

“The Rainbow Sign”

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Unity Church-Unitarian**

Worship Leader: Rob Eller-Isaacs, Janne Eller-Isaacs, and Kerri Meyer

HOMILY

On September 11, 2001, philosopher and author Frederick Turner, his wife Elise, their younger son and his girlfriend were at Boston’s Logan airport waiting for a flight to Paris. They never went. Instead, the Turners made their way to Concord where as he writes, “Over the following few days Elise sought solace at the First Parish Church in Concord and I in the woods outside town, shuffling through a landscape that had inspired the highest moments of idealism America had ever known.”

Elise went to church knowing she would find some comfort and connection there. Frederick went to the woods – the woods surrounding Walden, the woods where Thoreau went because he “wanted to live deliberately.” In perilous times, when we feel lost and afraid we humans turn to the people and the places which have nourished and sustained us. Likewise, in the wake of this great flood we come together here to be renewed and to be strengthened and, yes, to set aside our grief if only for an hour that we might feel the power of old joy made new, of old friendships kindled once again and of the mystery from which we come and into which we all return.

Earlier this week I sat alone here in the quiet of the sanctuary. Each time I settle my heart here I sense the presence not only of the generations of the church gone on before but also I can hear the sound – just barely audible – of this good place waiting like an instrument that is eager to be played. For that is what we do when we gather, you know: we strike a chord, and the sympathetic strings beneath us sound in strong response and magnify our longing and our joy.

Worship works that way. Whether in a well-tempered sanctuary or in the wholeness of the Walden woods, when we let go of all our fear and grief, when we let go even of our good intentions, when we surrender into faith, we find that we are held in the embrace of a strength we dare not name, a strength that nonetheless sustains us.

On the 13th of September with “smoke still rising from the sites in Washington, New York, and Pennsylvania,” the Turners rented a canoe at the South Bridge and made their way down river through the town. Having passed beneath what Emerson referred to as “the rude bridge that arched the flood,” they put in at the bank beside the Concord battlefield.

At the base of the minuteman statue, men and women subdued and exhausted as pilgrims bowed their heads and wept. Up on the bridge itself, Turner chatted with the ranger then on duty. Mindy Fimreite told him that the Park Service had yet to issue emergency instructions. “Thus far,” she said “she was improvising to meet contingencies, as she had earlier that day when some visitors excitedly reported that two ‘Arab-looking men’ were lurking about the restrooms and didn’t look like they belonged there. ‘So, I had to go over there,’ Mindy Fimreite said, gesturing briefly in the direction of the facilities. ‘I was nervous, of course, I admit that. And there they were all right. And what they were doing was they were cleaning the place – that was their *job*.’”

It’s a telling story. It’s a story that echoes down the years when we recognize how when we’re fearful prejudice and deep disparity take hold. Those who deny the fact that racism has had a profound effect on our response to the devastation of the Gulf Coast flood must have no eyes to see. Our hearts go out to all our neighbors who have been displaced by nature’s recent wrath. And we will do all that we can to help in the days and weeks and months and even years to come.

But here is the question. What will we learn from this great flood? What will the dove be holding in her beak when she returns? Without denying for a moment the scale of the damage done might we not hope the flood has given our Nation new eyes with which to see the depth of racial disparity and new will with which to confront it?

James Baldwin at the end of his long, brilliant essay, Down at the Cross, writes:

When I was very young, and was dealing with my buddies in those wine and urine-stained hallways, something in me wondered, *what will happen to all that beauty?* For black people, though I am aware that some of us, black and white, do not yet know it, are very beautiful. And when I sat at Elijah's table and watched the baby, the women and the men, and we talked about God's, or Allah's vengeance, I wondered, when that vengeance was achieved, *What will happen to all that beauty then?*

I could also see that the intransigence and ignorance of the white world might make that vengeance inevitable — a vengeance that does not really depend on and cannot be prevented by any police force or army: historical vengeance, a cosmic vengeance, based on the law that we recognize when we say, 'whatever goes up must come down.' And here we are, at the center of the arc, trapped in the gaudiest, most valuable, and most improbable water wheel the world has ever seen.

Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. If we — and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on or create the consciousness of the others — do not fail in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible, in song by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time.*"

Handful that we are, I pray we may not fail in our duty now. Love one another. Love the neighbors we are yet to know.

May it be so and amen.