

Everything Holy?
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
July 19, 2020
(text from live-streamed worship)

Song and Opening Words – “Holy Now” by Peter Mayer

To say that “everything is holy,” as this song affirms, is *not* to say that everything is okay. “Holy” does not suggest “without trouble or problems or suffering.

Remember, the lyrics to a song are a poem – and poetry is often not literal. So to say everything is holy is to say that even in the midst of trouble and problems and sorrow... there is holiness, beauty, love.

The other thing I’d like to say about the song is that it seems to imply that church is no longer necessary: since *everything* is holy now, why the need for church and ritual and scripture.

Well – I have a response to that.

Church – or temple – or mosque... is, if not necessary, then certainly helpful... to *remind* us that everything is holy and to remind us to live accordingly: caring for one another and for the creation in all its miracle and mystery...

Call to Worship

In this spirit then... it is *good* to be gathered together in spirit if not in person, gathered on this holy day –

To remind us of the miracle and mystery of life.

To remind us to pay attention to the beauty of our neighbor and of every tree and flower and creature with whom we share this life.

To remind us to care – for one another and for the creation.

Yes – it is good to gather.

Lighting of the Flaming Chalice

I light the flaming chalice of our free faith, symbol of Unitarian Universalism, chalice of welcoming, hospitable community, flame of freedom, truth, and love.

Meditation and Prayer

May we now pause, slow down, breathe into this moment, become more fully awake to this moment we share...

With each breath more deeply present...

With each breath more aware of the heat of the day...

With each breath more aware of whatever we see out our windows...

With each breath more aware of our dancing thoughts...

With each breath more deeply present...

And with each breath... the hopes, the cares, the concerns... yearnings may arise from this presence... prayers:

Prayers for the health and well-being of our dear ones...

for the health and well-being of all beings...

Prayers of gratitude for the helpers and healers, for the justice-seekers, peace-makers, and earth-keepers...

Prayers from the silence of our hearts to the God of our hearts, the wellspring of our love...

Song – Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

A biblically inspired spiritual – as they pretty much all are. As we sing we can each have an idea as to what “home” the song is talking about: A heavenly home after this life? The home of freedom from slavery? Or the home of simply learning to be at home in this world, awake to the miracle and mystery of being alive...

Reading – Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

³ He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

⁴ Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

⁵ Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Message

If you know only one Psalm out of the 150, it is quite likely the 23rd Psalm. And it is quite likely the King James translation that you know, the one I've just read, which is the one I've read at many, many memorial and graveside services, the one that might offer you some measure of comfort and peace even if you consider yourself a humanist, agnostic, or even atheist.

How could that be so?

My short answer is to note that the 23rd Psalm, like just all the Psalms, is not a theological treatise or a philosophical discourse; it is not a text to be argued about and dissected.

Rather, the language is the language of a poem, designed to symbolize rather than describe, to evoke rather than convince.

I love the Psalm, even though there is an assumed theology which is not my theology.

I love it, to begin with, because of the sense of peace it evokes: lying down in green pastures by still waters... what could be more lovely than that?

I also love it because it doesn't sugarcoat our human condition – since we do indeed sometimes find ourselves walking through the valley of the shadow of death, since there are things in the world we rightly call “evil”, since there are those who feel like, and maybe are, our enemies.

And I love it because it offers assurance in the midst of all this, in the midst of whatever, that we will be entirely and utterly cared for and guided. What a blessed relief! Is this true in a literal sense? Doesn't matter for the Psalm that is a poem.

It is indeed pretty clear that whomever composed Psalm 23 was not asserting that everything was always okay, just fine. Not at all – “yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death”! This said, many of the Psalms are even more explicit than this one in that regard: They are outpourings of lamentation in the midst of serious trouble – surrounded by enemies, taken into exile (remember the so deeply poignant Psalm 137: By the rivers of Babylon we wept while we remembered Zion...).

But even the 23rd Psalm, though gentler than many of the others, is no exception. It, too, is a kind of ancient blues – the troubles are real... but somehow the Psalmist also does experience being cared for, somehow knows or believes that in the end all will be well – “I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Well... what might that mean?

Well, maybe in the most general sense this Psalm has to do with how to be at home in the world... as it is.

Writer Scott Russell Sanders (in his book, *Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World*) notes that much of religion assures us that if we don't feel we have a home, a place, in this world, we can look toward the next – everlasting heaven. So he is somewhat dismissive of that last line of the Psalm – writing:

If we are ever going to dwell in the house of the Lord, I believe, we do so now. If any house is divinely made, it is this one here, this great whirling mansion of planets and stars.

Well, as you might have figured out by now, I agree – but I would also say that the last line of the Psalm could be read in exactly this way, not as an invitation to some next life, but as an invitation to this life freshly experienced – as in the opening song this morning: “Everything is holy now” – in other words, maybe we are already dwelling in “the house of the Lord” – in spite of and in the midst of troubles.

I’m reminded of the moment in Alice Walker’s novel “The Color Purple” when her character Shug, who surely had her many troubles, said that God was upset “if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it.”

So – are we feeling at home in the world these days? These days of the sufferings of pandemic, these days of economic uncertainty, these days of reckoning with racism? Or are we, instead, nostalgic for the world of four or five months ago? Thinking we could be at home back there, back then.

If course we can’t go back.

And as I’ve preached on other Sundays these past weeks, though we might understandably yearn for how life was... it will never again be just as it was, and maybe that’s just as well – given the inequities those of us more privileged could too easily ignore or deny back in those days.

So, instead, can we learn how to be at home in a world of uncertainty, of challenges, even of dangers... which is at the same time a world of beauty and love – which moves us to do our parts to make this world more homelike and hospitable for all.

As John Lewis, now of blessed memory, said just a few weeks ago: The protesters will “redeem the soul of America and move us closer to a community at peace with itself.”

In a moment I’m going to invite you to sing another song based on a biblical text – one we often sing, from Ecclesiastes: Pete Seeger’s “Turn, Turn, Turn.” This text, too, offers a sense of consolation, simply by naming that the seasons come and go, that there is a time for everything under the sun, every feeling, every doing, for good and for ill.

And we go on.

In the spirit of Pete Seeger’s added tag line: “I swear it’s not too late.”

So may it be.