

HOPE AND POSSIBILITY

Week #1 of a 3-Week Christmas Series

Dec. 6, 2020

Rev. Richard Maraj

Rev. Richard Maraj: Good morning, everyone, and welcome to Unity of Phoenix Spiritual Center's Sunday virtual worship celebration. I'm Rev. Richard Maraj, and I am so thrilled that you have chosen to join us! We are all in the midst of the holiday season already, and excited that we'll be doing two outdoor LIVE candlelighting services: one on Wednesday, December the 23rd, at 7 p.m., and then Thursday, December the 24th, at 7 p.m., as well. It will be out in the Courtyard; it will be a fabulous, cozy, wonderful experience. So we look forward to seeing you then.

We are also going to have our annual New Year's Eve service – our Burning Bowl – LIVE outside. One service at 7 p.m., as well, on December the 31st. So we look forward to seeing you at those special services.

And don't forget: LIVE every Sunday on our lawn, 9 and 11 a.m., we have our services available for you, as well as continuing to do these virtual services.

One last thing is: Coming up on December the 12th, on Saturday from 4 to 5:30 p.m., there's a Drive-Through Christmas Festival that the Youth & Family Ministry is putting on. The Halloween one was such a smash hit; this is a repeat again. It's very safe; they'll be handing you things through the window. I think there were 14 stations last time. And they're games, they're crafts; I hear hot chocolate. All kinds of fun things! I might drive through myself, I'm so excited about it!!! So hopefully you'll join us for that.

So right now, we're going to enter a time of quiet meditation as Rev. Lori leads us in a time of prayer.

MEDITATION

Rev. Lori Fleming: I invite you to join me in a time of prayer and meditation as we close our outer eyes and take in a deep, cleansing breath and release it slowly. And take in another mindful breath and, as we release it, let go of anything that's been busy so far this morning. Any thoughts that you want to let go, just gently release them. As we begin to breathe in and out – slowing our breath – moving our awareness within: to that quiet, still, place within.

In this peaceful place, we are one with Divine. We know that we are here for a divine purpose that only we can perform. And in this sacred space, we open our hearts to God's unconditional love: love for us, love for all of humanity, love for every love form across the cosmos. God created it good; God created us good. Vitalizing us, filling us with life: the life force of the cosmos. That force that brings every cell back to wholeness.

In this Christmas season, we feel the presence of Christ within our hearts. That loving presence guiding us each and every day, teaching us to love God and love each other in deeper and more profound ways throughout this Christmas season. Jesus was born in a humble manger, bringing forth new ideas for better ways to live. New ways to overcome obstacles: to let them go so that we can rise up in consciousness into a love so deep and so profound that it brings love to everyone in the world. This Christmas season is a season of peace. And when we become more peaceful in our hearts, the world becomes more peaceful.

And so I invite you to move more deeply into the silence as we feel the peace that passes understanding.

SILENCE

And so we come in gratitude for these quiet moments together that bring us the peace, that bring us the love, that bring us all of the amazing things that God has in store for us as we receive the kingdom of heaven. And so we say, "Thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God!" And it is so. Amen.

MESSAGE

Rev. Richard Maraj: Thank you, Rev. Lori; that was absolutely fabulous! Really, really great job!

So did you know that Chewbacca from *Star Wars* was a professional athlete? He was so good, he actually won "Wookiee of the Year." [Simulates "rim shot" drum roll]

Did you hear about the guy who lost his dog, and he put an ad in the paper? And the ad said, "Here boy! Come here, boy!"

So did you hear about the robot that went skinny dipping? It was quite shocking!

And did you hear about the Miami Dolphin who got called on a personal foul? He tripped another player on "porpoise." [Simulates another "rim shot" drum roll]

Okay! [Laughs] So, not bad; not good! But not bad, not bad!

So, you know, we are getting already in the swing of Christmas: decorating, preparing. Things are already underway. And I wonder: How many of you have, as a part of your getting in the Christmas spirit, the tradition of watching a Christmas movie? You know, maybe *It's a Wonderful Life*, maybe *A Christmas Carol*, maybe *Miracle on 34th Street*, *National Lampoon Christmas Vacation* ... Whatever it is, what's your favorite?

So I've had a lot of different favorites over the years. But recently my favorite has become all of the Hallmark Christmas movies. Now, there are countless Hallmark Christmas movies, and the thing about them: they're really kind of cheesy. They're predictable. They're really sappy. And, yet, I love 'em! And, yet, I watch 'em! Yet, I keep enjoying them over and over again! And they're so many of these ... But, really, there are only four story lines that they keep repeating in different themes over and over again. And, yet, I absolutely love 'em. So here are the four story lines, and tell me if you've ever seen any of these.

The first one is a storyline of the big city businessman coming to a small town to either buy up all the land, or shut down the local factory, all in the name of bigger and more business and more profits. And the town is shocked, because everybody's employed there. And there's tension between this big city business guy and the single female who's a store owner or part of the family that owns the big factory. And there's tension and conflict, but through the tension and conflict, there's a soft, tender moment they share. Their hearts open. Then the business guy sides and helps save the business; they fall in love. Merry Christmas! Happily ever after.

The second one is of a single woman who dreads going home to her family to face questions of, "Why are you single? You're putting too much effort in your career." Or just had a break-up and she doesn't want to deal with that. So she hires somebody to pretend to be her boyfriend. And, then, through the lies and the deception together they get closer somehow, fall in love, and they spend Christmas together and find their special one.

The third storyline is the cold-hearted businessperson who doesn't like children, and doesn't like animals. Uh, you know, kind of Scrooge-like. And then, somehow, they're forced to do charitable work and help out people in need. And, of course, the head of the charitable organization is a beautiful, single woman that his heart melts; she's transformed. And they fall in love, and he is a whole new man.

One more is that sometimes there's this Christmas wish. Like there was one recently called *Christmas Crush*. And she wished her neighbor would fall in love with her. But the spell – or the wish – went to the wrong guy, and the wrong guy fell for her. And there's these awkward moments between the guy she likes, and this guy liking her, and they're all neighbors. And it just is a real mess of chaos. But, of course, by the end everything works out; they fall in love. Merry Christmas! And happily ever after again!

As cheesy as these things sound, I love 'em! You know why? 'Cause things work out! Miracles happen; dreams come true. The good is restored in human nature. You find your loved one, and you get to spend Christmas with someone special. And I'll tell you, just watching that fills me with excitement and hope, because I want their dreams to come true! And, at the same time, watching it gives me hope. And it gives us all hope for better possibilities and miracles and great things in our lives.

In one of the movies, it said this line: "*Christmas is the promise of hope in hopeless situations.*" And the truth is: Christmas is a season of hope. The birth of the Christ child – the birth of the Savior, the newborn king – is a story of hope! Because it is the fulfilling of an 800-year prophesy that a child would be born that would bring good news and hope for all people.

You know, hope may not always sound like such a powerful thing, but it is a huge, powerful, life-changing, uplifting, faith-filled mindset that literally uplifts our lives and helps us to see life – and to see our situations – with much more optimism and positivity and possibilities. See, there's a huge difference between living our lives hopefully, and living our lives feeling hopeless.

Have you ever had a time when you lost hope? Or is there a situation in your life right now where you don't have a lot of hope that it will get better? And I'll bet you've had times in your life where you have felt so hopeful: you've had that calm confidence that everything was going to work out and be okay.

You know, Robert Louis Stevenson says one of my favorite quotes on hope. And he said, "*It is better to travel hopefully than it is to arrive.*" He is saying it is better to live each day with hope in our heart than waiting for things to turn around. That living hopefully – that living and traveling hopefully in our lives – gives us a glow of positivity and optimism. And the more hopeful we are, we actually open ourselves to new possibilities and opportunities in our lives.

So my question is: What are you hoping for this Christmas? What's your great hope for yourself and how you experience it? What's your hope for your relationship this Christmas? Or your family? Or if there's an area of concern: What is your hope in how it will work out?

This morning, we are going to look at what we can do to really experience the hope and the possibilities of Christmas.

And the first thing we need to do is: **WE NEED TO BE WILLING TO BELIEVE.** Willing to believe. Hope starts with a willingness to believe that it is possible.

In the Book of Luke, Chapter 1, Verse 26 to 38, tells the story of Mary being visited by the angel. And let me just read some of it to you. It says:

"The angel said, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. And he will be great, and he will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor, David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

And Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be since I'm a virgin?' And the angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore, the child to be born will be holy; and he will be called Son of God. And now your relative, Elizabeth, in her old age has conceived a son, also; and in this, her sixth month, who was said to be barren. For nothing shall be impossible with God.'

Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be done according to your word.' And then the angel departed from her."

And what I love about this is: Here's Mary. She's young. She's innocent. She's a virgin. And then she's told she's going to give birth to the Savior of the world. She's told that she has been called to allow this birth of something great: more than she could ever imagine. She can't even quite understand the magnitude of it. And you could see that maybe she would be unwilling! She'd be scared and confused, and think, "*Whoa ... you've got the wrong maiden!*"

But, instead, even though she didn't grasp the totality of it, and it was beyond what her belief was, she was able to be willing to believe. To be willing to trust beyond the possibilities she could see for herself to know that God had something great. And that God was capable of doing something amazing through her.

And the fact is: Every single one of us lives in a certain mental paradigm of beliefs. And we can't always see the possibilities beyond what our belief level is. And so, for us to really expand our hope – and experience greater possibilities – we need to be willing to just allow ourselves to believe. To believe in God. To trust that God has more in store for us. To trust that there are possibilities beyond what our current belief system can be. And we just need to be willing to believe! We don't have to force ourselves; just be willing to believe that God has greater possibilities in our lives beyond what we can currently see.

In 1999, a young man named Jason Bryant, at the age of 20, had partnered with a couple of young men to do a series of robberies in California. And during the third or fourth one, somehow a man was shot and killed. And, as the police put him in the squad car, he could see his parents were crying. And in that moment, he realized that it was his mistakes – his poor choices – that robbed a man of his life, devastated their family, broke his parents' hearts, and really robbed him of his own life and the potential and future that he had.

And when he was being sentenced – he was sentenced to 26 years to life – he made a commitment to himself that he was going to stop hurting people, and he was going to do something with his life and with his time in prison. And prison isn't an easy thing. There are a lot of gangs; there's a lot of violence. It is not easy to stay on the straight-and-narrow. But he was so dedicated to not hurting people, and he didn't want to be known as a criminal for his whole life. He wanted to contribute in some great way.

And it is through this he actually met with a couple of other like-minded prisoners, and they started studying together. They started doing workshops on being accountable, being responsible, on goals, on how to deal with drugs and alcohol. And, through this, they even developed a book study program where groups of men in the prison would join with groups of high school kids, and they would study a book together, and just learn about the book. And the kids got to see that these just weren't criminals, but they were men that made mistakes. And they were also able to see to be careful not to make mistakes, because they have consequences that can impact our lives.

They have developed great relationships and connections. And Jason also got his BA, and he got two master's degrees! And his goal was to create a sense of hope in a place where there wasn't much hope. And to create what he called "an environment of possibility." To know – even no matter where you are – that there are possibilities for good and greater things.

Interestingly, in prison he ended up meeting Ted Grey, who was one of his cohorts in the robberies. And Ted Grey said, "*Hey, let's develop scholarships for some of these kids.*" And so, one of the kids – their parents fell ill; they couldn't afford going to college when it was time – and the inmates raised \$30,000 to cover the kids. And here's the context of it: The per hour minimum wage in prison is eight cents an hour. So could you imagine how many hours all those men contributed to raise \$30,000? And every

single one of them wanted to do it, because they wanted to make a positive difference. And they believed that supporting this person with a good education would be a great way to make a difference.

Because his intention was so strong, he was actually released after 20 years, not the 26-to-life by the governor, Gavin Newsom. And he was released on the 27th of March of this year, 2020. He got out, and immediately got a job, and he is the director of restorative programs: a non-profit that works to reduce recidivism through personal leadership training, career development and housing solutions.

And the point of telling you that story is: In a place where there wasn't hope, he was willing to expand his mindset to believe things were possible for him to make a positive difference. To help other inmates. And, to me, in our own life – wherever you are – are you willing to expand your level of hope? Are you willing to expand ... to know that there are possibilities? There are solutions? There are opportunities and answers beyond where we are mentally right now?

Because just the willingness to believe – like Mary to give birth to the Christ child – and like Jason did, gave birth to a whole bunch of other great positive things that have had amazing rippling effects.

The second thing to experience hope and possibilities is: **TO USE THE POWER OF INTENTION.** See, once you have hope, you can channel the creative spiritual energies through the power of intention.

Now, intention isn't something we do. Intention is something we connect to. You know, to me, intention is a way to direct and channel our creative power and energy to allow it to flow and move into the ways that we desire and intend. It is the intention behind our words – the intention behind our thoughts and the intention behind our actions – that really attract and manifest the good that we have in our lives.

The most powerful way to create is to create intentionally: to be intentional in the words that we speak, the thoughts we think, and the actions that we engage in. And so here's that young man – Jason Bryant. His intention to make a difference: that intention then led him to ideas about training, about helping with accountability and goals. It is that intention that inspired him to go get a degree and then two master's degrees. It is that intention that helped the prison leadership come towards him and be willing to work with him and develop these programs with other high schools. It is that intention that – 20 years later – got him released early, because they knew he would do more good in the world. Intention moves things!

You know, sometimes I think we're very casual; we don't always think and set an intention of how we want ourselves to live. So let me ask you this question: What was your intention for the kind of day you were going to have today? What was your intention for the kind of week that you were going to have? What's your intention for the next year? For the next two years? You know, we have this intention – the ability to use it. But we don't always use it!

And so the question is: What's your intention for the kind of Christmas you're going to have? Maybe your intention is to have a joyful Christmas; to be more child-like and playful and silly, and kind of catch Christmas through the eyes and the wonder of a child. Maybe your intention for Christmas is to have a more sacred, contemplative, quiet; and just talking less, and connecting, and being more present. Maybe it is to be more loving or kind, more forgiving, more generous. Maybe it's to be more engaged in your relationship, and more present to them. Maybe an intention would be to pick an area in your life that isn't working – maybe where you're hurting or there's conflict – and set an intention for healing, for peace, for harmony in that area.

You know, hope is a powerful thing. And it is a willingness to believe there are possibilities, and the desire to use your power of intention. So what is your intention for the kind of day you're going to have? And what is your intention for the way you're going to show up – not just at Christmas – but every day in your life? Because intention moves things: sets things in motion.

And the final one is: **TO EXPAND INTO THE NEW.**

So what area in your life would you like to open up to new possibilities? In your relationship? In your family? In your work? What are the new expanded options and possibilities and opportunities that you would like to experience? Because I believe new experiences require new actions, new ways of thinking and a new mindset to welcome thinking outside the box. We need to let our minds expand. We need to let our actions and our activities expand. To try new things. To get new energy and new life moving. Holding a consciousness of believing in possibilities isn't going to last long if we're not willing to try or think outside of the box.

You know, the word heaven comes from a word that means "expansion." That the more we expand in our faith, expand our awareness, magic happens! Possibilities open up in amazing ways!

So what are some areas you want to open up into new situations in your life? Like maybe this year, start a new Christmas tradition! You know, maybe start the tradition of watching a favorite Christmas movie. Maybe start the tradition of cooking a particular special Christmas dish. Or going and seeing different lights. You know, maybe it's to renew some old tradition that you used to do, like going and helping a family, or going and volunteering somewhere.

Maybe it's a tradition that I used to love – that I think I might renew – and that is eating a bowl of hot tomato soup with a gooey grilled-cheese sandwich! I used to love that in the winter time! Maybe it would be to call a family member that you haven't called in a long time. Maybe it's to say, "*I love you*" to someone you haven't said, "*I love you*" to in a long time. Maybe it's to realize it is time to get some help, and go to see a counselor. Maybe it's time to realize there's something in my past I'm still holding on to, and it's time to let it go and forget. Maybe it's to get closure in some area that things are dangling and kind of unfinished, and you know you need to clean that up. Maybe it is to do something that you're afraid to do that you know is important to do. Maybe it is to buy yourself something really wonderful that you've wanted, and realize that you are worth it! Maybe it's to open your heart to start a new relationship. Maybe start a new business.

I don't know what it is ... but the question is: What possibilities are calling you? What areas of your life can you expand and begin to look for new opportunities and new ways of being? And I'll tell you, expanding into the new can be any little things that will add to our lives! Like, for me, baking cookies at Christmas-time was not really a big deal. Now, there was a lot of baking in my house; there were 10 kids. My mom was baking all the time! But we were a cake family, not a cookie family. Fruit cakes; she'd make pound cake with this little Maraschino cherries in 'em. You know, all kinds of things! We'd have sweet bread with coconut and raisins. So we'd have lots of bready stuff, but not cookies! And Mom – she was always into all this healthy stuff. So instead of cookies, we got these date squares with oatmeal and wheat germ and all kinds of nasty, delicious, healthy stuff in it. *[Chuckles]*

So the cookie experience really wasn't something I had. Well, last year I decided I wanted to feel a little more Christmas-y. And I know people that are really into baking cookies all day, and then giving them out to people. And I didn't really want the cookies; I wanted the experience. And so, it didn't work out last year. But this year I decided I wanted to expand into this new area. And I have two bookings already! A friend of a friend who bakes cookies all day long, I got invited for a couple hours. And I'm just excited to smell the smells and hear the Christmas music and enjoy that. And the second gig is with a five-year-old little angel and her mom and a couple of friends. And I'm going to watch through the eyes of a child what baking cookies on Christmas is like.

And it doesn't sound like a big deal, but for me it's a big deal! For me, it's opening to an area and an experience and a feeling that I hadn't opened up to.

So my question for you is: What possibilities at Christmas – and activities – would you be willing to open yourself to? To expand your ability to see and welcome new possibilities in your life? Again, the word

heaven means “expansion.” And the more we expand, you know what? It means the more we’re engaged; the more we’re enriched; the more we’re alive; the more we feel confident and capable; and the more we feel joy. And so what area are we willing to expand and open up to possibilities?

You know, Christmas is a season of hope. And, in this year, I think some of us are running a quart low or two on our hope. But there is hope for so many great things in our lives. And if we are willing to practice being willing to believe, using our power of intention, and then expanding into new possibilities and new activities, we will then – I truly believe – enjoy and bring to life the hope and possibilities of Christmas.

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 to those of you who contribute online, who send checks in in this time when we’re not all able to be together. We thank you so much for your contributions!

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: Well, it’s been great to be with you online! We hope you’ve been uplifted in some small or in some truly large way by the message and the meditation. Have a fabulous week!

And now will you join me in the 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!

Many blessings!

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