

## **PALM SUNDAY: FIGURING OUT OUR NEW NORMAL**

**April 5, 2020**

**Rev. Richard Maraj**

**Rev. Richard Maraj:** Hi, everyone, and welcome to week three of our virtual video services. I just want to thank you for tuning in. Please know that we are continuing to hold this entire situation in our thoughts and prayers, and we absolutely thank you for your support.

So we have a fabulous service for you! Charity Lockhart is going to sing for us, but first we will begin with a moment of meditation with Rev. Lori. So everyone just take a deep breath, and let us prepare ourselves.

### **MEDITATION**

**Rev. Lori Fleming:** I invite you to close your outer eyes, to take in a deep breath and release it slowly. To begin to let go of any busy-ness you've had so far this morning; just gently let it go. To begin to move your awareness into your heart space: into that space of Divine love... of unconditional love for ourselves and for each other. As we rest in this quiet, still space, we feel the presence of the Divine in us and as us and through us. And we know that we are part of this presence; that we are spiritual beings having a human experience. And that, while this human experience may be a little stressful right now that, when we go within, we feel that peace that passes understanding, and we are centered again. And we are one with God again.

And so in this quiet, still place of peace, we recognize our oneness with all other beings on this planet. We send love out to every person, affirming health and wholeness, knowing that that is our birthright. And we know that this time will soon pass, and that we'll be able to be with our friends again. That right now, in this quiet moment, we are one with everyone. And each and every one of us is part of the tapestry of life: an unrepeatable expression of the Divine, and that we represent different colors, and different textures. And every one of us is necessary to the greater whole. And if one of us is missing, it leaves a space, and we're not complete.

And so, God, keep us healthy and whole. Let our bodies be filled with your vital life. Let every cell fairly sizzle with all of the health and wholeness that we are. And so we take just a few moments to go more deeply into the silence, where we are one with the Divine.

### **SILENCE**

Mother/Father God, we are grateful for this time together. For your calming presence within. For your unconditional love. For creating these amazing lives that we're living. And so, God, we say thank you for all of our blessings. Thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God! And it is so. Amen.

### **SONG:**

**Charity Lockhart: 'The Greatest Love of All' (accompanied by Craig Bohmler on piano)**

I believe the children are our future  
Teach them well and let them lead the way  
Show them all the beauty they possess inside  
Give them a sense of pride to make it easier  
Let the children's laughter remind us how we used to be  
  
Everybody's searching for a hero

People need someone to look up to  
I never found anyone who fulfilled my needs  
A lonely place to be  
And so I learned to depend on me

I decided long ago, never to walk in anyone's shadows  
If I fail, if I succeed  
At least I'll live as I believe  
No matter what they take from me  
They can't take away my dignity  
Because the greatest love of all  
Is happening to me  
I found the greatest love of all  
Inside of me  
The greatest love of all  
Is easy to achieve  
Learning to love yourself  
It is the greatest love of all

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The greatest love of all  
Is easy to achieve  
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It is the greatest love of all

And if, by chance, that special place  
That you've been dreaming of  
Leads you to a lonely place  
Find your strength in love

## **MESSAGE**

**Rev. Richard Maraj:** Thank you, Charity! That was fabulous!

'Morning again, everyone!

So what's the best way to carve a piece of wood? Whittle by whittle. *[Laughs]*

What do you call it when one cow spies on another cow? Steak out! *[Chuckles]*

Why don't crabs donate money? Because they're shell-fish. *[Chuckles]*

Who invented the round table? Sir Cumference! *[Chuckles]* And big finish now!

What do you call a belt made of watches? A "waist" of time! *[Imitates a "rim shot" drum roll and laughs]*

Alright... I hope you're laughing or at least smiling! Perhaps you're groaning... but, either way, I think we've all come to realize that beginning with a joke to get you to smile and feel good is the norm of how I begin my talks. It is the standard; it is the regular; it is the usual way.

That's the norm! And I think we would also agree that, over the last several weeks, our lives have been anything but the norm. Our lives have been anything but usual, and regular, and standard. We have experienced so many changes, so quickly and so drastically. And even though they're understandable because of this medical crisis, it is still a little mind-boggling. It's still a bit of a shock, and tough to comprehend. To keep our distance, and not touch; for most of the country being directed to stay home. That's not normal! Having our schools and our businesses and so many places that we're accustomed to closed, is not normal. Having our economy impacted and jobs impacted so drastically – so negatively – is not normal. Not being able to gather with people we love; not being able to go to movies or concerts or sports; that's not normal. Even for those who are still working regular hours – all the doctors, all the essential workers, delivery people – even though they're doing their usual duties, I think even they would say this is not normal.

Our lives have changed significantly. And not only is it not normal, we're not sure when normal will come again... or even after the cases of the coronavirus are reduced, that we don't know what our life – our new normal -- is going to be.

With all that change so quick, so fast, we feel a lot of different emotions. And one of them, I tell you, I'm feeling is a little disoriented. You know, it's a lot to process and deal with and adapt to and adjust to so quickly. I think our collective equilibrium has been rocked and shaken. And we're trying to figure it out! We're trying to figure out what's going on now; what's going to happen? What's next? Has life changed – not only now – but has it changed permanently for us?

With all this going on, we probably need to ask ourselves a question: How do we understand this spiritually? How do we handle this spiritually?

Without a doubt, most importantly – and Rev. Rogers talked about it – is to **STAND STRONG IN OUR FAITH**. To have faith in God's love. To have faith that God has a plan and purpose for our lives. To have faith that all things are working together for our highest good.

One of the things we always say that we believe is: That everything happens for a reason. That – even if we can't think of the reason – we have faith in knowing that there is a reason, and good will come forth from this. And it really, really will... But we've got to stay strong in our faith.

You know, one of the things that I think is interesting is, suddenly, our lives have changed so much: from being active and busy – hectic paces that we all live – to literally slowing down to a halt. We have been so accustomed to going out, and being all over the place – traveling – to suddenly being at home. You know, I think, symbolically, being at home and staying in is not only protecting ourselves and protecting others, but I think it's helping us connect to ourselves, and to connect with others. To care for ourselves and to care for others. To have compassion for ourselves, and compassion for others. For wanting the best for ourselves, and wanting the best for others, as well.

I really believe that this is an opportunity for us to go within and to connect and experience a deeper level of joy... a deeper level of love... and a deeper appreciation and experience of a more fulfilling life at a deeper soul level. With all the outer things being taken away, we are being forced to turn within: to connect with Spirit; to connect to our faith; to connect with that deeper sense of joy and fulfillment that can only come from within ourselves.

Besides faith, two other things I think we need – and we talked a little bit about them last week – is **MORE TIME OF MEDITATION AND QUIETING OUR MINDS**. Our minds will be distracted; it will get a little freaked out and concerned, and we need to quiet our minds and rest our minds in the mind of God.

And the third thing I think we could use right now is some **INSPIRATION**. Things are so challenging, inspiration actually picks us up; it fills us with a level of hope and optimism and possibilities. It empowers us. It re-engages us, and lets us know that things will get better. Inspiration is a powerful and important thing that we could all use some right now!

Today is Palm Sunday and, for me, that is one of the most inspiring stories. And the reason I think it's so inspiring is because Jesus headed into Jerusalem – and he chose to head into Jerusalem – even though he knew that things would get hard. Things would get worse. Even though he knew the Pharisees were plotting against him. Even though he knew his life was in danger. Even though he knew people would turn on him. He would be betrayed; he would be tortured; he would be crucified; and he would be resurrected. He knew that this was going to be the hardest, most painful, experience of his life... and, yet, he chose to walk into it.

That, to me, is inspiring!

Now, he could have run away. He could have fled into obscurity. He could have done a lot of other things, but he chose to walk into it. And, to me, that's inspiring! To walk into something that he knew would be painful and difficult, but he knew that would transform him and it would absolutely change the world and bless all of us. That it would absolutely make a difference.

And the truth is – the reason Palm Sunday's so important – if Jesus didn't go into Jerusalem, all those other dominos wouldn't have fallen which make the Resurrection and Easter Sunday possible. So it was a very inspiring and important thing... and, I think, a lesson for all of us in how you step into those hard situations. Those challenging times. And, particularly with what's going on now, I think there's a great lesson for how to handle what's before us.

The first thing Jesus did that I thought was great was – and, of course, this took courage to do this. So the first one was **THE COURAGE TO FACE AND OWN WHAT WAS HIS**. Every one of us has situations in our lives that we don't want: that we didn't ask for; we really, really disliked that it happened at all. Whether it's bankruptcy or a divorce, losing our job, an addiction or a health challenge... We have things in our lives that have happened that we didn't want to happen! We wanted one thing, but we got something else.

Kind of reminds me of the little boy who was praying: *“Dear God, thanks for the new baby sister, but what I prayed for was a puppy!”*

And sometimes we pray for one thing, and we get something else. And it's a hard thing for us to adjust, because we want to resist it and not accept it.

In the Book of John, here's what Jesus said about his calling, and the thing that he had to walk through. It says: *“Now my soul is troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No! For this purpose I have come to this hour.”*

What Jesus is saying here is: *“I'm a little scared. This is a lot! I'm troubled! This is bothering me! But should I run away? Should I wish it away? Should I push it away?”* And he said, *“No! This is my purpose.”*

*As difficult as this is, this is what I am called to do. This is the difference that I'm here to make. This is the thing that I am here to achieve.*" He knew that this was his. That this was a part of his spiritual journey. This was a part of his calling. This was a part of the gift that he came to give this world.

You know, one of the things that I believe is so important is, for these things that we don't like – for the things that we want to push away – I have this test that this is yours or this is not yours. If it's in your life, it's yours! It is an important part of your journey! If it's there, that means it has value and importance, and it's meant to be a part of our spiritual journey and our soul unfolding.

No matter how much you dislike your family, and think you got born into the wrong family, guess what? If they're in your life, that is a part of your spiritual journey. Whatever things are going on in our lives – particularly the tough ones – are all part of our lives, a part of our journey.

Rabindranath Tagore, the great Indian philosopher, said these words. He said: *"To find God, you must welcome everything."* To find God, you must face and own and walk through everything in your life. To find peace, you must welcome everything, and own it and face it. To find joy, you must welcome everything, face it and own it. To find the level of fulfillment we all seek, we must welcome and face everything. Because everything does happen for a reason! Everything is in our lives for a reason!

In the Book of James, it says a Scripture that I've never really liked. **[Chuckles]** And here's what it says. It says, *"Whenever you face trials of any kind, count it all joy, because the testing of your faith creates perseverance; and let perseverance finish its work in you, so that you might be whole, complete and lacking in nothing."*

And what that is basically saying is that everything happens for a reason, and it's there to test our faith – to give us perseverance – so we can expand into the fullness of knowing there is nothing that we are lacking.

I used to dislike *"Count it all joy"* when you were going through trials, but what I've come to realize is: *"Count it all joy"* means accept it; embrace it; face it; and own it, Because it's going to bring us expanded faith and greater awareness. And expand our presence, our joy, and our ability.

You know, the Dalai Lama, every morning, says these three statements to himself: *"I am fortunate to be alive. I have a precious human life. And I am not going to waste it."* I just love that, I've gotta say. Because the truth is, we are fortunate to be alive. We do have a precious human life; this life experience is precious. And it's important for us to not waste it. To not avoid, to not face, to not walk through something because it's tough. It's important for us to own what it is that is showing up in our lives fully. Not grudgingly... but to *"count it joy"*... to welcome it, and to walk through it.

Second thing that's important for us to have the **COURAGE TO TRUST THAT WE HAVE IN US WHAT WE NEED TO HANDLE WHAT IS BEFORE US.** Sometimes we don't think we have what it takes to achieve our goals or dreams. Sometimes we don't think we have what it takes to overcome certain challenges and difficulties. We think we don't have it. But the truth is, we've got it! In fact, we've got more in us than we even realize!

Here are three powerful, fabulous Scriptures that remind us of the truth. The first one is, *"The kingdom of God is within you."* The kingdom of God! The fullness of all that God is is within you! Sometimes I think we hear it, *"The kingdom of God is in everyone except you."* That's what I think we think! But the truth is: it's in us! We have it in us! Do you trust that it's there?

Another fabulous Scripture is, *"I can do all things through God, who strengthens me."* Clear message: we have it in us – the strength – to do all things.

And then the most powerful one by Jesus, when he said: *"He who believes in me shall do the works that I do, and even greater things than these."* What he's saying is: if you believe in the Spirit of God in you the

way that I believe in the Spirit of God in me, through that Spirit you shall do great things, and even greater than the things that I have done. That is the power that's in you! Now, isn't that inspiring?!? Isn't that uplifting?!?

The thing I love about inspiration is it reminds us of truths that we forget. Because that is the truth of ourselves: we are magnificent, amazing, powerful spiritual beings at all times. Even when we face challenging situations, that's the truth! And the inspiration I say we all need is to remind ourselves of that truth. Because we can get a little overwhelmed by the outer conditions. As human beings, we have to remember that we are spiritual beings. That we are powerful, and we are amazing.

Maya Angelou said something really wonderful. She said, *"You do not have control over all the events that happen to you. But you can decide not to be reduced by them."* I love that!!! That you can't control everything in your life, but you have the power in you to choose to decide not to let it reduce you. Not let it reduce your power; not let it reduce your happiness; not let it reduce your joy or your enthusiasm and your passion for being alive!

That power is in you!!! The question is: Do you trust it? Every single one of us has to trust it, because it is there.

And then the last one I just wanted to talk about is that Jesus entered... And here's the line; it says, *"Hosanna to the son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"* And I love that line. He came in humble on a donkey. Head held high. Calm, clear, confident. Humble. He entered in the name of the Lord!

You know, a name in the Bible means the nature. So he entered in the nature and the consciousness and the mindset and the power and the presence of God!!! He entered the situation spiritually grounded, spiritually centered, with a clear sense of purpose of how he was supposed to show up and what he was supposed to do... even in a difficult, difficult time.

You know, the Dalai Lama is known for being particularly joyful and silly and playful and compassionate and kind. And I love that! He shows up in that consciousness, no matter what! And here's the interesting thing: he has lived in exile since he was 15 years old. Kicked out of Tibet. He has been trying to free Tibet from occupation. And, all this time – he's in his 80's – it hasn't happened. It may never happen in his lifetime. And, yet, he shows up with joy and compassion and laughter and a positive energy and compassion for all people. He shows up every day: *"I am fortunate to be alive. I have a precious human life. And I am not going to waste it."*

And one of the ways we waste it is by showing up with a negative attitude or a resistant attitude. Or complaining or whining or moaning. Or feeling sorry for ourselves. That's wasting this precious gift. You know, we can show up in a consciousness – even in a tough situation – that is hopeful, that is joyful. And I think one of the most powerful ways that we can show up is to show up in a spirit and a mindset that is thankful. Because as tough as life is now – and at any time – there are always things to be grateful for. There are always blessings.

You know, at this time – even though we're kind of isolating a bit – if you really think about it, look how supported we are by the Universe and all people. We are supported by our doctors and our nurses and all our response people who are helping us continue a normal life and be safe. People are delivery people and groceries. And even go further than groceries: the people who are growing those things and making those things. We don't have to go hunting! We just have to go to the shelf and pick it up! We are so much more supported than we realize, at every single moment. Even if life isn't going perfectly, if you were to count all the things that are going well that support us, it would be overwhelmingly a huge difference.

So it's important to not just focus on those few things, alone. Yes! Do something and be responsible. But celebrate, rejoice and enter all situations with an awareness of how thankful and grateful and blessed that we truly are. We could think, *"I'm stuck at home!"* Or we could think, *"I'm safe at home."* We can think, *"Awww, we've got to get through this."* Or you can think, *"Let's make the best of this."*

You know, we could all use a little inspiration right now, because what we're dealing with is not easy. It takes courage. And we have to make the most of it by having faith in knowing that everything happens for a reason. And so what we need to do is: face what's before us. Own it. Trust that we have it in us. And then enter it in a consciousness that is grateful, joyful and thankful.

Why don't we try – for fun! – every morning to wake up like the Dalai Lama! And tomorrow morning, let's say, *"I am fortunate to be alive. I have a precious human life. I am not going to waste it."* We have a lot to deal with, but if we follow this steps, I truly believe that we will help figure out, create and handle our new normal.

God bless you!

## **OFFERING**

**Rev. Lori Fleming:** And, friends, it's that time in our service where we give our gifts and our tithes and our offerings. You've been so generous during this time when we can't be physically together. We know that, when we tithe, it's a spiritual practice that brings us closer to the Divine. And so thank you, thank you! For sending your checks in the mail and going online to give. We just really appreciate all that we give.

Our offering state is: *"Divine Love, through me, blesses and multiplies all that I have, all that I give and all that I receive."*

Will you affirm that with me? *"Divine Love, through me, blesses and multiplies all that I have, all that I give and all that I receive."*

God, we are grateful for this outpouring of your love; for these gifts and these tithes and these offerings that keep this ministry going. We know that every giver is blessed, heaped up, pressed down and overflowing, for that is the law. And so it is. Thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God! And it is so. Amen.

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