

GOODBYE 2020; HELLO 2021!

Dec. 27, 2020

Rev. Richard Maraj

Rev. Richard Maraj: Hello, and welcome to Unity of Phoenix Spiritual Center's Sunday virtual worship celebration. I'm Rev. Richard Maraj, and I'm so glad that you have joined us. This is the last Sunday message for 2020! And so, we've got a powerful message for you.

And I just want to remind you that the Burning Bowl service is on Thursday, December the 31st, at 7 p.m. It'll be outside. If you haven't done it before, it's a powerful way to release the negativity of the past, and how to bring forward the positive energy to create a new and wonderful year. 7 p.m. coming up this Thursday. Please join us for that!

And then the first Sunday in January is our annual White Stone Ceremony. So it's going to be a great, great set of services to help you release the past and welcome the new.

Right now, Rev. Lori is going to lead us in a time of prayer and meditation, and let us prepare ourselves for that experience now.

MEDITATION

Rev. Lori Fleming: I invite you to join me in a time of prayer and meditation as we close our outer eyes, take in a deep, cleansing breath and release it slowly. As we begin to move our awareness within, and take in another mindful breath. And as we release that breath, let go of any busy-ness we've had so far today. Just release anything we no longer need, as we move our awareness deeply within: into our heart space. Into the very depths of our souls. Into that place where we are one with the Divine.

In this time of an old year ending and a new year beginning, we remember to let go of everything that no longer serves us. To forgive and to release and to gently sweep away everything that we don't want to take into this new year. In this quiet, still place within, we are one with the Divine, and we are filled with God's love and light. The presence and the power of God is in every cell of our body: healing us, renewing us, refreshing our minds with new ideas. And bringing us to wholeness in body, in mind, and in spirit.

As we open our consciousness for the new that is coming -- for the good that God is bringing our way -- for every good thing comes from the Divine. And we open our minds and our hearts to receive our good now, knowing that it is God's good pleasure to give us the kingdom. And that all we have to do is ask, and we will receive fully, completely, joyously, abundantly.

And so we take just a few moments to move more deeply into the silence as we feel God's unconditional love.

SILENCE

And so, sweet Spirit, we come in gratitude for all the lessons that we've learned in this year. For all the good that we've experienced. For all we've overcome. For all that we've enjoyed. We say thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God! And it is so. Amen.

MESSAGE

Rev. Richard Maraj: Thank you, Rev. Lori, for that wonderful meditation.

So how many people are ready to say goodbye to 2020? And how many people are ready to say, "Hello, 2021!"?

You know, every year we always want to start a new year and are ready to release the current year. But this year, in particular -- more than any in a long time -- I think we are glad and excited to let go and say

goodbye to 2020. I don't think another year in either many years -- or ever -- has had as much collective and individual challenges and life adjustments and alterations than 2020. This year, we have faced the global pandemic of COVID-19 that has infected millions; that has killed hundreds of thousands. I mean, thousands upon thousands have been hospitalized. It has created the need for wearing masks, social distancing, lock-downs, quarantining. It has also brought a pretty huge financial crisis, with a skyrocketing level of unemployment and with millions of people not knowing where their next meal is coming from.

It has brought to the forefront some of our racial inequality and injustice issues. And in a year where it already feels like we're so divided politically, this was an election year where the election has been contested with over 40 lawsuits and been taken to challenges in the court.

All these things on top of the normal level of challenges and struggles of life has really made this a year that sometimes felt like maybe it's more than we can take. Certainly more than we wanted to take! If 2020 was a "Sesame Street" episode, they would say this year was brought to us by the letters O, M, G! And I'm sure they are a couple of other letters you could think about to describe how challenging a year it's been!

I mean, did you ever think you would get to a place where it would be normal to walk into a bank with a mask and ask for money! That's not even a crime anymore; it's just a normal part of our lives! And you know, I've gotten so lonely in this isolation stuff that I called Jake from State Farm just to have someone to talk to! And he asked me what I was wearing! *[Laughs]*

You know *[laughs]*, in all the struggles and challenges that we have been through, we've had moments where we have used a particular phrase that I think has been reassuring for us, and that phrase is: *"This, too, shall pass."* The phrase, *"This too shall pass,"* is a reminder that this -- while it seems like it will never come to an end -- will actually come to an end. That things will change. That things will improve. That things will get better. *"This, too, shall pass"* is a statement of assurance. It is a statement of a calming hope and a faith that things will get better.

This year will pass. Even though it'll pass like a kidney stone, it will pass! Because that's the evolutionary, unfolding, changing nature of life. Life is always unfolding and developing. You know, things move on; time keeps going on and on.

So the question isn't: Will this year pass? The question is: How is it going to pass? Is it just a quick goodbye? Adios and good riddance and move on? Or is it a way to handle it so that we get the most out of this year, and bring the best into the new year to assure that we have a great 2021?

In the Book of Genesis, Chapter 32, Jacob is wrestling all night with an angel. And when the dawn comes, the angel says, *"Let me go."* And Jacob says, *"No; I will not let you go until you give me a blessing."* And he was given a blessing of his name: going from Jacob to Israel, being the father of the 12 tribes of Israel. He was blessed in great and wonderful ways. And I think that's a lesson for us! That we've been struggling and wrestling with the year, and the challenges and the things we didn't like. And we need -- before we let it go -- we need to make sure we get the blessings from it that it's meant to give us, so we can make this a new and better year.

I truly believe when challenging things happen in our lives, we can respond in three ways. One: We can let it take us down and make us unhappier and more frustrated. It can leave us unchanged. Or we can use it to rise above and become better: to become stronger and wiser.

In 2 Corinthians, it says: "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature. The old has passed away. All things become new." You know, just a few days ago, we celebrated our Christmas Candlelighting Service, lighting that Christ light to remind us to ignite that Christ light in us: that light of God in us. To turn to it in all situations to guide and be the illuminating force in our lives through any darkness and any challenge.

Well, now it's time -- as we end the year -- to use that Christ light to guide us: to say goodbye to 2020 in the healthiest and best way, so that we can have a new and more joyful 2021. And so there are four things we're going to look at to help us say goodbye to 2020, and say hello to 2021.

And the first one is: We've got to **MAKE PEACE AND FIND ACCEPTANCE WITH THIS YEAR** and all the things in it that didn't go well for us. I'll be every one of us had things happen we didn't want to happen. We had things that we didn't like happen, and things that we didn't want to happen. There were probably things this year that we thought were unfair. Things that we thought were horrible and terrible. That we judged. That brought us heartache and brought us struggle. I think it's important for us to look back and develop some sort of closure, and to make peace with all the things that happened that caused us a level of frustration and anger.

You know, there's this woman who went to a therapist to talk about her relationship with her dad. About all the things that didn't go well. All the things where they had conflict. And she also lamented on her grief that the relationship really wasn't what she had hoped it would be. The therapist said it was important that she make peace and find acceptance in the way that the relationship is, and open a space to accept that maybe it may never get to where she wants it to be. She became so angry, and she said, *"What are you trying to make me not want to improve or not work on it getting better or changing it?"* And it was through the amount of anger that came out from her, she realized that the thing that was causing the most pain and suffering was her resistance, her judgement, her forcing and fighting it to be other than it was. That trying to change the past and trying to control the future was actually causing her more pain and problems. And that making peace with it -- and finding acceptance with it -- was the thing that would help her the most.

You know, in Buddhism they say pain is an inevitable part of life. But suffering is optional. And the way suffering happens is by us resisting and trying to control and force things to be different than they are. Acceptance isn't giving up; it's just about not fighting and trying to make things different than they are. Acceptance and making peace with the past is the absolute key to be able to truly move forward onto greater and better things. Because, if we're still holding on to the past, we're not really moving into the future. We're just going to keep repeating some of the pain of the past.

Eckhart Tolle said this. He said: *"Accept what the present moment contains. Accept it as if you had chosen it. Always work with it, not against it, and this will miraculously transform your whole life."*

So what are you having a hard time accepting? And what are you resisting or resenting about what happened in 2020? And can you get to a place where you can accept it? Make peace with it? And work with it instead of against it? Just accepting the way things are liberates energies of resistance, and actually makes us more present, and gives us more creative spiritually power to actually deal with and move forward from any challenge, particularly the challenges of 2020.

The second thing we need to do is **REMEMBER THE GOOD**. Scripture says, *"In all things give thanks, for this is God's will for you."* You know, even when things aren't going our way in a few areas of life, there is a lot of good going on in our lives! There's a lot of love. There's a lot of blessings. There's a lot of happiness and success and achievements. There are so many things to be thankful for, even in the midst of the challenges that we've experienced this year.

If you were to notice and reflect: What were your highlights of 2020? What were the things that went really, really well? What were the things that you enjoyed the most? What are the things that you did exceptionally well this year? What is it that you overcame? What is it that you learned this year? What was the most fun you had? What was the hardest laugh that you had? What person influenced your life positively the most this year? What was the best book that you read? What was the most surprising and positive thing that you experienced?

You know, I had a friend whose husband died a couple of years ago, and she was really struggling and lonely in that grief process. And this year, she opened a space, and met someone online. They've been

dating, I think, for about six months now. They're like "soul mates." And they just got engaged: happy as ever! And this happened -- and changed her life in a positive way -- in 2020.

I have another friend. He had a goal of doing one million steps in 10 weeks. That's 740 miles in 10 weeks. He ended up not only doing the million, he did 1.5 million steps this year! What a great achievement!

So what was your greatest accomplishment and achievement this year? Remembering the good helps us realize that we are so blessed -- even in the midst of any challenging time. But you know the more that we fill ourselves with positive emotion and positive energy, it actually gives us more hope and optimism to move through whatever we're going through, realizing that good will always be with us, even in the challenging moments.

The next thing I want to talk about is about the importance of **GIVING THIS YEAR MEANING**. You know, happiness is an important indicator for fulfillment in life, but what's even more important is the meaning that we feel our lives have.

You know, we are at a high level in the world about suicides, about depression, addiction and taking anti-depressant drugs. As great as our world is -- and as modern as it is -- people are feeling hopeless and lonely. And the indicator of suicide and depression is not just being happy; it's about having meaning. When we find meaning in life, it brings a sense of purpose and clarity, and it allows us to be more resilient and patient, and more focused and driven, even through the difficult times. Because when something has meaning for us, it actually gives us a greater strength and drive to hang in there, and be more persistent.

Emily Smith, in her book, *The Power of Meaning*, says that meaning is absolutely the key to fulfillment. Victor Frankl, in his wonderful book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, says that most people think... They ask the question: What is the meaning of life? And he said the real question is: What meaning do you give to life?

Every one of us has the power to give the things that happen to us in our lives meaning. And the meaning we give -- the kind of meaning we give to it -- actually defines how we handle and move through it. If something happens to us, and we could... We all tell ourselves a story of whatever happens... If we make it a "victim" story, or a hopeless story, it will impact how we handle it! But if we talk about a story of hope or overcoming or achieving or rising up, the meaning we give to the experience absolutely makes a difference.

Friedrich Nietzsche said when you understand the why -- the purpose; the meaning -- you can endure almost any how. It's a powerful message. To say, when we give something meaning: to know that this was supposed to help me get stronger... This was the year I was going to provide for my family, even through difficult times... This is the year I was going to grow and become a better person... This is the year that I was going to be a more positive force and make a difference in my community... Anything that we give meaning to begins to drive us, and almost has a transcendent aspect to us: that we are being called to do something greater and better. And it helps us be more resilient.

So the question is: What meaning does 2020 have for you? Is it a story of redemption? Is it a story to help you appreciate the little things? Is it a story to bring out your best? Is it a story to support other people in greater and better ways?

So I want you to think about an experience that you've had. And what story have you told yourself about it? And could you see telling yourself a more positive story? Because the story and the meaning we give to experiences literally color, not only how we see it, but how we see it and experience and go through it.

And the last one I want to talk about it is **MAKING ANY ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENTS**. Sometimes we want to get on to the next year so quickly, we don't realize: What is it that I need to change in myself to take a new me into the new year? And I want you to think about how you've shown up and reacted and

responded to all the aspects of 2020. And could you see that maybe you could have handled it in a better and more positive way? And what would be one attribute you could think of -- if you added and embodied more in your life -- that you would show up in a more positive way, and make a better difference?

Do you think you could have handled it more calmly patiently? Do you think you could have handled this year with being kinder and more gentle? Or more understanding? Or clearer and communicated better? Or with more compassion? Or more confidence? Or more honesty? Or with better boundaries? Or more boldly or more daringly? More thoughtfully? More prayerfully? More spiritually centered?

What is one quality or attribute that you know -- if you added to who you are and how you showed up -- would absolutely influence the kind of year you're going to have in 2021? Attitude makes a huge difference! Regardless of our circumstances, the attitude we have can actually help us rise above and show up and respond in greater ways.

I love the example of Nelson Mandela, because he was in prison for 26 years! Confined to prison! And yet, his attitude was one of being an agent of peaceful change to end apartheid. He ended up coming out of prison -- not bitter, but better -- and becoming president of his country and help ending apartheid. And considered one of the greatest statesmen and leaders in the world. His attitude in that condition transformed anything anybody thought was possible for someone to do.

Young lady named Bethany Hamilton. At 13, she was a surfer. A shark bit her left arm off. She could have been bitter: could have thought, "*Never am I going to be able to surf again.*" By the time she was 14, she was surfing again. By the time she was 15, she was winning national championships surfing. What an attitude for a young lady who lost her arm, who was a great athlete. It's her attitude adjustment that literally made a change in her life.

Ben Hogan, the famous golfer: his dad committed suicide when he was nine years old. He had to go to work with his older brother to provide for his mom. He got a job as a caddy, and that's how his interest in golf came. When he became a pro, into his prime -- prime! -- he got into a car accident that they were surprised he lived through. They didn't think he'd walk; they didn't think he'd play golf. And yet, a year-and-a-half later, his attitude was so good -- he knew he could overcome it! And he started winning tournaments. He's the fourth most winning golfer ever: one of the greatest in history. And I'll tell you, it wasn't the conditions; it was his attitude and mindset that made a difference.

My friend, Bob Koehler, always says, "*Life won't get better until you get better!*" So what's one attribute you could add to how you show up in 2021 that would make you a better version of yourself, which would make this a great and wonderful year?

2020 -- like all things in life -- shall pass! But how it passes is up to us. We need to be just like Jacob: wrestling with it, and not letting it go until we get our blessing. And so the four things we need to do is: To make peace with 2020. Make peace with all the things that angered us, that we had a hard time accepting, that we struggled with. Number two is: To remember the good. Because there's good all the time! And the more we can rejoice in good -- we can always see God and the goodness in our lives -- but it gives us hope and optimism to move toward the future. The third is: What meaning are you giving to 2020? Because when we find our meaning, it gives us resilience and drive and an ability to endure through all challenges, and get through them. And finally: Adjust your attitude. Change in attitude can really change our entire outlook. It can change how we show up and what we feel and experience in life. And if we do these four things, I guarantee it is the greatest way to say "*Goodbye 2020; Hello, 2021!*"

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 to all of you who have sent in checks; who have signed up to contributed online. You've kept

us going through a really rough year for everyone. We've been able to do our services and still be with you, even if we're not physically present. So thank you, thank you for your generosity!

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, we hope you've enjoyed our service, and we hope that this new year brings you abundant blessings in every area of your life. And now will you join me in affirming 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!

Blessings!

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