

First Unitarian Church

July 19, 2020

This is still hard. Can we start there, in this sermon? This is still hard. It has been four months since the pandemic changed all of our lives. We know how many weeks are behind us, but not how many still lie ahead. We are living in a lot of uncertainty.

If you are depressed, it's okay. If you are anxious, it's okay. If you feel self-pity, and then guilt, because you know it could be worse, it's okay. If you feel panic or dread, it's okay. If you are not okay, it's okay.

If your life has not stopped for the pandemic, but has marched on through health challenges or grief or other things that preceded or that supersede this pandemic, it's okay. Whatever is going on for you right now, it's alright. You can bring it here to church.

And whatever your other days have been like, if this is a spiritually centered day for you, if you are doing okay right now, then thank you for being one of the people who can keep the faith in our congregation today.

That's one of the gifts of being part of a spiritual community. You alone do not always have to keep the faith. The faith that no feeling is final. The faith that this too shall pass. That you are lovable, redeemable and, worthy. The faith that justice may take generations, but it is inevitable. The faith that we are held in a larger love. When you are in a spiritual community, the community can keep that faith, when you can't. And you can just be where you need to be.

However you are today, it's okay. And it is good to be together. This is what I mean when I say those words at the start of these services. It is good to be *a faith community* together.

One of the wonders of this time is that we are together in at least two places. One, on the internet, on zoom. The other place, at least for most of us who are listening right now, is the desert. The desert here in New Mexico.

When I was contemplating moving here from the east coast just about a decade ago, I remember reading in this church's description of the area that the desert is a spiritual place for many people. I had not spent much time in the desert in my life. I grew up in a lush valley in Oregon, surrounded by vineyards and fields of hops and other crops, and by rainforest. And I really didn't know anything else. In fact, when I drove east out of the valley in a moving truck on

my way to Massachusetts at the age of 28, I was surprised—very surprised—to discover that half of the state of Oregon is desert. I suppose I had learned this in school at some point, but like most Oregonians I didn't really know it. Like *know it*, know it. In Oregon we identified with the valley, forests, rivers, and mountains.

My only real experience of the desert had been a road trip to the southwest when I was fifteen. We drove to visit a relative in Arizona, who proudly told us that her well-manicured, predominantly-white subdivision was built on ancient Indian burial grounds that gave it special healing powers. I may have been a small-town kid, but I was a UU kid, and I knew that idea was abhorrent. Sadly, apart from a vague awareness that the indigenous traditions it violated and fetishized still existed in their own right, for a long time that subdivision was my only impression of spirituality in the southwest. So when I read in this church's materials that the desert is a spiritual place for UUs, too, I was really curious.

I'm so glad I've had a chance to experience the desert differently. In these past seventeen weeks, more than ever before, I have found myself drawn into the wild areas of New Mexico, into the desert. Into its healing powers that are not about being on top—of anything!—but about humility, silence, and awe.

Now, if you are listening from somewhere that is not a desert, if you have tuned in from Vermont or Illinois, I am so glad you're here today, and this sermon is for you, too. Because, you know, a sermon is never only about the thing that it's about. Right? It's about more. That's what makes it a sermon. So today you are invited into the desert with us, right from wherever you are.

Where I am, if I step outside, I can actually see a desert. Not the endless stretch of sand you might imagine based on cartoons—though New Mexico has some of that, too. Here, the dry, high altitude land includes a mountain range on one side of the city, rising up out of the earth to the east: the Sandias. And on the other side of the city, a vast mesa—a desert plateau—stretches toward the west. Between the mesa and the mountain is what feels like 180 degrees of sky. The sky is everywhere you look. And it changes colors, especially at sunset. When it does, it changes the color of other things, too. The mountains turn pink. The mesa turns blue.

Throughout the state, there are forests and rivers—but they aren't like the ones I grew up with. These are high altitude drylands, with red cliffs and rattlesnakes. The land is big. It's vast. The plants, even mature trees, seem small in comparison to the ones I knew in the pacific northwest. This large scale of landscape, and the relative smallness of living things, is one of the reasons the desert holds so much spiritual power.

The desert... how to put this... the desert does not think you are special. The writer and religious professor Belden Lane calls this a “sacramental affront.”<sup>1</sup> Sacramental affront. A holy insult. The desert is inattentive to human anxiety. And it is so much larger and more powerful than you, to contemplate it is to experience awe. And to experience this is to remember that your concerns and your ego are also small in the face of the ultimate.

The desert reveals your place in the order of things.

What are the things among which you find your place? They are: the praying mantis. The soft, spiky succulents. The flowering cacti. The songbirds. The coyotes. The deep-rooted cottonwoods. The shushing, flowing river. They are the afternoon storms. They are bats, and the night which cools, like a cave, but one filled with stars. And the day, with its pure hot light.

The desert says, you are a part of this.

The desert reveals your place not just in the order of things, but in time as well. There are traces left behind by ancient people—petroglyphs, and there are foundations of ancient structures. There are strata in the cliff faces—layers of color and texture from past ages. There are fossils from sea creatures and dinosaurs. The story those fossils tell seems impossible. Ocean? Here? And in the desert, bones of the more recently dead are also laid bare. No leaves cover them. The skull of a deer, or a cow, or a bird. They are the desert, too. They were when they were living. And they are again now.

*Observer, you are temporary*, these bones and strata and other signs say. But you are part of something larger and more mysterious.

The desert is a place of creation stories. Of life being born like a spring, like an ear of corn, like the first awe-struck humans to stare at the sky and at each other. But also, in the desert, life exists on the edge. It is a place of vulnerability and vastness.

In this way, the desert teaches humility. And through humility, it also offers healing from the torment of believing that we are separate and entitled; entitled to comfort, to our routines, to wellness, to a certain number of days or years, and it invites us to let go of our grasping continuously onto that... mirage. That separation and entitlement... they are illusion. In releasing that, there is freedom. In freedom, there is laughter and compassion. There is... just a different level of life.

There is a strong tradition of desert spirituality in the ancient lineage that led eventually to this church. It's the part of our lineage that we share with Catholicism and Protestantism. In the stories and scriptures of the Abrahamic religions, the desert is a place of uncertainty, a testing place. It is synonymous with wilderness. It is a place where humans may experience a change of heart, a conversion, or a deepened faith.

In the first few centuries after Jesus lived, monastics began to form communities in the desert, often in hard to reach places, requiring dangerous trips up ravines or along cliffs. Once there, visitors might look down to find long vistas of the drylands below. The monastery locations embodied distance and perspective. The arduous journey to reach them, was like a physical representation of the spiritual journey into enlightenment or union with God. It's a journey that entails great risk to the self, our understanding of which may turn out to be, as I said, illusion. We may find ourselves relinquishing the self—or at least, what we thought we were.

These desert mothers and fathers, as they are known, practiced a simple, austere spirituality. They lived disciplined lives, meant to remove the ego from the center of one's being. The desert, with its indifference toward the monastics, was a teacher in relinquishing the ego. Away from other people, the monastics were also unable to feed that constant craving we all know well—the craving for approval, for praise, for mastery.

In the desert they were away from human-made worldly concerns, away from society, and away, even from too many words. The emptiness of the desert elicits silence. It elicits awe. It leaves us without adequate language. Even the word emptiness is not really adequate. To say the desert is “empty” is incorrect. The desert contains all of the “things” I listed before and more. So emptiness is an approximation, it's an almost-description. What it gets at is the scale of things relative to each other in the desert. The space is big. The things are small. Emptiness.

And such are words when it comes to the divine or the ultimate. They do not accurately express it. When Anthony, the father of Egyptian monasticism, was asked how he could be a monk out in the wilderness, far away from holy books, he gestured toward the desert and replied, “My book is the nature of created things; whenever I want to read the Word of God, it is always there before me.”<sup>ii</sup> He was born in the year 251 and died in the year 356. Nature as spiritual teacher is as old as humankind.

But I don't think Anthony meant literal words when he said the desert contained the word of God. The vastness of the desert elicits silence and awe. To attain union with God or the ultimate in the desert is a process of unknowing. Just as, in Buddhism, attaining enlightenment requires silence, presence, and the emptying of self.

We are treading here into mysticism. Into experience of the ultimate that transcends words like “God.” Better then to speak of unity. Or oneness. We are treading even beyond concepts of theism and atheism. The desert suggests that.

Desert and mountain places are often associated with the “limit-experiences” of people on the edge, people who have run out of language in speaking of God, Belden Lane writes. He says,

“Only at the periphery of our lives, where we and our understanding of God alike are undone, can we understand bewilderment as occasioning another way of knowing.”<sup>iii</sup>

Maybe you speak of God and maybe you don't. It seems to be about 50-50 in our congregation and I love that about us. But I think it's safe to say 100% of us are experiencing some measure of bewilderment right now. We are small in the face of this pandemic, which moves on a global scale, and yet touches individuals like sun on so many grains of sand. We have been decentered in our own lives, and find ourselves at the periphery. Hoping to wait it out, and have some more good living to do on the other side.

Last Saturday, I awoke at 6am in Carson National Forest, to the sound of a dozen crows flying back and forth over my tent, calling to each other like a flock of winged Homer Simpsons, their voices cracking repeatedly as they circled the campsite.

As I told the pastoral care team this week, the Source of All has birthed astonishing displays of awkwardness. We were talking about how to pray out loud. The secret is to just go for it. You won't do worse than the crows. Whatever you come up with will be fine. Words won't be adequate anyway. It's the space around the words that matters more. The silence in which you are present.

I clambered out of my tent and looked up at the sky. The crows were gone. But the dryland mountains were there, and the aspens were watching over the whole thing, and I still feel like laughing.

I am glad to be a part of it. I am glad you are part of it with me. It is good to be together.

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<sup>i</sup> Lane, Belden. The Solace of Fierce Landscapes. Oxford: New York, 1998.

<sup>ii</sup> Qtd. in Lane p. 165

<sup>iii</sup> P.4