

2020: IT'S BEEN QUITE A YEAR!

Oct. 4, 2020

Rev. Richard Maraj

Rev. Richard Maraj: Good morning, everyone, and welcome to Unity of Phoenix Spiritual Center's Sunday worship celebration. I'm Richard Maraj, senior minister, and we are so glad that you have joined us. We are going to continue with our video messages on Sunday and Wednesday, and we have added Sunday LIVE here on campus with an outdoor service at 9 a.m. So hopefully you'll check out from now on every single Sunday at 9 a.m. LIVE services. And you are welcome to join us!

We are starting up Circles of Gratitude in two weeks, and for more information you can check out the information online. We also have ongoing classes virtually on Zoom, and you can check those out, as well.

Starting next Sunday, we will be doing a five-week "Songs of Life" series. And those are always fun and exciting; the music is great, and the message off of them is always a fun thing to do. So, hopefully you'll join us for that.

So, right now, Rev. Lori is going to lead us in a time of prayer and meditation, and to get us started, we will listen to the choir as they sing "Surely the Presence."

Unity Choir (singing remotely):

Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place;
I can feel God's mighty power and God's grace.
I can feel the brush of angel's wings;
I see glory on each face.
Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.

MEDITATION

Rev. Lori Fleming: I invite you to close your outer eyes as we come together for a time of prayer and meditation. So take in a deep, cleansing breath and release it slowly as we begin to move our awareness within to that quiet, still place. That place of peace that passes understanding. That, no matter what's going on in the outer world, when we go within we claim our peace. We live our peace. We become peace. And when we become peaceful, the world becomes peaceful.

And so from this quiet place of oneness with the Divine, we recognize that we are God's beloved. That God created us to love one another. To love ourselves. To come and do that amazing thing that only we can do. And that, in this quiet place, we hear the voice of the Holy Spirit, encouraging us. Filling us with grace. Knowing that there are opportunities out there for us to be more loving. To be more joyful. To have wonderful, fulfilling relationships. To have a work that we can be a contribution to the world. And to know that we live in the kingdom of heaven: a place of unlimited prosperity, where there's enough to share and enough to spare. In this quiet, still place, we know our oneness with the Divine. We are uplifted. We are vitalized in every cell of our body. And we are brought to wholeness in body, in mind, and in spirit.

And so we take just a few moments to move more deeply into the silence: into that place of God's unlimited peace.

SILENCE

Sweet Spirit, we come in gratitude for the many blessings that we have in our life. For the opportunity to grow and learn; to rise up in consciousness to new levels of greater awareness of who and what we are. We say thank you for everything. Thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God! And it is so. Amen.

SONG

Rusty Ferracane: "What's Going On?" (accompanied by Craig Bohmler on piano)

Mother, mother
There's too many of you crying
Brother, brother, brother
There's far too many of you dying
You know we've got to find a way
To bring some lovin' here today

Father, father
We don't need to escalate
You see, war is not the answer
For only love can conquer hate
You know we've got to find a way
To bring some lovin' here today

Picket lines and picket signs
Don't punish me with brutality
Come on and talk to me, so you can see
What's going on
Oh, what's going on
Yeah, what's going on
Oh, what's going on

Ooooooooh
La da da da da da, ohhh
Ooooooooh
Oh, da da duh, da da duh
Ohhhh...

Mother, mother, everybody thinks we're wrong
Aw, but who are they to judge us
Simply because our hair is long
Oh, you know we've got to find a way
To bring some understanding here today

Picket lines and picket signs
Don't punish me with brutality
Come on and talk to me
So you can see
Oh, what's going on
Yeah, what's going on
Tell me what's going on
I'll tell you what's going on!

[Light applause]

MESSAGE

Rev. Richard Maraj [clapping]: Thank you, Rusty! That was fabulous! Great, great job! Thank you, Craig! I really, really appreciate that.

So, we're going to start with a few Sunday "smiles." The first one is: What did the cat on the smartphone say? Can you hear me-ow? [laughs]

How did people find jobs in the 1800's? On Abraham Linked-In! [simulates "rim shot" drum roll]

What do you call a cow with two legs? Lean beef! [laughs]

Why did Simba fail the polygraph test? He was "lion" all the time! [simulates "rim shot" drum roll and laughs]

So I would love you to think about where you were nine or 10 months ago. What kind of year were you thinking or planning or hoping or dreaming to have in 2020? What were some of your goals? What were some of your intentions? What were some of your desires? And how many people would say – looking back on what you were hoping and expecting – that 2020 that you've experienced up to now is far, far different than the one you were hoping for, dreaming for, or desiring to have? [Raises hand]

I think we'd all agree that 2020 has been quite a year. I think every one of us -- whatever we had planned – probably changed, was altered or delayed in some significant or even in some dramatic ways. I'll be no one of us thought that a virus would have changed our daily lives so significantly and profoundly. Nobody would have thought that we have been practicing new things like quarantining and social distancing, mask wearing and toilet paper hoarding. I bet nobody thought we would be practicing those things! Nobody thought businesses would close; that so much of life would be virtual. That we'd be at virtual meetings, virtual classes, virtual doctor's appointments, virtual church, virtual school for our children. No one thought in 2020 that we would have an eruption; it would come to the head of the deep-seated levels of racism, social injustice that's going on.

Sometimes we look at this; it's hard not to feel upset, frustrated, sad and even heartbroken of how things have unfolded in 2020. Leaving us really thinking and wondering, "*What's going on?*" Wondering, "*What is happening to my life? What's happening in our country? What's happening in our world?*" Wondering: "*When is it going to get back to normal?*" Or, "*What is normal going to be?*"

So how do we make sense of this? How do we handle this in the greatest way and in the best way? Is there an answer? Is there a solution to help us to move through and navigate this part of 2020, and all that we've been through? And what we're looking forward to?

The answer is, "*Yes!*" Some of it will unfold and heal and improve over time. But what to do immediately is summed up in a quote by Matt Kahn, a spiritual teacher. And here's what he says: "*No matter how things seem or appear, everything is here to help you.*" Everything is here to help you become who you came to be. Everything is here to help you to live and to bring out the best life that you could possibly live. Like, I've always believed that everything in our lives is there to teach us; or to help heal us; or to help awaken us. To help guide and direct us to what is for our highest and best. To help us bring out the fullness of the amazing spirit and the incredible things that we are here to contribute and to do with our lives.

Everything in our lives is for us, not against us. It is actually to help us; to support us; to grow us; and to help us unfold in amazing and wonderful ways.

And so what I'd like you to do right now is think about something that is going on in your life that is not what you planned. That is frustrating. That is something that you really, really don't like. Just think about that. And now, what I want you to think about now is: Why are you frustrated? What is frustrating about

what it is that is going on? And what it is that you're feeling? And I truly believe that our frustrations come from three beliefs that we hold: three ego-centered beliefs that really cause most of our pain and our frustration and our upset and inner turmoil in life.

The first one is that we think everything should go our way. But we only think everything should go our way all the time! And this is what causes a lot of frustration. Because nothing goes everyone's way all the time! Have you ever had something not go your way? And think of the immediate feelings and reactions that we usually have. They tend to be frustration, complaining, angry, resisting, hating it. Not liking it a bit. And what we do is: We almost get to a point where we just choose to pout. Choose to be unhappy. Almost saying as if, "*I refuse to be happy, because that thing didn't go the way I wanted it to! I can't be happy! I won't!*" Because we believe everything should go our way all the time.

Second thing that causes us a lot of frustration is: We think we need to know everything. "*I've got to know! I really want to know! Tell me: how is it going to work out? How it's going to turn?*" Most of the time, in setting a goal, we want to know all the steps and all the details before we even get started. The little control freak in us always wants to know. Have you ever had test results, and you're waiting for it? And just the not knowing just drives you crazy? Tom Petty had a song, I think: "*The waiting is the hardest part.*" It really is! Not knowing can drive us crazy! Because we think the uncertainty is scary! The unknown is something to be feared. The unknown and uncertainty can equally – and I'd even say more likely – be good! And yet we freak ourselves out, because we feel we need to know. And it's why dealing with uncertainty scares us so much, because it's our attachment to feeling we have to know everything.

The third thing that causes frustration is that, sometimes, we believe at a deeper level that life is against us. People are against us. Circumstances are against us. Sometimes even thinking God is against us. Labeling things as "bad" and "horrible" and "terrible." You know, sometimes we see things as obstacles. We see things as blocking or stopping or preventing our peace of mind or happiness and our success. Sometimes we think that things are against us – that people are conspiring against us – and it's one thing after another stopping me from living the kind of life that I want. And I think we've all had those moments of frustrations of things not clicking, things not being in the flow, things not working. But to believe that life is against us just is a mindset that is untrue and unhealthy for us: that literally hurts us and creates more frustration.

So think back to that thing that's frustrating you, and ask yourself the question: Are you willing to open a space to believe that everything is here to help us? That that very thing that you are experiencing – and are frustrated with – is here to help you. And are you willing to ask that question of that: "*So in what way is this here in my life to help me? In what way is this helping me evolve and expand? And experience greater peace? Or open me to make a more positive difference in this situation? A more positive difference in my life?*"

Whatever it is in our lives – including that thing – is there to help us!

And so, even this COVID situation. Even any problems we're having at work – or in our relationship or our family – are all there to help us. And the one thing about life is that it often teaches us, guides us, and gets our attention with adversity and inconveniences. That, usually, the things that really help awaken us the most – or see a different perspective or open our minds in a new way, or to find greater understanding – are usually difficult things.

There's a line I heard once that someone said: "*It's when my life was shaking at my foundations, I went to God, only to find out that God was doing the shaking.*" I bet if every one of us really examines our lives – and looks at the greatest areas of growth and developing qualities we didn't think we had – were usually in the difficult moments that brought out our strength. That brought out our leadership. Brought out our ability to stand firm and to set new boundaries. It's usually the tough things that expand us and grow us beyond what we think we can do.

And you know where the pain comes from in those moments? It is in our own resistance. It is in our own unwillingness to let go of those three rigid mindsets: that everything should go my way; that I need to know everything; and life is against me. We waste so much energy – so much creative energy and time – and deplete ourselves of energy we could be using to let go and feel more peace. To let go and open ourselves to greater possibilities.

And so the question is: Are we willing to let go of those things? Because, really, this process of dealing with things well in life is about letting go of the ego part of us – that part that needs to control and be right and know everything – and giving way to live a more soul-centered life. To allow that illumined spirit of unlimited possibilities and wisdom that's in us to actually rise above and come forth and handle life in a healthier and more positive way.

In the Book of Timothy, it says: "*God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but a spirit of power, love and self-discipline.*" In the Old Testament, it says that, "*You are the temple of the Living God.*" In the New Testament, it says, "*You are the light of the world!*" There's a light that shines in us that no darkness can ever overcome. We are amazing spiritual beings! We have an incredible level of power! We don't have to stay "stuck" holding on to being upset about things that don't go our way. We can free ourselves by letting it go, and allow our spirit to rise above and to be guided by the spiritual intelligence and wisdom and God's love that is within us. You know, to let that Spirit lead us to our higher purpose.

In the Book of Jeremiah, it says this: "*For surely I know the plans I have for you,' says the Lord, 'plans to prosper you, not harm you; plans to give you hope and a future.*" And the question is: Do we really trust that? Do we trust that God has a plan to prosper us, and a plan to give us hope? Do we trust that? And, to me, trusting that is an important aspect of how we show up and live our lives every day. On our money we say, "*In God we trust.*" But the question is: Do we really trust God? And trust the Universe? Trust the unfolding plan and purpose for our lives? And do we trust it enough to let go of the need for control? To let go of the need to know every single thing?

So how many people believe that everything in life happens for a reason? [*Raises hand*] I think we all do. And how many people believe that everything will always work out? I think we all do. And I'll show you how everything always works out! Can you think of the problem you were worrying about on this date five years ago? I'll bet most of us can't. You know why? Because it worked out! Can you think about what you worrying about on this date three years ago? I doubt anybody can! Because guess what? It worked out!

Can you think about what's worrying you and bothering you right now? I imagine you can! But guess what? In the same way – like the other ones did – in a year or two, you won't even be able to remember, because it worked out.

Here's the deal: Everything in life happens for a reason. And everything will always work out. But here's the exception: Everything in life happens for a reason, but not always the reason that you think. And everything in life will work out, [*laughs*] but not always the way you think it should work out. And my question for you on this is: Can you trust that? Can you live your life trusting that it happens for a reason, even though you can't see it in the moment? And can you be okay knowing that it'll work out, even if it doesn't work out the way that you want?

You see, the more and more we trust, the more we can let go of those needs for control ... and open ourselves to the wisdom and possibilities and the opportunity that life is trying to bring forth from us and through us, instead of just hanging on so tightly and being upset and being so rigid.

The good news is that life is always working out! It just happens in different stages and different ways. We take a snapshot and get upset that life isn't working, but we're not looking at the bigger picture to see how it's unfolding!

Let me give you an example. So if I said to you that I was renovating my house, and I was going to do all these funky thing. It was going to be so beautiful, and look so awesome. And you got excited! And then a couple of weeks later, you decide to come over, and there were walls that were knocked down; there was dust all over the place. You'd say, "*Your house is a mess! Your life's a mess! This is not good!*" But the truth is: Everything is working out. That's just a part of the process that needs to happen for the full unfolding of the vision and dream.

Sometimes relationships end. Sometimes situations don't look good, just like the knocking down of the house for the renovation. And you can't say it's not working; it is working! It's just that stage and that moment of life – if you take the snapshot – you could label the appearance as bad. But the higher truth is – if you see it from a higher perspective – it is working out. It really, really is working out!

So for my things I wanted in 2020, I'll guarantee you, still being in a wheelchair was not in there! And it has been frustrating. And it has been difficult to not know, and have my doctor still not know. And it has really caused me to go deeper, and to realize that everything happens for a reason. And that things are working out. Because the truth of the matter is: Even though this one thing isn't as good and wonderful as I'd hoped, I still have a great life! I have great people in my life. I have a great job. I have a lot of joy that I still feel in my life.

Sometimes we can let one thing stop us from seeing the beauty. You know, one thing where some moment in our lives, thinking that our lives aren't working. No! My life is actually working! And it's just unfolding in a way. And the more I can let go, and the more I can feel peace, the more joy I can feel now. And the more I can open up for whatever the highest good is meant to teach me through this.

Your life is working out! All things are working for your highest good! Just don't judge it in the moment. Allow the fullness of the goodness to unfold in the greatest way possible. The more we let go of the ego, and the more we hold to that illumined, incredible spirit within us, it will open us to see that.

And one thing I really had to learn – and I'm learning in this process – is also: Am I showing up for myself in these situations with an open heart, and in the most loving way? Because there have been moments where I didn't show up for myself, and wasn't very loving or very supportive or open-hearted. I would get angry. I'd get frustrated. And, to me, that's one of the key things of how we handle our lives ... is to always ask ourselves: "*Am I handling this situation in the most open-hearted and loving way?*"

Even looking at the COVID situation: Are we showing up in the most open-hearted and loving way? When we're going through anger or sadness, are we showing up in that situation – for others and ourselves – in the most loving way? You know, if we're having frustrations in our work, are we showing up in the most loving way for ourselves and for everyone involved?

In every single thing – family conflict or health challenges – how are we showing up in the most loving and most positive way? You know, for feelings of unworthiness – or even whoever wins the election – how are we going to show up in the most open-hearted and loving way? And I mention that, because this idea permeates everything. The open-heartedness and love that we show up with in every situation determines the quality of the experience, and how we navigate it and get through it.

So for any frustration in life, three questions we need to ask ourselves: "*How is this here to help me grow and evolve into a better person? How is this here to help me awaken to a higher spiritual awareness?*" Number two is: "*Am I willing to trust God has a plan and purpose to the point that I'm willing to let go of my need for control and to know everything?*" And finally: "*What is the most loving way I can face it? What is the most loving way I can show up in this situation? What's the most loving way I can show up for others? And what's the loving way I can show up for myself?*"

You know, 2020 has been a very different year! And, you know, when you think about 20/20, it's used for visual acuity: how clearly we see. How well we see. I find it profoundly ironic – in 2020, that

represents visual acuity and clarity – we have not been able to see very clearly, and we've had a lot of uncertainty to deal with. And I think this year is calling all of us to realize you can't live your life by eyesight; you have to live it by insight. You can't just use your physical eyes; you have to use your spiritual eyes to look a little deeper to see how this is here to help us. You know, how this is calling us to open our hearts and be more loving.

I really hope that, for all of us, as we go through the remainder of this 2020 – and in the years that we will look back on 2020 – I hope we will all, with a positive mind, be able to say: "*2020: It's been quite a year!*"

God bless you all!

OFFERING

Rev. Lori Fleming: It's that time in our service to give of our gifts and our tithes and our offerings. We're so grateful for all of you who've been sending in your checks and donating online to keep us going through this pretty difficult time we've been through.

I invite you to take your offering in your hand, and affirm with me: "*Divine love, through me, blesses and multiplies all that I have, all that I give, and all that I receive.*" And so we say thank you, Mother/Father God, for these gifts, for these tithes and these offerings. We know they are given in love; they are received in love; and that they move through this ministry with the energy of divine love out into the world as good. And that each giver is blessed: heaped up, pressed down and overflowing, for that is the Law. And so it is. Thank you, God! Amen.

CLOSING

Rev. Lori Fleming: So, if you're looking for some community, we'll be starting our Circles of Gratitude the week of October 18. You can go online and sign up; there are groups meeting outside in the Grove, and there are also groups meeting on Zoom. So check that out online. And while you're there, check out our classes! We have a number of classes going that are all on Zoom, so you can watch them from the comfort of your home.

We now are starting our LIVE Sunday mornings at 9 o'clock every Sunday morning out on the lawn! Bring your face mask; bring your hat; bring your suntan lotion; bring your great big smiling eyes, since that's all we can see with our masks on! And come and join us at 9 o'clock every Sunday morning. We'll still be having our Wednesday night service online.

And now will you listen as we hear the choir sing the Peace Song?

Unity Choir (singing remotely):

Let there be peace on Earth;
And let it begin with me.
Let there be peace on Earth;
The peace that was meant to be.

With God as Creator,
Fam'ly all are we.
Let us walk with each other
In perfect harmony.

Let peace begin with me,
Let this be the moment now.
With ev'ry step I take,

Let this be my joyous vow:

To take each moment

And live each moment

In peace eternally.

Let there be peace on Earth;

And let it begin with me!

Rev. Lori Fleming: And will you affirm the Prayer for Protection with me?

The light of God surrounds us;

The love of God enfolds us;

The power of God protects us;

The presence of God watches over us.

Wherever we are, God is.

Have a fabulous week!

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