

ALL THAT REMAINS
Homily by Audette Fulbright
Sunday, December 30, 2018
All Souls Church, New York City

I think there comes a point in every life, if we are fortunate to live long enough, where we reasonably fear the future may not be as good as the past. Maybe it's because we've lost people we love; maybe it's because we ourselves are feeling a decline in personal health... it may even be only because of the barrage of frightening detail we receive from a world now saturated with information, much of it of a kind that we cannot personally respond to. Speaking for myself, that is a hard, hard moment, and it is, in fact, one of the great spiritual crises of life. How shall we live with hope in such a changing world?

Let me tell you first a very old truth. I bet you've heard it before in some form or fashion. One iteration of it was when your caregivers may have said, "Who said life was fair? Life isn't fair." Life isn't fair. We live in strange times - and those of us under the age of 55 may suffer from this more than previous generations. We have lived our lives in a mostly peaceful world, especially in the U.S., with greater advantage than any generation before us. I know that things are changing on that front, but that is my point, really. We've been living in a world which, for decades, has told us in an increasing number of ways, that life is supposed to be good, and we are supposed to be comfortable and happy and healthy - and if we are not, there's something desperately wrong, probably because we are doing things wrong, and we need to FIX IT!

But that old, not closely guarded secret stands by: life is not fair. It's never been easy. Sometimes, life is short. Bad things happen to good people. Good things happen to bad people. Very few of us get what we deserve, and often enough, that is a glorious thing, indeed.

So I want to begin there this morning: with a simple, unvarnished reality check. Life isn't meant to be good, or happy. Life just is. And if we can approach it knowing that there will be good and ill, that there will be people we love and people who do not like us, that we will feel joy and suffer, and that much - so much - depends on us...that's a much better footing for handling the "full catastrophe" that is a life, to quote Zorba the Greek.

I love the new year. My mind, drawn to orderliness, loves clear delineations. It's absolutely true that each moment we draw breath is a moment we can start anew, and I don't know about you, but I just like being able to gird up my loins a little and say, "THIS is when I'm going to try something new." Or something old. Or something for the 400th time.

The new year is usually a time when we are hit with a barrage of, "how to make and keep your new year's resolutions" or, "you're going to fail at those resolutions, so don't bother" articles and whatnot. Set those aside. The new year is not a magic spell, but it is a liminal moment, and thus, a powerful shared spiritual opportunity. Here in the US, generally speaking, we share an agreement that one thing - the year 2018 - is ending, and a new thing - the year 2019 - is about to begin. It is a time when, in both secular and spiritual lives, we have long been invited to think on where we are, and where we hope to go. It is a time when cultural permission is given to look at both flaws and dreams, and to let go as well as embrace. I believe it is a wonderful gift that should not be overlooked. And times like this, when we gather in community and make a communal practice of reflection, are particularly meaningful - at least potentially. If we engage them.

So today, that's what we're doing together. We are gathering in this one beautiful room - with its arching ceiling and chandeliers, its imperfect sound system and the breath of people who care about us. We are gathered to sing together, to listen for a good word, to be renewed to face a world we've always known is full of both joy and pain.

Today, we are creating space for each person to think on these things - to have a time and place to let go of that which no longer serves, and to lift up the things that do give us confidence, hope, meaning, joy. We have the fortitude to face a difficult world. But it really does matter if we do that with a spiritual practice, one that gives us encouragement that we can weather storms. Jesus said we should go apart from the world and pray to a God that loves us better than the most generous parent could. Similarly, the Qu'ran reminds us we are never alone, and that it is our most sacred task to care for one another. In Wicca, we are reminded that our experience of the holy is determined by how much we know the holy to be present in ourselves - and Buddhism similarly encourages us to seek stillness, so we can hear the quiet voice of wisdom that is present in each. There are hundreds of ancient paths that we might walk, wisdom words we can seek to hear. But if we don't create the time and space in our lives to listen or study or follow them, they cannot make much of a difference for us.

So this morning, we are going to "think on these things," as the Bible says, share silence, as they do in so many of the great traditions, and we are going to make art. It won't last forever. Nothing ever does. But that is the point - it's the nature of things. Nothing gold can stay, and this, too, shall pass. Our lives - they are full of ups and downs, times of fleeting joy and enduring sorrow and love and wonder. Let us give space to that today. We're going to do a guided reflection, just to take a little time, together, to think on these things.

Close your eyes and rest gently in your body. Now you have time for your own thoughts. Our time in quiet and meditation will be longer today than we often take in service - relax and know that this is ok.

Where are you, here at the turning of wheel? On what do you need to loosen your grasp? What no longer serves you? For what do you need to forgive yourself or someone else?

What do you want to learn, to practice, to embrace, to become? What do you hope for this year? Who do you want to serve? What grace do you wish for this community?

What fills you with wonder, with awe, or with hope? What comforts and strengthens you?

As your thoughts fill you now, perhaps you will soon talk them over with a loved one or good friend, or write them down, to revisit over the course of the year. Whatever your heart asks of you, know that you have this spiritual community to return to, to be strengthened, to be encouraged, to be called into right relationship, to be loved. Happy New Year. May it be everything you hope and need. Amen, Ashe, blessed be.