and refreshes us to be our guide -

CLOSING HYMN      123      Spirit of Life (w/ acoustic guitar)

Spirit of Life, come unto me.

Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.

Blow in the wind, rise in the seas;

Mold in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.

Roots hold me close; wings set me free;

Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.

BENEDICTION 1039

Be thou with us, now and always, now and always, blessed be.