

THE WILL TO PREPARE

Week #1 of a 3-Week Easter Series

March 21, 2021

Rev. Richard Maraj

Rev. Richard Maraj: Good morning, everyone, and welcome to Unity of Phoenix Spiritual Center. Welcome to our Sunday worship celebration! I'm Richard Maraj, senior minister, and we are so happy that you joined us.

Excited that April the 4th, Easter Sunday, we'll be having three services outdoors on the lawn. 6 a.m. – our Easter sunrise service – 7:30 a.m. and 9 a.m. All outdoors. Masks are required and social distancing, as well. We have a fabulous service planned for you; it will be incredibly uplifting. And we will look forward to seeing you then!

Also, the day before – April the 3rd – from 3:30 to 5, the Youth & Family Ministry Department is having another drive-through celebration! It's a Drive-Through Easter Celebration! And there will be a special appearance by the Easter Bunny, and they'll be taking photos there, as well. So don't forget: Saturday, April the 3rd, 3:30 to 5 p.m. for our Youth & Family Ministry Drive-Through Easter Celebration.

Right now, Rev. Lori is going to lead us in a time of prayer and meditation. And to prepare us for that experience, we will now listen to the choir as they sing "Surely the Presence."

Unity of Phoenix Choir sings "Surely the Presence"

Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place
I can see God's mighty power and God's grace
I can feel the brush of angels' 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 join me in a time of prayer and meditation. As we take just a few moments to begin to go within. I invite you to close your outer eyes, to take in a deep cleansing breath, and release it slowly. As we begin to relax our bodies – as we begin to relax our minds – take in another mindful breath. And as you let it go, release any busy-ness you've had to far today. Just gently let it go. If there's something troubling you, give it to God! God can handle anything.

And so we take another deep breath and begin to move our awareness within: into the very depths of our souls. Into that quiet, still place: that place of peace. To that place where we are one with the Divine. That energy that created us. That divine Spirit that sustains us. That God who gave us life and vitalizes every cell of our bodies. We recognize that we are part of the Allness of the cosmos. That Spirit is right here, right now, as close as our own hearts, and as vast as the cosmos. Because it's all God!

And in this quiet moment – in this sacred energy – we begin to open our hearts into a greater love for ourselves and to a greater love for all of humanity. For all the beings on the earth. Love for every life form, as God created it all. Our God is a good and loving God: a God of prosperity, willing to give us the kingdom of heaven just for the asking, eady to shower down on us everything we ask for. Our good is calling us higher now, recognizing there's enough to share and enough to spare in this abundant universe that we live in.

And so we take just a few moments to move more deeply into the silence as we ask for our hearts' desires, knowing that we will receive.

SILENCE

And so, sweet Spirit, we come in gratitude for this amazing, abundant universe that we live in, knowing that God is providing everything that we need and all that we want. Because we live in a prosperous universe. And so we say thank you for all of our blessings: the small ones, the big ones, the beautiful, wonderful ones. We thank you for it all, God! Thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God! And it is so. Amen.

MESSAGE

Rev. Richard Maraj: Thank you, Rev. Lori; that was a wonderful meditation! Really appreciate it!

So as you know, March Madness has begun! NCAA basketball! And this week I saw a fabulous quote by the great coach Bobby Knight. And he said this. He said, *"We all have the will to win, but few of us have the will to prepare."* And what he was meaning by that is: everybody's got the desire to win, to succeed, to have great lives. But not everyone has the will to prepare. Has the willingness – or the desire – to prepare ourselves and do all the work that is needed.

You know, most of us automatically think the will to prepare is about the will to do hard work. And hard work is good and important, and a necessary part of success in almost every area of life. And when it comes to hard work, we can be like the student who said to the Zen master, *"Master, if I become your disciple, how long will it take me to reach enlightenment?"* And the master looked at the young man and he said, *"Well, with study and with practice and earnestness and sincerity, it will take about 10 years."* The student was stunned and absolutely disappointed, and kind of upset about that. And he said, *"But what if I work twice as hard? What if I work really long hours and apply myself with all the principles and studies and practices? How long will it take me to be enlightened then?"* And the master said, *"Well, if you do all that stuff, it'll take you about 20 years."*

And I love that! Because the will to prepare is not about hard work, but it's about doing the right work. Doing the spiritual work. Doing the inner work. Doing the soul work, and doing it with earnestness. And the earnestness that is needed to expand our consciousness to a higher level. And to create a space to attract something and bring forth something even greater into our lives. The level of inner preparation that I'm talking about is really the prerequisite to breakthroughs and to transformation that are profound and lasting in the areas that we are seeking to have better lives.

You know, Jesus taught by his very example the value and the absolute importance of preparing ourselves. He prepared himself every single day spiritually by taking time for quiet and prayer and meditation. He prepared himself to begin his ministry by spending 40 days and nights in the wilderness. Spiritually preparing himself and readying himself to do the great work that culminated in the miraculous event of Easter.

You know, Lent is really a season of preparation: to spiritually prepare ourselves to have a personal and profound experience of the power of the resurrection in our lives. That 40-day period is really powerful and symbolic in the Bible. There are several instances. Moses spent 40 days up on the mountain. The spies were given 40 days to spy out the Promised Land. Elijah traveled for 40 days before he saw his vision. Nineveh was given 40 days to repent. Jesus, of course, spent his 40 days. And symbolically, those 40 days – what they represent in the Bible – 40 days represents a period of discipline, devotion and preparation.

Ralph Marston said, *"Preparation can be tedious, and it's usually not very exciting. Yet the result it can bring is tremendously exciting. Being sufficiently prepared opens doors for you that you otherwise would never see. Efforts spent in preparation will pay off. And when they pay off, they will pay off in a big way."*

Preparation isn't particularly exciting, but it is hugely valuable. An important part of the process of creating a space for miracles, breakthroughs and transformation.

So let me ask you a question: What area of your life would you like to change? What area of your life would you like to improve? What area in your life would you like to heal? And what in your life would

you like to open up more to? What in your life would you like to feel a deeper experience? And where would you like to have a breakthrough?

The fact is: all these things are available to us. The question is: Do you have the will to prepare? To prepare yourself and do the inner work to create that space to attract and to manifest something greater in your life? So today we're going to talk about the three things to do to prepare ourselves for a greater transformation and breakthrough.

The first thing we need to do – and it's going to sound really simple! – and that is to breathe. So everyone just take a deep breath. [Breathes in deeply] Doesn't that feel good? Let's do it again; how about another deep breath? [Breathes in deeply] How about one more time? Deep breath. [Breathes in deeply and out deeply]

It seems so simple: breathing. It is absolutely fundamental. We do it so automatically. It is so natural that we often take it for granted. And sometimes we miss out on how powerful and important our breathing is, and how it affects all areas of our lives.

Did you know that how well you use – or how poorly you use – your breathing, that it actually has an impact on us physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually? Improper breathing can be caused from sometimes slouching. Or when we feel depressed or negative or sluggish. When we feel depressed ... all these things actually restricts the natural flow of oxygen in us. And it actually makes us feel more negative, more lazy, more fatigued. And less oxygen moving in us actually makes us more susceptible to, not only down emotions, but actually increases the chances of disease.

Another example of how not using our breath well. Do you ever do exercise, and then you're like [*does sharp intake of breath*]. You hold your breath and [*grunts*]. And your coach has to say, "Just breathe! Just breathe!" Another one is when we get scared: you know the first thing we do? [*Quick intake of breath*] We hold our breath!

Air is the vital source of life. And most of us get into a pattern of breathing very shallow. That's why a thing like **take a deep breath** can feel so good. Can feel so calming. Can feel so relaxing. Because this life force – this breath that we have – is sometimes blocked. And we forget to breathe.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning said something really interesting. She said this: "*Whoever breathes the most air lives the better life.*" Whoever breathes the most air [breathes in deeply] lives the better life. What do you think she meant about that? And so what I think is that, when we use our breath more consciously [breathes in deeply], and more intentionally, we open our lives to greater things. Those who breathe the most air [breathes in deeply] tend to be calmer, more centered, more connected. Those who breathe the most air [breathes in deeply] tend to be more conscious, more aware, more appreciative. Handle things in a greater and better way. Make better decisions.

And so, are you using your breath in the most conscious and positive and intentional way as you can? So like, if you're tired, you know a good thing to do? Take a deep breath! [Breathes in deeply and out deeply] If you're feeling overwhelmed in your work, take a deep breath! [Breathes in and out deeply] If a family member has cancer and you're devastated, take a deep breath. [Breathes in deeply and out deeply] If you have to have a difficult conversation at work, or with your partner or your child, take a deep breath. [Breathes in and out deeply]

Any area of our life, when we feel disconnected or things aren't going well, just take a deep breath. [Breathes in and out deeply] Pausing to take a deep breath is one of the best things we can do for ourselves.

Do you know in Webster's Dictionary, it defines a breath as the act or power of breathing: air inhaled or exhaled in breathing. And the third definition is that breath is Spirit. God is Spirit. And the word "spiritus" actually means breath. In Sanskrit, "hana" means/is breath, and it actually means "the life

force." As we breathe more [*breathe deeply*], we take in more of the life force. As we breathe in more [*breathe deeply*], we bring in more of that life-giving energy of God that is in us.

In the Song of Solomon, it says this: "*Breath restores me to my exact self.*" Do you know the more we breathe [*breathe deeply*], it brings us not only calm and connection to Spirit, it brings us back to ourselves. It brings us back to God. It brings us back to our highest nature.

So what I want you to do this week, in preparing yourself for something transformative and a breakthrough, is to pause through your day and just breathe [*breathe deeply*]. When you feel stressed, when you feel overwhelmed, breathe. [*Breathes deeply*] When you're feeling good, breathe [*Breathes deeply*] Because it really does center us and prepares a way for us to open up to greater possibilities in our lives.

Step one in preparing ourselves is to breathe!

Step two is to fast. Do you know there are over 40 incidences of people fasting and praying in the Bible? And the amazing this is: every single one of them – from King David to Moses, everyone! – came out of that fasting period and did something great. They came with greater wisdom, greater leadership, greater clarity, greater understanding. There was a renewed power and clarity about who they were and what they came here to do.

And so why does fasting play such an important role in spiritual preparation? It is because fasting isn't about depriving ourselves. It is actually about disciplining ourselves to help free us and detach from the attachments and the distractions of the things that consume us and stop us from feeling our connection with God. It's about freeing ourselves from the attachments to the world and our concerns to really get us a more open place to feel our oneness with God.

Here's what it says in 1 Corinthians 6. It says, "*All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be dominated by anything.*" See, the reason that we give up meat or give up food or whatever else for that temporary period is that it helps detach from those things to help empower us. And I love that! It is to help not enslave us and consume us by the things that we are so attached to.

I mean, we love coffee so much we say, "*I don't want anyone talking to me until I've had at least my first cup of coffee.*" I mean, we are so attached to certain things! We are attached to certain foods. We are attached to worry. We are attached to all these different things that we think we have to have. You know, we have to have dessert. We have to have a drink. We have to have all these kinds of things. And it really distracts us from God. When we get so consumed with those things, we put them ahead of God.

And that's why fasting is a discipline to help distance and disconnect us from those things so we can be more open to God, realizing God is the most important thing. That God is the source of our life and our health and our joy and our peace.

And so the other thing about fasting that is important is that it is an important spiritual discipline that actually empowers us. It doesn't weaken us. I read an article, and it was called "The Eight Ways to Become a Happier Person." And do you know one of the traits of happy people? Self-control! I know that's disappointing, but it is! Self-control!

They did a study with college students who had the highest level of self-control, and it said that they had better grades. That they were less depressed. Less anxious. They had stronger personal bonds and connections. They had heartier self-esteem. And they had fewer struggles with good. That, literally, the more self-disciplined and how much self-control that we have, the happier and more fulfilling life that we lead. We don't waste or dissipate or procrastinate as much, because we're utilizing our energy towards the things that we want to experience and achieve.

Here's what it says in 2 Timothy: "*God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but a spirit of power, love and self-discipline.*" Some translations say "self-control." And so the thing about fasting – taking a

temporary break from something we think is important in our lives – actually shows us that nothing is more important than God, and that it helps us reconnect with our own power.

Remember when Paul said, “*I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me*”? So if we can give up chocolate, or whatever it is, for a little bit, it shows how powerful we are spiritually. That we can rise above those things and connect with our power, and to allow that Spirit and power of God to move through us.

So, here’s the thing. I want you to pick one thing in your life that you’re really attached to. That you really like. And I want you to show yourself your own power and discipline. To put it aside for a little bit – temporarily – so that you can open yourself to connect with God in a greater and more powerful way. And, as you let it go, do it with the intention that, “*As I let that go, I am getting more powerful spiritually. And I am preparing the way for some greater transformation or breakthrough in my life.*”

So what’s that one thing you’re going to give up – that you’re going to fast from – to open a space and to prepare yourself spiritually?

And so the last one ... So it’s to breathe. It’s to fast: to detach.

And then the third one is to surrender yourself fully to God. Let me give you the best quote that I think describes what I’m trying to say by this. It’s by Martin Luther King. He said, “*Use me, God. Show me how to take who I am, who I want to be, and what I can do, and use it for a purpose greater than myself.*” He’s saying: use me, God. I want to be an open channel and a vessel for you. Use me for a purpose greater than myself.

And all the great people who have done amazing things have had this mentality to surrender ourselves fully to a higher power. To surrender to God’s will. Remember when St. Francis said, “*Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace*”? He was saying: I want to surrender fully to let Your will for me be done.

You know, Jesus said, “*Not my will, but Thy will be done.*” He was opening himself to be a channel for God’s purpose, and God’s calling. You know, Paramahansa Yogananda opened his life to allow God to use him as a vehicle to start the SRF church, and to write *The Autobiography of a Yogi* that still touches so many people’s lives.

And so this desire to be a channel is really a willingness to surrender our lives fully to God. To not resist. To not fight. To not struggle. But to just open yourself for God to use you in an amazing and wonderful way. So my question for you is: What would take for you, right now, to fully surrender and let God use you for something great and wonderful? What do you think is holding you back from letting go fully?

I think sometimes it’s like, “*God, I’ll do anything you want, but just don’t make it too hard.*” I think we have those little bits of fear. And we need to get to that place where we can fully trust – and I really think that the word is trust. Trust that God loves us. And God has a plan for us. That we be willing to let go and let God’s plan be moved through us. Come alive through each and every one of us!

Here’s what it says in Philippians: “*For it is God who works in you, both to will and act in order to fulfill His good purpose.*” So, if that is true, then the question is: Are you willing to surrender? Are you willing to open a space in you to let God do something amazing through you?

You know, we always use the caterpillar and the butterfly scenario. And it’s over-used, but it’s so good! Because what it is: it’s the caterpillar has to surrender itself fully to be born and to be transformed into something beautiful and amazing as a butterfly. And that’s where you are in your life now is a caterpillar. This is the current version of your caterpillar self. And your soul is saying to surrender: to let that go – all who you think you are – to allow the spirit of you to rise up and to create a beautiful butterfly. And it’s a willing to trust and surrender, and allow God’s will to be worked in and through you.

So I want this to be our affirmation. I’m going to read it again, and come up with your own version. But this Martin Luther King is so powerful! And it is: “*Use me, God. Show me how to take who I am, who I*

want to be, and what I can do, and use it for a purpose greater than myself." Use me, God, for a purpose greater than myself!

You know, we all want to win. We all want to succeed. And hard work's a good thing, but the right work is an even more important thing. And, particularly, the right work with a sincere heart. We're already well into Lent, but it's never too late to do the right work, and to do it with earnestness, to literally open a space to transform us.

So the three practices this week are to breathe [*breathes in deeply*] multiple times through the day to calm us, to connect us, and also to restore us to our exact self. The second is to fast: detach from something that's important to you to show how powerful that you are. That you can do all things. To reclaim that oneness with God and that spiritual power that you have. And then, finally, it is to surrender. To trust God enough with your life to just literally let go, and let God use you in an amazing and wonderful way. To create that butterfly within you! To allow it to come forth.

So if you want to have a breakthrough – if you want to have a transformation – it's absolutely possible! And the way to start is through the will to prepare.

God bless you all!

Solo

Guest artist Sean Mullaney sings "Parachute"

I wanna take you with me
To life with no more yesterdays
We can start again awake and so excited
And change the way we always push
We always pull

I'll open up and be your parachute
And I'll never let you down
So open up and be my human angel
And we'll only hit the ground
Running

And when the world gets sharp and tries to cut you down to size
And makes you feel like giving in
Oh, I will stay, I will rain, I will wash the words away
And I will change the way we push
The way we pull

You're beautiful
I'll open up and be your parachute
And I'll never let you down
So open up and be my human angel
And we'll only hit the ground
Running running

And if it feels like we might drop
It will stop
So don't look down
It wouldn't be the same without you
This life is too good to give up on

I'll open up and be your parachute
And I'll never let you down
So open up and be my human angel
And we'll only hit the ground
Oh, we're gonna hit the ground
Running ... running

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 continue to support Unity of Phoenix by sending in your checks and contributing online. We're so grateful for all of the abundance we are receiving from you.

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, for these tithes and these offerings. 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 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're so grateful you could be with us online. We hope that you have been uplifted by our music and our meditation and our message. And now 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;
The presence of God watches over us.
Wherever we are, God is. And all is well!

And now join me as sign out with our choir singing the Peace Song. Have a blessed week!

Choir sings Peace Song:

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
Family all are we!
Let us walk with each other
In perfect harmony!

Let peace begin with me;
Let this be the moment now!
With every breath 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!