

# Under the Sun

## August 24, 2014

### Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

**Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening:**

We are here,  
**after a week of heat, thunderstorms,**  
and continuing news from a fractured world,  
**to worship with truthfulness,**  
and face the tough reality of summer's flow,  
**by restoring a bit of vulnerability and hope,**  
by grounding ourselves in our guiding mission.

*In this common house of life and love, may we lead lives of welcome, wisdom and kindness. Bestowing ourselves bountifully to the common good, let gratitude and question displace any easy assumption. Knowing that we are within this hurting, amazing world, not outside it, we approach our earth and equity mindfully. Let each day express our amen.*

**Singing: Comfort Me 1002**

**Ingathering:** *Notes*

Huaso (Cowboy) Belt from Chile serving as a stole for ministers like me. (take off stole, and put on belt)

The same, yet different.

Eggs I did not recognize as eggs for a Japanese dish called Maguro Yamakake. Yet they were eggs, even though they didn't look like eggs to me.

The same, yet different.

My Mexican friend Juan Carlos used to make tuna salad. But he never used fish of any kind. He used these, which are tuna, the fruit of a cactus that grows in a desert, and also used to grow in my backyard in California.

The same, yet different.

It's the same word, but it has entirely different meanings. Juan Carlos used to like to fool me like that. One day he told me was going to make dragon for supper. I said, "Dragon? There is no such thing as a dragon, as far as I know." Oh yes there is. So when I got to his house, he showed me this. "it's dragon fruit" he said, and proceeded to cut into the fruit, cut out little chunks, add some lime and mint and some pineapple, and made a fruit salad. It was delicious.

Did it breath fire like storytellers say dragons do?

Well yes, he put some chile slices into the fruit-salad too, so I breathed fire, just like a dragon.

But in any case, it's The Same, Yet Different.

So have a good time and a smart time and friendly time this morning. We love you, we want you to be as happy as it's possible to be.

**Greeting:** Announcements by Steve

**Affirming (Sung) #1012 When I Am Frightened**

**Communing:**

Love, I am living in a hurting world right now, and I am here to testify that I am part and parcel of that world.

Late summer thunderstorms sweep the sky, and my heart, too, flashes like lightening in rage and grief as young black man, after young black man, in Missouri and in Ohio in particular, drop to the ground riddled with bullets fired from guns held by pale hands. Remorseless fanatics in Syria and Iraq poison the heart of the world with their killing; conflict without ceasing in the divided land below; ominously thunder in my soul as bitterness is dropped into the cup of life offered to future generations. In Ukraine, in Lebanon, in Honduras, where the children we send back to the place that they left in fear are killed – all of this and more. And then there are the hurts and sorrows in our personal lives, and I say, “I know, I know,” and my heart is broken. It's too much world, too little me.

And yet, I know this too. I proclaim this. It's also true that people of all kinds get up off the ground where they just collapsed in tears, and rise up to decry, to protest, to demand justice once again. It's also true that Muslim religious leaders in high places have loudly decried the murder of a journalist by people they, too, call fanatics. It's also true that women and men, wearing the vestments of their religion, speak out clearly against the deadly sin of saying that race issues are over in our country. It's also true that new trees are planted in burnt forests. It's also true that geese still walk across Olentangy River Road, sparrows chirp on the grass in front of this building, and rain falls, and sun shines indiscriminately, all over the world. It's also true that medical staff do not shirk patients with Ebola, and that many teachers who love their calling will soon lead our children to learn who they are. It's also true that compassionate arms still reach out to embrace those who grieve, and that hands, no different than our, own cook food to feed the hungry and siphon off despair. All of this is the world too, and I am part of this world too, and my heart beats stronger with this news. I am but one small voice, standing here; so now I shall strike this bowl and withdraw silently inside, oh Love; and let my dream of peace and wholeness, so severely tested by the days of summer, come back to life with each breath in, each breath out.

*silence*

We are many, but we are one, too, one in our vulnerability, even when we pretend otherwise.

So let us feel free to call to mind and heart the names of those we mourn, those we miss because they live far away, and those we love, and those who love us for exactly who we are. Say the names aloud if that brings you comfort, or remember them silently in your heart if that brings you comfort. Remember...

### *the Naming*

I am but a small voice, I have but a small dream, but when many voices come together to sing this dream, I really don't feel so alone.

**The First Reading** comes from the scroll of *Qoheleth* in the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew scriptures. It's called by the name *Ecclesiastes* in most English translations, a Greek word that translates the meaning of *Qoheleth* (*The Assembler*) into Greek meaning pretty much the same thing. The Rabbis debated this book for a long time before including it in the canon. It never uses the word *Lord* (or *Yahweh*) and speaks not of God but *The God*, which Rabbi Rami Shapiro translates, with convincing authenticity, *Reality*. This is his translation, from Chapter One. I really think his translation and his commentary are the best out there.

The sayings of the Assembler  
Emptying upon emptying, said the Assembler  
Emptying upon emptying.  
Everything is emptying.  
A lifetime of labor under the sun  
and what survives?  
The earth outlasts you,  
and humanity passes away  
one generation after another.  
The sun rises only to set, then races  
breathless to the place of rising once again.  
The wind spins without end,  
one moment northward, the next, southward.  
All rivers empty into the sea,  
yet the sea never fills;  
indeed, the waters rise and return  
that they might flow yet again.  
Talk exhausts us, and eventually we fall silent.  
Yet the eye never tires of seeing,  
nor the ear of listening.  
What has been will be,  
what has been done will yet be done again.  
There is nothing new beneath the sun.

**The Second Reading** comes from a prose offering of the great poet whose words have changed my life, Wislawa Szymborska. She wrote these words in her collection of essays: *The Poet and the World* in 1996.

*There's nothing new under the sun:* that's what you wrote, Ecclesiastes. But you yourself were born new under the sun. And the poem you created is also new under the sun, since no one wrote it down before you. And all your readers are also new under the sun, since those who lived before you couldn't read your poem. And that cypress under which you're sitting hasn't been growing since the dawn of time. It came into being by way of another cypress similar to yours, but not exactly the same.

The world — whatever we might think when terrified by its vastness and our own impotence, or embittered by its indifference to individual suffering, of people, animals, and perhaps even plants (for why are we so sure that plants feel no pain), whatever we might think of its expanses pierced by the rays of stars surrounded by planets we've just begun to discover, whatever we might think of this measureless theater to which we've got reserved tickets, but tickets whose lifespan is laughably short, bounded as it is by two arbitrary dates; **whatever else we might think of this world — it is astonishing.**

## Preaching

So it's been tough, hasn't it?

The events that have grabbed and shaken so many of us this summer? I was in Bucuresti (pronounced *BU-Ku-Resht*) Romania when that plane was shot out of the sky, and bodies rained down on Ukrainian fields. Only 300 miles north of where I was. I was going to be flying home in just a few days, and, true, I didn't have any realistic fears of being shot out of the sky myself, but the images of bodies falling through rooftops and onto fields filled my head, twisted my heart into a knot as we flew.

The news of Ebola from Africa affected me in a funny way. In June and half of July, I suffered from two ear infections at the same time, one bacterial, the doctors said – and I went to several doctors – and one fungal. I felt both pain and ache for five weeks, and the pain was as great as the pain I felt when I passed a kidney stone at age 28, to wit, the worst pain I have ever felt.

I could not hear much, my ear was swollen, the ache perpetual, my capacity to focus on anything shredded. I was scared. Scared there would be permanent damage. Scared I would lose even more hearing than I already have, with age.

And when I got cellulitis or gout (they are not sure which), that swelled up my ankle so I could not walk without wobble and pain, I was afraid again. Afraid that my walking days were coming to an end. Fearful that the infection might travel to other more sensitive parts of my body, as one website suggested. (I'll never read medical websites again, I've promised myself.)

I didn't have Ebola. But clearly, I was able to get some sense of the *fear* that sick people might be experiencing, but a thousand times worse.

It was a sobering lesson.

*The wars and rumors of wars*, to quote a famous line from one of the gospels, crushed the possibility of summer peace for me. In the Middle East, the rise of Isis is alarming the world, including the Muslim world there, which speaks out strongly against their barbarism.

Even relatively conservative Muslim leaders are decrying their violence. And in the so-called Holy Land, where not much seems to be very holy anymore, the conflict has worn me out. Of course, I have to remind myself that this is a very old conflict. After all, the middle books in the Tanakh, the Hebrew scriptures, are *all* about the wars fought by the Philistines and the Israelites. The word Palestine is only the Latin pronunciation of Pelishtim, or Philistines, coastal people which the great majority of archeologist theorize were refugees settled originally from the Aegean islands, at the same time as the Asiatic nomads, who came to be called Israelites, were settling in the inner highlands of that small geographical plot of land on the eastern Mediterranean. Gaza, destroyed yet again, was one of their main cities all the way back then.

Another book, Ecclesiastes or Qoheleth (the very one you heard quoted this morning), famously says, "There is nothing new under the sun." Spears, stones and slingshots have been replaced by missiles and rockets, sure, but the conflict is rooted in dirt 2800 years old. It appears to me to be pretty much the same.

Except the people, especially the children, dying on both sides are not 2800 years old, but 3, 4 and 5 years old. On both sides, many of the younger generation who survive to grieve these losses will grow up in a state of bitterness, and the seeds of a continuation of this ancient conflict will have been planted deep.

Which is why Szymborska, in her prose commentary on the book of Ecclesiastes, admits that the violence and inhumanity have dogged our species for ten thousand years, but each person who suffers this violence has a new face, a new imagination of what their future might be, a whole new set of friends and relatives. Dying is the same, war repeats itself, but each person is unique. And precious. And there is the rub.

How does one find hope and strength in a world like we are living in now? The young men who are shot in this country by other men of paler skin have different names than the young black men who were treated with injustice in an earlier era. Solomon Northrup, in the autobiography and film "12 Years a Slave," was tortured by white men, but lived to tell his tale. John Crawford does not share his name, obviously, nor does Michael Brown of Ferguson share Northrup's name. But they both died real deaths, their own deaths, at the hands of men just as pale as the hands that whipped Solomon Northrup's back off.

The same, yet different.

I say Ecclesiastes says something important, but that so does Szymborska.

When I was in Romania this summer, I had the remarkable experience of what I call flickering.

Every morning I would walk through the grassy park that brought me to the closest subway stop, and as I strolled those lanes, I would feel the humidity and heat on my arms and head that were *exactly* the same as what I experience here in Ohio. The Queen Anne's Lace, the clover, the yarrow along Bucuresti alleys looked exactly the same as our Queen Anne's Lace, clover and yarrow. I flickered. I felt I was in Ohio, not Romania for a second. My senses gave me evidence that I had not flown across the ocean on three flights over a period of twenty hours, but had just stepped outside the door of my loft building over to the Topiary Park.

Yet the language around me was entirely different from the language I hear when I am by an Ohio clover blossom. Verog is clearly not the English word *please*, and multumesc is not *thank you*, yet they mean the same thing.

My friend Ionut, whom I was visiting, wore clothes I could get at a mall here. For dollars. He had to pay Lei. But the clothes were the same. And different.

Bucuresti was a safe city, the safest capital in Europe. Women walk alone there, late at night, unlike in this country, where rape and assault have become so frighteningly common.

Not the same. Very different.

Everyone, including my friend Ionut, smokes there. Like the proverbial chimney. From age ten on. The percentage of smokers in this country is far, far less these days. Not the same. Very different.

The music. The poetry. The art. All completely unknown to me. Romanian history is not part of any European History curriculum I know of.

Yet their artists, poets and composers resemble everything you would find in Western Europe or the States. In their National Gallery, I found paintings every bit as good as the best Monets or Singer Sargents or Picassos, or Marie Cassatts. Romanian painter Stefan Luchian does not share a name or citizenship with Monet or Cassatt, but he painted just as well. Different names, same quality.

Szyborska was saying this; a lot of things may look the same, but they are different too.

And those differences, those distinctions, are precious and sacred. As we word it within our own Unitarian Universalist Principle statement, everyone has deep and *inherent worth*. Yes, we all have *different* names and lives, and, at the same time, we all each *share* common experiences like grief and joy. But my joy is not your joy. I grieve for different people than you do. Your grief is powerful, and so is mine. The same, yet different.

But then Szyborska goes on to say something quite remarkable, and to me, excellent. The world — whatever we might think when embittered by its indifference to suffering, **whatever else we might think of this world — it is astonishing.**

Wow. This world with war and murder and deception and racial stuckness and terrible new viruses? This world? Astonishing?

I think I can tell a story that will open up what I think she means. In my former congregation, a man and woman, a couple, moved for work to our town. They had been active in their former Unitarian Universalist congregation, so they joined quickly, and, within a short time were serving on committee, boards and teaching Sunday School. They were amazing folks.

One day, the man, named Glenn, came to tell me that he had contracted an illness that was rare and strange. An illness that usually affected men much older. An illness much like HIV disease, in that it allowed opportunistic infections to gang up against the immune system to destroy it.

He suffered many such outrageous infections. Finally, after losing his eyesight, he realized that fighting this syndrome was a losing battle, and he opted for no more treatment. A young man from this congregation, Joel Miller, was my intern then. And he and I heard Glenn ask us to do something after he told us he was just going to let go. "I want you to anoint me in a ceremony tomorrow, like last rites." He had always been proud of his liberal Baptist roots, so I was surprised he wanted a ritual not usually associated with Baptists of any kind that I know of. And I said so. But he said, "I know, but it's really important to me, despite my religious heritage, and I think it will do something important for my family. I want you to anoint not just me, but everyone who comes. I want to have my bed rolled out into the garden of the hospital (it was Stanford University Hospital), and here are the people in the church I want you to invite." He paused. "Mark," he continued, "I want you to preach a little homily on this line from the Hebrew scriptures: *"Love is stronger than death,"* and then I want you to anoint me, and then everyone. I have no real desire to live on when I die, and I hold to no particular theory of life beyond death, but I want to remain alive till my last minute. I want to let my family and friends know that they will survive me, and they have to live, too. They have to live to love each other, and to love the stars at night, and to love the weeds along the side of the road, the clover, the yarrow, and not miss out on anything in this astonishing world we live in. And then I want to hug everyone there and say goodbye. Can you do that?"

Through our tears, Joel and I nodded yes. The next day, his wife and I and Joel wheeled his bed out to the beautiful garden court at the center of the hospital. Those he invited gathered. I had olive oil and cotton balls with me, and I had written a prayer summarizing what Glenn had told me the day before about his intention, and about the astonishing world. Astonishing, even though he knew more than anyone else what mortality actually is. Astonishing, even though he could feel terrible pain.

And so I preached a bit on the wonderful text he offered me, and I anointed his forehead, hands and feet and heart, trying to echo his own words back to him. Then I anointed the hands and hearts of everyone there, Joel joining me in this process. Then he hugged us all goodbye, and blessed us. We kept some tearful silence and wheeled him back into the hospital. He died not long after. And we went on to live with his blessing, with the strengthening of his ritual.

Believe me, both Joel and I learned a great deal that day. We learned that, yes, there is nothing new under the sun – generation after generation we are all mortal and we all suffer, and we all



love, and we all are brokenhearted by the suffering of the world. But Glenn was Glenn, and I was I, and Joel was Joel, and each of us have our *unique* lives, with *unique* pains and *unique* joys. Glenn knew more than most people I have ever met about the truest meaning of hope – not hope for personal survival – he wasn't even sure that made sense to him. But hope that, despite suffering and setbacks and cruelty and mortality itself, we have to live every minute of our lives. We have to live with what Szymborska calls "astonishment" to our last breath – if we can. We have to live forward, not backward, we have to move, not stay stuck, or court paralysis. Yes, our principles wobble sometimes at the sheer horror we experienced in the world, as we all did this last summer. But we can move and live on only if our principles anchor us, if our confidence can remind us that two steps forward, one step backward, is still movement, is still life. And I say this not just for our own sake, but for our children's sake, for it is up to us to anoint a better future for them, no matter what it takes, for like Glenn, none of us will see the world 100 years from now. But our children's children will.

### **Offering**

*Because life is a gift, and the world itself is a gift, something not of our making, and because even existence is a gift, the very fact that we are here and now in this room together, I invite us to complete the circle of giving by ourselves giving of our selves toward the common good of life in this congregation and life in our shared world.*

### **Returning: A Prayer of Lamentation for all the Hurting Nations with a Coda of Hope**

Love, I have wept, and pounded my fists against the wall this summer. So much aggrieves my heart, the inhumanity of humanity; the deception of almost all politics; the hurt encompassing so many of my fellow creatures on this small planet.

The unconsciousness, the blaming, the finger pointing, the fanatic worldviews. It's more than I can bear. I lament. I lament. I lament.

And yet, and yet even now, I refuse to give up. It means something to me that eyes can look up and see blue skies ten thousand miles from here, even as I look up. It means something that clover and Queen Anne's Lace can be found far away in many nations.

It means something to me that dreams are still possible, still holy and strengthening to the spirit.

Love, the world is tough. But give me the power to nevertheless sing with astonishment.

### **Singing 159**

**Blessing:** as a closing ritual, please, as you leave this place, feel free to touch the peace tree our children made during Peace Camp this summer, and then take the hand that touched this beautiful creation and lay it upon your heart for a moment. Think of it as an anointing if you want. Go in peace.