

AFTER THE FEAST – THEN WHAT?

Nov. 29, 2020

Rev. Lori Fleming

Rev. Richard Maraj: Good morning, everyone, and welcome to Unity of Phoenix Spiritual Center's Sunday virtual worship celebration. Thanks so much for joining us! I'm Rev. Richard Maraj, senior minister. And as the holidays pick up, we have a lot of great and wonderful things happening.

And one of them is a very sacred and special Remembrance for all those individuals lost in this last year, and even in previous years, that we want to honor, remember, and reflect upon. That service will be posted at 7 p.m. this Tuesday, Dec. 1. So please tune in and enjoy that very sacred and special ceremony.

Also, this Tuesday, Dec. 1, is the final opportunity to be an applicant to become a chaplain. So that application is online, and you can fill it out if you feel that desire – that wonderful drive to serve in a very, very special way as a prayer chaplain.

Finally, another treat for the kids! Just in the same way that the drive-through Halloween event was such a success, we now have a Christmas version of that! You can bring your stockings and drive-through, and you'll get all sorts of different treats and candies and games and surprises through the window at the various stations. It was so well-attended, the Youth & Family Ministry team is doing it again, and we are excited to be able to host and to celebrate with our kids and our families in this special way.

So a lot of great things going on! And right now – as wonderful as those things are – we're going to set them aside for a moment, and take a deep breath, and let us prepare ourselves for a time of prayer and meditation.

MEDITATION

Rev. Richard Maraj: So I invite you now just to close your eyes, take a deep breath, and just relax your body. Take another deep breath, and just feel how good it feels just to let go. Just allow your body to relax and be fully supported by the chair you're sitting in. And as you relax and let go, just set aside all the outer thoughts and activities, just to allow your heart, your mind and your spirit to be fully present to this precious moment. For, in this moment – and every now moment – the fullness and the beauty, the goodness, the peace, the love and the wisdom and the magnificence of God, the abundance of God, is always within us and all around us.

Take a deep breath, and expand your heart, your mind. Expand your lungs to the fullness of the amazing life that God is calling us to live. Knowing truly that the kingdom of God is already within us. That whatever it is we're seeking – whatever it is that we desire – is already present within us. And through that in-dwelling Spirit of God, as we let go and open ourselves, we just allow ourselves to be a greater channel for the flow of all of God's goodness and blessings and wisdom and inspiration and creativity and unlimited possibilities.

Take a deep breath, feeling lighter and brighter. Feeling more open. Feeling more connected. Feeling more conscious and more aware of that living activity of Spirit within us. Just let God's love wash over you: healing, renewing, refreshing and revitalizing you in mind, body and spirit. Opening us to see from a higher perspective; to see our lives and everything in it through the eyes of love. To see everything through the eyes of gratitude and thankfulness. To see through the eyes of unlimited possibilities of good. Let go of anything that is holding you back from giving God your undivided attention.

So for the next few moments, let us just rest in the peaceful presence of God. As it says in the Old Testament, *“Be still, and know that I am God.”* In the silence now, just let God minister to you in the way that your life needs. Let God heal what needs to be healed, and reveal what needs to be revealed. Open us to the fullness of the life that we came here to live. Peace; be still!

SILENCE

And now let us turn our thoughts and prayers for a moment to our loved ones. If you have a family member of a friend, a neighbor or a co-worker in need of prayer, healing or guidance in any way, I want you to bring them into your heart right now. See them encircled in the healing, loving light of God. We also bring into our hearts and minds all the prayer requests that have come into our ministry; we see them all encircled in the healing, loving, light of God, and we affirm for them that God’s Spirit is working miracles. It is bringing about the comfort and the strength, the peace and the healing and the guidance that is needed to bring about the best and the highest possibility and outcome for their lives. We hold and affirm this prayer – that each of these individuals are God’s beloved children in whom God is well pleased. And it truly is the Father’s good pleasure to give them the kingdom. So we see positive results and outcomes and we release these prayers, knowing that good has already been set in motion to break forth the very best result and highest possibility for them.

And so we just end this time of prayer and meditation by allowing ourselves to just be so thankful, so appreciative, to be so grateful to God for the amazing ways our lives are blessed. We give thanks for all that is in our lives, all that has been in our lives. We open a space to allow even greater good to come forth. And we affirm this all through the name and the power of the Living Christ Spirit. And it is so. Amen.

MESSAGE

Rev. Lori Fleming: Hey, did you know that a survey found that 80% of men claim they helped cook Thanksgiving dinner ... which makes sense when you hear they consider saying, *“Smells good!”* is their way of helping. Don’t send emails about that!

You know, with the Corona virus being a possible concern this year, the most popular side dish for Thanksgiving Day was “masked” potatoes. *[Laughs]*

Some people celebrate Thanksgiving, and they also celebrate “Friendsgiving.” Who do you invite to Friendsgiving? Your close group of “pal-grams.”

With Thanksgiving over, what happens when the cranberries get sad? They turn into “blue” berries.

But you know what made Thanksgiving Day go as smoothly as possible? Because everyone was designated a casse-role!

What day are turkeys most grateful? The day after Thanksgiving!

Alright, my family told me to stop telling Thanksgiving jokes, but I told them I just couldn’t quit “cold turkey.” *[Laughs]*

Did you know that there were 46 million turkeys prepared this Thanksgiving meal? And that 12% of Americans don’t even eat turkey! Fifty million pumpkin pies were consumed on Thanksgiving. Well, I love to watch the Macy’s Day Parade. Did you know that the first balloons appeared in the Macy’s Day Parade in 1928? That’s almost a hundred years! And three-and-a-half million people in New York watching the parade on the day of the parade. According to the Guinness Book of World Records, the heaviest turkey weighed 86 pounds. That wouldn’t fit in my oven! Most turkeys – the average – weigh 15 pounds.

Well, my talk is entitled, “After the Feast-What Then?” By now, most of the turkey and leftovers are gone or they’ve been frozen. We finished off the last of the cranberries, which I love cranberries. The fridge is empty; I gave it a good scrub. We had a great Thanksgiving meal. There were only five of us, when usually there are 15 or 20. That may have been your experience, also. We didn’t even do all the traditional side dishes, but it was still lovely. Family is one of the things I’m most grateful for.

I remember when I was a little girl – there were four children in my family. My parents had four kids in less than five years, so we’re all really close. Before they would let us dig into that delicious Thanksgiving food, we all had to say what we were grateful for. Now, I’m the oldest, and I would think about it for days ahead of time, so I’d get just the right words, and be thankful for the things I was most thankful for. And then my brother is next. He would say he was thankful for the turkey. And then my next brother would say he was thankful for short prayers. But we got to dig into my mom’s delicious meals.

You know, sometimes after a big event like Thanksgiving or a wedding or a graduation, when it’s over we might feel a little let down. All that work that went into planning that big meal is part of the fun for me. I like to shop for the special food. I like to get out my good china. I like to set a pretty table. And I always make a dish I’ve never made before. Now, you may think that’s strange, but I’m making a dish for a group of people, so I get a really good idea who really likes it and who really doesn’t. And then if it doesn’t turn out, well; we always have something to laugh about. I love to put flowers and candles on the table, and use a special seasonal tablecloth.

But after all that planning and cooking and cleaning, after the feast is over, sometimes I’m sad that it’s over. I may even regret doing all that work for one meal. When something has ended, we find ourselves in this “liminal” space: between the ending and the new beginning. We may feel let down. It was really fun; we really enjoyed it. We had a great time. But now what? Especially now with COVID-19 dictating certain behaviors in our lives. We may feel stuck or depressed or alone. I’m pretty sure I’ve got some of the symptoms of COVID-fatigue, because it’s been going on for so long.

But if you think about it, life is a constant stream of endings and beginnings. They may even happen at the same time! Like the couple who welcomes a baby into their home: brand new baby – a new being to get to know and love. And then find out that the husband loses his job. It’s both a happy and a sad time, at the same time. New beginnings and endings happen like that. Or the high school graduate who goes away to college, and he’s nervous, because he’s moving into the unknown, away from home, the support of his family and his friends. He might even be afraid that college is too hard, or he might not be able to make new friends. Or we may be starting a new job. Many people have lost their jobs, and are trying to find new jobs. We might worry that we don’t really have the skills that we need.

Between the ending and the new beginning is a void: a wilderness, a space and a time of the unknown. This time is creative! It’s filled with possibilities! It’s organic and natural, and healing can occur at depth. It’s important in this void – in this liminal time – to process our feelings. To own our part in what happened. Because anything that’s unhealed in our consciousness can pop up later, and become a problem. And I promise that anything unhealed will come back to be healed ... probably when you least expect it.

When we’re in the void of transition, the way out is the way in.

There’s a student who goes to a wise old monk for instructions. And the monk’s trying to work with this young man, but he has this busy, busy mind, so the monk invites him for tea. And he takes the tea cup, and he pours the tea into the teacup, and the student is shocked as the monk allows the tea to overflow into the saucer and on to the table and on to the floor, making a huge mess. When the student asks what’s happening, the monk suggests that the overflowing cup represents the young man’s busy mind. It’s so full, there’s no room for the instructions that the young man came to the monk to learn. Student’s overflowing mind so full of many things also made a mess in his life.

What's in our minds? Is there lots of busy-ness? I know sometimes there is in mine. It's been said that we have 60,000 thoughts every single day, and that most of them are thoughts we think over and over again. Like, "What should I have for dinner?" or, "Oh; I need to gas in the car." "Oh, I need to add milk to the grocery list." "Oh, yes; we need paper towels." We think the same thoughts over and over again.

And some of us are so full of worry about things that probably will never happen! Maybe we're feeling some remorse. Some anger. Some sadness.

But that empty cup is a metaphor for staying open to new ideas and new possibilities. Sometimes we're experts in our field, and we don't allow ourselves to learn new things. I try to fill my inner cup with whatever feeds me, and then let the rest go. I have – when I hear something I don't understand – I have this mental shelf in my mind. I take that idea and I put it up there, and pretty soon I put another one there. And after three or four or five or 10 get together, they start to form a picture, like pieces of a puzzle. And then I begin to see a picture. I begin to get inspiration and understanding. I begin the healing process.

Infinite life is ever-ready to pour itself into us: into that cup. This is know as "the flow." It's Spirit calling us higher. With God, we can heal anything: our bodies, our minds, our spirits, our consciousness. Because wholeness is our birthright.

When we're too full of our own ideas – when we're planning and worrying – there's no room to receive the gift the "now" moment has to offer us. Imagine every day – every night when you go to bed – emptying that up. Emptying your mind at the end of the day. Getting rid of all the old ideas, all the things we don't need anymore. Because if we forget to do that, we might end up with ideas we don't need any more that might even hurt us, and it makes our consciousness harder to cleanse.

The same is true of that empty cup in my heart and mind. Cleaning a cup is a metaphor for releasing things I'm holding that I no longer need. New thoughts come in many forms. Lack, limitation, thinking of people or objects that have a bad feeling or bad energy, unforgiveness, fear, doubt, regret. But we also have happy thoughts of love and compassion and understanding.

When we're in this liminal space – in the void – it's time to do our inner work. We may need a counselor or a friend to talk to. We may benefit from doing some journaling. And we always benefit from doing meditation. But truly the way out is the way in! When we experience all those emotions fully – both the positive ones and the negative ones ... When we embrace and learn the lessons – remembering that what we resist, persists ... When we take time to let everything go we no longer need ... That's when we begin the process of healing.

There was a caterpillar that was crawling on a carpet. And the carpet was a beautiful tapestry with pictures of animals and flowers and birds and trees and the sun and the clouds. But the caterpillar could only see blotches of color. The caterpillar goes into the cocoon: into that primordial "goo." The goo is something that the caterpillar needs to experience in order to transform. And after a time, it comes out of the cocoon as a butterfly, and the butterfly can fly over the carpet and see the whole picture.

The void is like the caterpillar going into the cocoon. In that primordial "goo" is everything the caterpillar needs to become a butterfly. It's a time of rest and rejuvenation. A time to transform from one thing into another. A time to become a brand new being.

The void is a process. It takes time. Sometimes we don't get it right the first time. We might try to hurry things. But the process of transformation is not only easy, but the rewards of a transformed consciousness make it worthwhile.

Robert Brumet, in his book *Finding Yourself in Transition*, writes: "In order to become who we really are, we must let go of who we are not. In letting go of who we are not, we enter into the experience of

nothingness and non-being. In allowing ourselves to have the experience of non-being, we come more fully into our true being. The void is a passageway to becoming truly alive and fully awake." That's the kind of energy I want in my life! To go into the void where I experience the passageway of becoming truly alive, and truly awake.

The quickest way to go through the void is to embrace each experience fully. To learn what it has to teach us and let it go. Move on. We may be tempted to rush the process or force something to happen. I am guilty of that! But we need to accept every day for what it is. We may even experience a feeling that we thought we'd already worked through this issue. If it comes to us again, we probably need to revisit it. There may be some unresolved feeling or lesson to learn we need to deal with. There's always something new to understand.

In the process of transformation, nothing happens before its time. That caterpillar has to be in that cocoon for a while before it can come out as a butterfly. And if you try to help the butterfly come out of the cocoon, you may damage it; it may not be able to fly. I don't know about you, but sometimes I have a hard time waiting for things. When I feel I'm ready, I just want to get started. I call this waiting in God's time. I know I have to be patient. I know I have to do my inner work, so I'll be prepared when the time is right. I truly believe that, if one door closes, another door will open, and it will be even better than the first one. I trust. I have faith. I know that God is working in my life to bring my good to me at the right time, and in the right way.

We all know that, if we start to do a task before we're prepared, we usually make a mess of it. Imagine that you're going to paint your bathroom. So you get the paint. You get the brushes. You get the ladder. You get the drop cloths. You get the tape. Everything you need is a time of preparedness. If you don't prepare the surface well, the paint won't stick. And if you don't mask off the woodwork when you're painting, you'll probably do a sloppy job.

Sometimes we learn from trial and error. We decide we want to paint the bathroom; how hard can it be, right? We move ahead full steam, only to find that we have to do it over, because we didn't prepare the trim properly, and we have drips of paint. And now we have to sand them down before we can paint them again. This time of preparation is really important to get ready before we have a new beginning.

As we travel through this time in the void, we may have to experience adversity in order to grow and learn. We may have to do some things over and over again until we get it right. You may have heard this story:

On Day #1, a woman is walking down the sidewalk. There's a deep hole in the sidewalk. She falls into the hole; she gets dirty and scratched up, and it takes a long time to get out.

Day #2, the woman is walking down the sidewalk. There's a deep hole in the sidewalk. She falls in the hole. She chastises herself for falling into the hole again, and it takes a while to get out.

Day #3, the woman is walking down the sidewalk. There's a deep hole in the sidewalk. She falls in the hole. But she gets out quickly, because this is now familiar territory.

Day #4, the woman is walking down the sidewalk. There's a deep hole in the sidewalk. She walks around the hole.

Day #5, the woman walks down a different street.

That's how you know you've learned the lesson! As we go through this process of doing our deep inner work, it's sometimes really messy. We may get hurt, but we always learn and grow. And eventually we will even stop making the same mistakes over and over again.

In her book, *Where Will I Go from Here*, Valorie Burton has five commitments when you're in this void. She says:

#1: I will not feel sorry for myself.

#2: I will not stare at a closed door.

#3: I will dig deep to unearth all the courage I need. That's what it takes to do all the growing and learning when we're in the void.

#4: I will direct my thoughts; my thoughts will not direct me. That's a great lesson for life any time!

#5: I will choose to believe that all things work together for good.

You know, back when I was applying to get into ministerial school, you had to have a college degree, and I had one more semester to finish. And they wouldn't let me apply. Now, you go to any graduate school in the country, and they would allow you to apply conditional on graduation. But they wouldn't let me apply, so I had to wait a year. And when I finally got into the seminary, and I met my class – and I met the class ahead of me – I realized that I was waiting in God's time. That I was in the right and perfect class. That I wouldn't have been as happy in the other class. So it's all about timing!

When there's an ending – and when the feast is over, and when we find ourselves in the void – we recognize that this is an opportunity for spiritual rebirth. In transition, can we move through the ending into the time of change and growth? We are here, not only to grow, but we're here to learn to overcome. We're here to experience life at its fullest, its richest ... including all of the pain, and all of the joy. We're here to reach our full potential as divine spiritual beings.

Transformation can be a messy business. It takes great strength and courage to pass through it completely. None of us escapes without scars. But scars are the mark that the healing has taken place within us. It's about savoring the journey: enjoying the sights; seeing the view and the vista of the big picture, even though we're doing that great inner work. And it's always about being mindful of the presence of God in us, and as us, and through us.

Martha Smock, in *Halfway Up the Mountain*, writes: *"To let go and let God does not mean to just drift along with whatever comes: good, bad or indifferent. It means to let go of our doubts and fears, our negative beliefs, our selfishness, our willfulness. To let the strong, vital, powerful Spirit of God take over in us, spring forth through us. Because, with God, everything is possible."*

The transformation happens, not when we arrive at a destination, it happens during the experience of the change itself! So when the feast is over – when we've experienced the wilderness of the void; when we've done our inner work; when we've healed at a deep and fundamental level – we move through that time of transition that leads to transformation. And eventually, we'll pass through the transition into a brand new beginning.

Thank you!

OFFERING

Rev. Lori Fleming: It's that time in our service to give of our gifts and our tithes and our offerings. Our offering blessing is: *"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, 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: We hope you've enjoyed today's service. We're so grateful that you can join us online! We thank you for all the gifts you send us, and we just hope that you have a blessed week.

Will you join me in our Prayer for Protection?

The light of God surrounds us;

The love of God enfolds us;

The power of God protects us;

And the presence of God watches over us.

Wherever we are, God is. And all is well!

Have a fabulous week!

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