



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“God is Nigh”

a sermon given by Rev. Frank Clarkson
on August 9, 2015

A few weeks ago, at Bill Garlington’s memorial service, the service ended with military honors. Bill served in the Navy, and the honor guard was here to ceremonially fold the flag that had laid over the box holding Bill’s ashes, and present it to his sons. And then, a bugler stood just outside and played “Taps.” It was a poignant moment, You know the words, don’t you?

Day is done, gone the sun
From the lakes, from the hills, from the sky
All is well, safely rest
God is nigh.

Those words, which I first learned at summer camp, have been with me lately. They express the truth that evening brings a special time; that we enter a kind of liminal space as day gives way to night. A time when it seems easier to be open to mystery and awe and wonder, doesn’t it? Easier to sense, as “Taps” says, that God is nigh, that God is near.

Do you know that’s one reason churches are built with stained glass windows? So that, even in the middle of the day, inside the sanctuary it feels like evening, in order to evoke a sense of sacred space and presence. Walk into a cathedral and you are transported from the brightness and bustle of the street into a different kind of space, a place of perpetual twilight, where candles glow and the eye is drawn upward and down the long center aisle. Coming into a space like this affects you; causes you to move slower and more quietly; because you sense this is hold ground.

Cathedrals and churches are manmade structures, designed to simulate the kind of experience you can have watching a sunrise or sunset or lying out under the night sky. These primary experiences of awe and wonder are available to each of us, and today I invite you to remember a time you have found yourself in such a place, when beauty and mystery opened you up, offered a sense of the oneness of being, of peace and rightness, the awareness that there’s more going on than we usually apprehend. Can you remember such a time?

I just came back from ten days hiking and fishing in Montana and Wyoming. I spent long days out under the sky, walking dusty trails and standing in moving water, hoping to make a deep spiritual connection with a trout or two. I didn’t take waders with me—one of the joys of fishing out there in the summer is what’s called wet wading; wearing shorts or quick dry pants and

getting wet in that water—if you get cold, you just get out for a while and let the sun warm you. It's a grown-up version of what many of us did as kids, playing in a creek on a summer day.

One of the prettiest places I've ever fished is Slough Creek in Yellowstone National Park. The stream rises in the Beartooth mountains and flows through several long meadows. You get there by walking—it's an hour to the nearest meadow, and two hours to second meadow, where I like to go. I put a photograph from there on the cover of today's order of service. That ring on the water was caused by a trout that rose just as I took the picture.

About a week ago I was fishing there, casting almost all day to rising trout, and it was heavenly. When I hooked one particular fish, this caused me to look up from what I had been doing, which was casting and watching my fly drift along the current, over and over again. And when I looked up, I said out loud, "Oh my God," because I was stunned by the beauty all around—the grassy meadow around the creek and the sagebrush and scattered evergreens beyond, the valley ringed by mountains and the creek reflecting the scene. All of it seemed to shimmer with presence; under that summer sky it was like a painting that I happened to step into. And there was a wild Yellowstone Cutthroat trout on my line, that would soon be in my hands, and then I'd unhook it and watch it swim away.

There were other moments like this, when I was struck by beauty and awe and wonder: walking alone through a river canyon or across a sagebrush plain, climbing to the top of a little mountain, spending time alone and being in what felt like a long silence. My first day out there, after fishing for a while, I sat by the Yellowstone River and wrote in my journal: "Maybe I'm feeling the presence of God, the great silence, in the space between the clouds and me, in the river flowing by, in the quivering trees."

This presence that I'm trying to describe feels different to me than the God who usually gets evoked in church and by religious folks. Some of us cringe when we hear that word, because of the things that have been done in God's name—oppression, exclusion, power-grabbing, warmongering. But today I hope you'll be open to a different way of imagining God.

Though our Unitarian tradition says God is one, we humans certainly have all kinds of different images for and ideas about God. Today, I want to offer you what I experienced out West—God in the things of this good earth, in flowing water and moving air, the "Spirit overseeing all," as one of our hymns puts it.¹

But if you want to experience this Presence, you don't have to go on a journey. You don't have to go anywhere, because God is near. You can experience this presence in a sunrise or sunset, or under the night sky, in music or in the people, you can find it in yourself, and even in church! That's my message for today—that this Presence, which I believe most of us long for, whatever name we call it, is available to us, if we will wait and watch and be open to it.

It's not necessarily a bad thing that we humans put our heads down and focus on the task at hand, whether that is our work, a relationship, or a little fly bouncing down a river. But sometimes

¹ "Immortal Love," words by John Greenleaf Whittier, hymn #10 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

we ought to look up, and look around, and take in a wider view. So you can see your life for what it is—the wonder and the struggle, the beauty and the blessedness of it.

This is one reason to come to church. To have an hour to just be, time to reflect on the stuff of your life. Time to be part of a community and to be in the presence of that which is always more.

There's a song by Van Morrison that's been on my mind lately. It's really a prose poem with musical accompaniment about some of the early influences of his life, growing up in Ireland. Listen for the luminous spirituality he finds in remembering the everyday things that were sacred to him:

Take me back, take me way, way, way back
On Hyndford Street
Where you could feel the silence at half past eleven
On long summer nights
As the wireless played Radio Luxembourg
And the voices whispered across Beechie River

In the quietness as we sank into restful slumber in the silence
And carried on dreaming, in God
And walks up Cherry Valley from North Road Bridge, railway line
On sunny summer afternoons
Picking apples from the side of the tracks
That spilled over from the gardens of the houses on Cyprus Avenue

Watching the moth catcher working the floodlights in the evenings
And meeting down by the pylons...²

The song goes on, describing the places and experiences that moved him—music, travels to the highlands and coming back, he says, “feeling wondrous and lit up inside with a sense of everlasting life.” That’s what I’m trying to talk about today.

Then Van Morrison says, about this sense of everlasting life, “And it's always being now / It's always now / Can you feel the silence?”

I've listened to this song for years, and I've always heard Van Morrison, in his Irish accent, as saying, “And it's always being nigh / It's always nigh.” And though I got the words wrong, I think that's right. This Presence, which is always now, is also always near. Always inviting us into this very moment, calling us to be awake to this day and these lives we have been given, to see them as the miracles they really are. To stop, look and listen for the sacred that is so close to us.

Can you feel the silence? Can you sense this Presence, this everlasting Life?

² Van Morrison, “On Hyndford Street,” from the album *Hymns to the Silence*.

I get glimpses of it in the things of this good earth, and here too: when you light candles silently, and in the music; I sense it in you and in the spaces in between us.

One of the things that makes me cringe, as a religious person, is how church and religion are so often seen as separate and apart from this world. People put God out there, in the clouds or beyond, a disconnected supernatural being, and then wonder why 21st century people have a hard time believing in such a thing.

What if we start with a different proposition? That God is the name for the deepest experiences we can have, and for the most profound mysteries? That this Presence, which is by definition beyond our human ability to describe or pin down or ever fully imagine, is still available to us if we are willing to lower our defenses and entertain the idea of it here in our midst; if we are willing to enter into these mysteries. It may require turning down the critical, analytical parts of our selves, and it certainly can help if you slow down and quiet down for a while. It can help to get outdoors, in touch with the earth and under the wide sky.

This coming week is an especially good time for this, as it brings the peak of the Perseids, the great summer meteor shower, on Wednesday night. I hope the skies will be clear. I know this is an easily explainable phenomenon, that shooting stars are bits of rock burning up as they fall through our atmosphere. But please don't tell me that watching for shooting stars on a dark summer night is not a sacred experience. If you do this, or if you get up to watch the sunrise, or a coming thunderstorm, or any of the many wondrous things this world offers us, you might find yourself exclaiming, as I did when I looked up from the river and saw the beauty pulsing all around me, "Oh my God!"

Yes, that's it. Oh my God, our God, You are here. You are nigh.

Amen.