

"They Called it a Miracle"
Sermon and Worship Service for
The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Wayne County
Wooster, Ohio
January 5, 2020
The Rev. Jennie Barrington, Interim Minister
Janice Baxstrom, Worship Associate [1st service]
Ivie Sorkin, Worship Associate [2nd service]

Spoken Blessing and Moment of Silence

(Rev. Jennie)

Spirit of new beginnings, new insights, and new hope,

Finally, it is 2020, and things look different somehow; we are seeing things through a new lens. We are appreciative of the holiday occasions and festivities we were able to take part in. Yet some of us also feel relieved. The winter holidays can hold expectations that are high and hard to meet. If things will calm down for awhile, now, we might also be able to feel more calm, too. All the while honoring these mixed emotions of this post-holiday season, let us try to turn our sights forward with faith that a better year lies ahead. Now is the time to remember all that is good about America, a nation of neighborhoods and neighborliness. Now is the time to remember all that is good about Ohio, a state in which people inform themselves and engage each other in the democratic process and in enhancing our communities. Now is the time to remember all that is good about our congregation, a place where all are accepted regardless of their religious background, and where each person's voice is considered with openness and respect. Let us remember that these intangible things are the things that truly last year after year. And let us take hope from them and their enduring power.

We continue to send loving kindness to all those in our congregation, or known and loved by our congregation, who are in a time of transition, loss, uncertainty, or fear. We pray that their pain be eased, that their hearts find peace, and that their spirits be comforted. The final stone is for the joys, sorrows, milestones, and remembrances which remain silent in our hearts. Let us join our hearts together in a moment of silence, in contemplation on the joys and concerns of the day. Blessed be.

Reading

(Janice / Ivie)

Our first reading this morning is by the Rev. Barbara Rohde, from the meditation manual, "The Simple Morning Light:"

"The Congregational minister stopped me in the aisle of the supermarket a few months after I had unexpectedly recovered from a serious illness. With a gentle but slightly teasing smile he asked me, 'How does a Unitarian deal with a miracle?' It was a good question, one which I thought about a lot. I started by asking myself more questions.

What is a miracle?

An event that fills us with wonder.

Is a miracle supernatural?

That depends on how one defines supernatural. Traditionally, supernatural has been defined as something beyond the natural, an intervention from outside. But the supernatural also might be defined as that which is most perfectly natural, that which is whole, that which is completely true to its purpose in nature. In this sense, the Eden of the ancient story was supernatural. In this sense, the occasion when a body is allowed to heal itself, and does, is supernatural. Not all bodies will heal themselves. But on those occasions when everything within the wider body is working together—the tremendous skill and caring of the doctors and nurses, the encouragement and love and strength-giving acts of family and friends, the amazing healing powers of the human body itself, and the patient but passionate life-loving spirit within oneself—then this definition of a miracle may apply.

What does a Unitarian Universalist do with a miracle?

She does what all humans do in the presence of wonder. She gives thanks."

Second Reading: "Miracle," by Susan Griffin

(Rev Jennie)

"It all happened on the water—
Jesus walking—
the fishermen watching
from their boats.

When they picked up their nets
they half-expected
a miraculous catch
but it was as ordinary
as the rest of the day.
Only some of them understood.
[Only some of them understood.]

This is how it always is with a vision.
Jesus walked on the water only once.
This wasn't science.

What was it the fishermen were supposed to see?
A man moving over the surface of the sea
as if it were some other substance? Like ground?
Was this all there was?

Picture yourself
You are out there on the water
You look at the horizon
You are so used to seeing that part of the sky
it's become part of your eyes

Then you blink, staring
You turn to shake your companion.
This is not what you expected to see.
Not even what you wished for.

What difference does it make, a man walking on the water?
[What difference does it make—]

But even so, the day, going on as it usually does
is cut with a certain clarity.
And you, you feel an inexplicable
happiness, the water beneath you, the
bright air above."

Special Music: "The Water is Wide"

(Sharon)

On a certain January evening eleven years ago, I got back to my apartment complex shortly before 7:00 p.m. The parking lot was really snowy and icy. (I was living in South Bend, Indiana.) I got ready to back into my garage. I had this very clever way of backing into that garage. There was a handicap space directly in front of it. So I'd pull into that space at an angle, then back straight in, always being so careful not to hit either side of the doorway, nor the walls, nor even the side view mirrors. I'd gotten really good at it. Well on this certain January evening eleven years ago, I arrived in front of the garage to find that there was a vehicle parked in the handicap space! I got out of the car, opened the garage door, got back into the car, and thought carefully. "You can do this," I said to myself, trying to instill confidence. Then I pulled the car forward, just beyond the garage door, at [what I hoped at least was] just the right angle, then took a deep breath and let it out. Then in one lovely swoop, I back my car into that garage at exactly the correct angle, such that no sides of doorways, nor walls, nor even any side mirrors were hit. There was no bumping nor crashing nor crunching at all. "You did that beautifully, Babe," I said to myself. I got all my work stuff out of the car, locked it up, closed the garage door, and stepped carefully over all the snow and ice and into my apartment. Since it was now just a couple minutes after 7:00 p.m., I turned on the PBS News Hour.

That's when I learned that just after 3:30 p.m. that day, Captain Chesley Sullenberger had landed a commercial airplane on the Hudson River. [And I had thought I was so clever, back in my garage.] As soon as I heard that news, I braced myself to hear how many people had died, and how many were wounded. Incredibly, I then heard that all 155 passengers and crew had survived. People were calling it, "The Miracle on the Hudson," and people were calling Captain Sullenberger a "hero."

I have been fascinated by this event ever since. I've saved clippings about it, I've watched interviews with Captain Sullenberger, I bought the Discovery Channel's DVD about it, and I read Captain Sullenberger's book, which is called, *Highest Duty*. It's a beautiful book, and I encourage you to read it for yourselves. Different parts of this amazing true story will resonate with different people. I've chosen a few aspects of it from which we might gain insight, courage, and confidence.

I've delved into this story in part because it raised so many questions for me: How long did they all have, after the landing, to get off of the wings of the plane before it sank? Who was this man who managed such an unusual and unexpected crisis so adroitly? What were his values? How did he feel about everybody using the words "hero" and "miracle"? Was he a religious man? Did he pray? Had a plane ever

been successfully landed on water like that, ever before in history? If so, did Captain Sullenberger know it had been done? What did he put his faith in during those harrowing three-and-a-half minutes? And perhaps the most emotional question of all: How would he be able to get back in the pilot's seat and fly again? Would he even be able to do that?

It took some digging, but I've learned that the amount of time they all had between the landing and when the plane sunk was twenty-four minutes. This is why Captain Sullenberger's co-pilot, Jeffrey Skiles; and the flight attendants Doreen Welsh, Donna Dent, and Sheila Dail; and the captains and crew of the boats that sped to the rescue; and the other first responders; were essential in making the story have, not a tragic, but a happy, ending. Captain Sullenberger credits them at every turn. He repeatedly says that the flight and the rescue were a team effort. And when he was invited to attend events such as the Super Bowl a month later, and the Presidential Inauguration, he said, "I'm honored, but may I presume to ask that should I be able to attend, it be on the condition that my entire crew and their families accompany me?" This speaks volumes about what Captain Sullenberger values: human beings, their accomplishments, and their potential. He has an unusually high reverence for human life. He believes that, when a fellow human being is in distress, we must, not be a bystander, but do all we can to help. He is not one to use religious language. [I would call him a Secular Humanist.] His book does not mention miracles, God, nor Jesus. And he says that he did not pray when the plane was going down. He focused on doing his duty to everyone on the plane. And he figured out a solution that did not harm any other people, nor even buildings, nor even the George Washington Bridge. He did not even harm the George Washington Bridge. When I reflected on that, I realized it had a profound meaning for me, personally. To me, Captain Sullenberger's values, and the way his values caused him to act that afternoon, are the antithesis of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. And, for me, Captain Sullenberger's heroic acts that afternoon are an antidote to how I felt after September 11, 2001. Of course nothing can ever completely erase the pain of that horrific day. But for me, what Captain Sullenberger did over the New York City skyline on that January day eleven years ago was healing.

Captain Sullenberger did, however, sacrifice the plane itself, didn't he? That's something people did not talk publically about at the time— And that's fine— We were all so relieved that everyone survived, as well we should be. But Captain Sullenberger talks about that decision in his book. He calls it "goal sacrificing." From his many years as a commercial pilot, he had learned that many pilots of planes that were about to crash wait too long to eject. The reason is that they "fear retribution if they lost multi-million dollar jets." [p. 229] He writes: "As soon as the birds struck, I could have

attempted a return to LaGuardia so as not to ruin a U.S. Airways aircraft by attempting a landing elsewhere. I could have worried that my decision to ditch the plane would be questioned by superiors or investigators. But I chose not to. I was able to make a mental shift in priorities... I knew about the concept of 'goal sacrificing.' When it's no longer possible to complete all of your goals, you sacrifice lower-priority goals. You do this in order to perform and fulfill higher goals. In this case, by attempting a water landing. I would sacrifice the 'airplane goal' (trying not to destroy an aircraft valued at \$60 million) for the goal of saving lives." [pp. 229-230] I didn't begin this sermon by saying that I heard the news that a pilot had just destroyed a sixty million dollar airplane. But Captain Sullenberger did. I mention that because I don't want to talk about him as if he's some superhero who's perfect in every way. He isn't. Even so, the fact that he was able to adjust his priorities like that –and so quickly!– is the one way I can't help but call him brilliant. And whenever we find ourselves in distress, we can remember we're allowed to sacrifice, or even just defer, some goals. And we'll almost always have more time to do that than Captain Sullenberger did.

As it turns out, a few planes had been successfully landed on water before, and Captain Sullenberger did know about them. In 1944, two test pilots voluntarily ditched a B-24 Liberator to see if it could be done, in the service of lives possibly being saved in the future. That was on the James River, in Virginia. Both pilots survived. And in 1956, a pilot named Captain Richard Ogg had to ditch a plane in the middle of the Pacific Ocean because two of its four engines failed. It was bound from Honolulu to San Francisco. There were twenty-five passengers on board, and also forty-four cases of live canaries. He circled for several hours to burn up fuel. So he had a lot longer to work out a plan than Captain Sullenberger did. Much of the plane shattered, but all the passengers and crew survived. [That plane took twenty-one minutes to sink.] Just before Captain Ogg died, in 1991, his wife tells of his getting such a sad faraway look on his face. "She asked him what he was thinking about. He told her: 'I was thinking of those poor canaries that drowned in the hold when I had to ditch the plane.'" [pp. 45-46]

The type of guilt Captain Ogg still felt, even after all those years, has a specific name: "survivor's guilt." "Survivor guilt is a type of remorse felt by people who manage to survive a tragic event involving loss of life, especially the lives of friends and loved-ones or other people commonly associated with the survivor. Sufferers often feel guilty that they get to move on with their lives, whereas other people were not as lucky. All great tragedies can provoke survivor guilt. [from Wikipedia] "When someone suffers from survivor guilt, they keep looking back to the time before the traumatic tragedy, thinking that there must have been something they should have done to prevent it; they get emotionally stuck there, and can't move forward with their life

productively and happily. What they aren't realizing is that during a traumatic tragedy, what anyone is able to do to be helpful is far more limited than in a non-crisis situation. It can take help from a therapist for the person to see what their culpability realistically was and was not. [This information about survivor guilt is from the paper, "Guilt Following Traumatic Events," by Kathleen Nadar, DSW, social worker and mental health professional:] Unresolved guilt can cause harm. It can lead to self-condemnation, punishing self or others, hopelessness, depression, suicidal feelings, or substance abuse...People with a strong sense of responsibility for others are particularly susceptible to feelings of survivor guilt.

Dr. Nadar gives us some guidance for processing survivor's guilt:

- Know that there is no offense in surviving
- It is good to survive
- It is okay to delight in being alive
- Feel free to reassess your life
- Reassess what is valuable to you
- Make the best of your life
- Making the best of your life can be a tribute to your survival and to those who died
- What is or can be your purpose? Your talent? Your benefit to life?
- Bloom where you are planted. This does not mean you have to stay in your current circumstances but that you can create something good from the circumstances in which you find yourself
- Process the traumatic experience and its associated symptoms with appropriate assistance
- Put guilt to good use
- As much as it is in your nature to do so, cherish life
- Treasure being alive."

Captain Sullenberger has some survivor's guilt himself. When his father, who had suffered from depression his whole life, was seventy-eight years old, he then suffered additional medical complications that would have been arduous to recover from. Tragically, he killed himself. Captain Sullenberger says that his father's death had an effect on how he's lived. He writes: "It made me more committed to preserving life. I exercise more care in my professional responsibilities. I am willing to work very hard to protect people's lives, to be a Good Samaritan, and to not be a bystander, in part because I couldn't save my father." [p. 292] Yet he actually adopted the ethic of not remaining a bystander when it's possible to help when he was only thirteen years old. That was when he heard the story of Kitty Genovese. As it was reported at the time, she was being attacked in New York City with people in close

proximity choosing not to help. He believes we have to do better than that in a civilized society. He writes, "I've come to believe that every encounter with another person is an opportunity for good or ill. And so I've tried to make my interactions with people as positive and respectful as I can." [pp. 152-153]

Captain Sullenberger is still not entirely comfortable being called a hero. But he realized that what he achieved on the Hudson River was a source of hope sorely needed by people all over the world. He writes: "The success of Flight 1549 had given them a positive sense of life's possibilities, especially in tough times. People had been losing their jobs in large numbers. Home foreclosures were up. Life savings had been decimated. A lot of people felt like they had been hit by a double bird strike in their own lives. But Flight 1549 had shown people that there are always further actions you can take. There are ways out of the tightest spots. We as individuals, and as a society, can find them." [p. 285]

Captain Sullenberger did resume flying again, though he retired from U.S. Airways in March of 2010. And a beautiful movie about him and the landing of that plane on the Hudson has been made. I saw it as soon as it came out, and found it to be both riveting and heartening. Captain Sullenberger now speaks internationally about the importance of aviation safety and patient safety, crisis management, life-long preparation, leadership, and living a life of integrity. He says he will never cease in his advocacy of aviation safety, nor lose his love of flying. Flying has been part of what gives his life purpose. So that's a big part of how he was able to get back on the horse— I mean the pilot's seat. But I think the other part is that strong and faithful connection he seems to have, every waking hour, with all the people whose lives have touched his, and all the people whose lives he can enhance, given the opportunity. The miracle on the Hudson is that the connections between all those people held him up— We can hold each other up above dangerous waters— We can hold each other up.

*Closing Hymn #18 What Wondrous Love is This

Parting Words (Captain Chesley B. Sullenberger, III) (Rev Jennie)

"I did not think I was going to die. Based on my experience, I was confident that I could make an emergency water landing that was survivable. That confidence was stronger than any fear."

Extinguishing the Chalice
Postlude

(Sharon)