

News from Across the Sea

Will you join me in prayer?

Speak to us, God, for we are listening.

Speak to us, God, for we are waiting for your voice.

Speak to us, God, in our hearts and all around.

Show us what can be, what can be. Amen.

It's a hard time right now. And you probably don't need me to tell you that. Our impeached-but-acquitted president is feeling emboldened to reward his followers and punish his enemies. And many of us who are Democrats are disheartened and worried, wondering if we will ever land on a candidate who can win in November.

Meanwhile the climate crisis rolls on, unabated, with increasingly strange weather patterns across the world. We're not even sure we should be enjoying this lovely, dry February weather - because we know how badly we need the rain.

Many of us went to last week's special City Council meeting about the growing problem of homelessness right here in Sonoma. A lot of people spoke out of their compassion for those among us who have no home, no shelter. And, we also heard of the pain and anger of parents who are worried for the safety of their children. Mostly I think we came away with an even greater understanding of what a complicated, difficult problem this is – and one that the city is going to have to spend some money on.

And then we can add in the coronavirus epidemic, Brexit and its unknown, unintended consequences, the Pope refusing to consider the possibility of married priests or women deacons. Even our beloved Golden State Warriors are in last place!

It is a hard time; a discouraging time.

And yet, and yet.... Even though I am not optimistic about the state of the world these days, still, still, I find that I am full of hope. Still, I feel hopeful. I wonder why that is? Where does it come from?

In the Bible - the first letter of Peter, chapter 3, verse 15 - it says that we should always “be ready to give reason for the hope that is within us.” So, I guess that’s my task for this sermon: to offer some reason for the hope that lives in me - and perhaps in you as well - in spite of it all.

Now, you might think that one way I might account for my hope would be for me to tell you about my deep religious faith. But the problem is that I am basically a skeptic; and I am especially skeptical about religion! Perhaps I have been ever since my father was killed when I was 12 years old, and everyone tried to console me by saying “God has a reason for this”; or it was “part of God’s plan.” Which only upset me more, because I knew - even at age 12 - I knew that there is no adequate explanation for such things. Nobody knows why pain and suffering falls on some and not on others.

And now that I am much older, and after a long career as a pastor - during which time I have walked with so, so many people in their grief and in their struggles along life’s journey - after all of that, I find that I am just as skeptical as ever of the answers that religion provides.

Oh, I’ve studied a lot of theology and Christology – which attempts to explain the nature of God and of Jesus – and it’s fascinating and thought-provoking. But, to be honest, I cannot say that any of it provides a reason for my hope: for that precious flame of hope that burns inside of me.

Which is not to say that I am not a religious person. I am. But I find that I am far more interested in questions than in answers. And I'm the kind of person who has to think my way to faith.

Which I suppose puts me in good company in the UCC. Down through the centuries, we Congregationalists have tended to emphasize thinking and reason, rather than direct spiritual experiences. You wouldn't find great mystics like Hildegard of Bingen within the United Church of Christ. Nor will you find revivals, nor altar calls, nor speaking in tongues anywhere in the history of our denomination. We prefer religion that is – well, you know - a little more reasonable, and calm, and thoughtful.

Which probably also leaves us a bit spiritually impoverished.

Take a look at the front cover of the bulletin today. This photo was taken looking straight up into one of the soaring towers at La Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, Spain. This church is Antoni Gaudi's great architectural masterpiece. It is a place filled with mystery and awe, full of surprises: shapes and colors that are over-the-top, and are meant to be.

Gaudi sought to reach into the non-rational, the subconscious mind. His surrealistic approach rejects well-ordered, rational thought, in order to open us up to spiritual insight and mystery.

And it seems clear that the Apostle Paul would approve of this, based on the scripture that Janet read for us today. Paul makes it clear that human wisdom and rational thought are simply not enough; being well-ordered, thoughtful, and reasonable is not going to lead us to spiritual truth.

Instead, Paul talks about mystery and about God's "secret wisdom" – which is mysterious and hidden.

Last Sunday afternoon, Wakoh Shannon Hickey got us off to a good start in our series on World Religions. At one point, she said that our inability to truly understand other religions is like being on an island in the middle of the ocean. From this perspective, the ocean simply looks round. There is no way that we can perceive, or even begin to imagine, the actual shape of the ocean, in all of its infinite variety as it strikes distant shores.

This image brought to mind the great American novelist Walker Percy and his book entitled, *The Message in the Bottle*. Percy employs a similar image: he says it is as if we are all island-dwellers, on a large island in the middle of a vast ocean. Percy then distinguishes between news that is available on the island, as opposed to news that is from across the sea, that arrives on our shores, like a message in a bottle.

News from the island is essential to our daytoday living. This includes scientific knowledge, which helps us understand and improve our world. It also includes practical messages about being responsible, rising to the occasion, being polite and cheerful, meeting deadlines. All of this is important to our well-being.

However, there are occasions when a bottle washes up on the beach, with a message inside. This is news from across the sea. It is information from outside that gets through to us – and it is clearly beyond the bounds of our normal island systems of rational thought and reasonable action.

Perhaps it comes from aliens in another galaxy far away. Or, maybe it comes from spiritual beings, or from the mystical realm of the unknown that we gesture toward, and call AGod.@ The point is that it is news from Aoff the island@; it is not part of our everyday experience; it's nothing that we can verify; it's not rational and reasonable. But there it is.

And, we have a choice: to pay attention to this “news from across the seas”; or just ignore it, and go on about our island business.

I'd like to share with you a couple of personal stories, this morning, of times when I have received “news from across the sea.”

The first happened when I was young - 33 years old. I felt too young, really, to be the senior minister of a prominent, 500-member church in East Lansing, Michigan. This was a church with about 30 ordained ministers in the congregation - including several members of the religion department at Michigan State University, and dozens of other professors and professionals. Altogether, they were an intimidating group.

Frankly, the first few months there were pretty brutal. And it wasn't just me I was concerned about; I had ripped my wife and our four children out of our cozy, contented life in a picturesque college town in Vermont, and thrust us all into this daunting, complicated, and stressful new world.

Well, about four months into it, on a bright, crisp January day, with snow on the ground, I walked into our living room. And there, on the floor, gently flapping its wings, was a brilliant yellow and black butterfly – a tiger swallowtail, I later learned.

It was a miracle. Where would a butterfly come from? How did it just show up, in January? We searched all over the house, and the garage - but we never found a chrysalis, nor any evidence of where this sweet, elegant butterfly might have come from.

What I can tell you that it felt like a sign; it felt like a message of hope, a word of encouragement: news from across the sea, perhaps.

And, it made a dramatic difference to me - and to all of us.

That following Sunday, in worship, I shared the story of my little butterfly miracle. After the service, an older man named Bill came up to me and said, “Alan, do you still have that butterfly?” I said I did. And he asked if he could borrow it, that he had an idea. I said “Sure,” and he stopped by later to get it.

Months went by, and I sort of forgot about it. And then, just before Easter, Bill showed up at my office at the church, with a bag under his arm and a twinkle in his eye. He said, “I have something for you.” And he pulled out this. This amazing work of art.

(Show the artwork)

This art form is called marquetry. It is composed of hundreds of tiny, tiny, and precisely cut pieces of wood, several different species of wood, to get the color variations. This is one of my most precious possessions, and it has hung in my office continuously from that day to this; so that, 37 years later, I still have my butterfly, my little miracle. (place on altar)

Now, of course, you have to understand, that for a confirmed skeptic like me, I don't really believe in stuff like this. And yet....

Many of you know that I was senior pastor for 12 years at the UCC church in Danville. What you may not know is I began my ministry there in September 2001. Truth is, I hadn't even unpacked my book boxes yet, when the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center changed our world forever.

As we gathered for worship that next Sunday, we were still stunned – all of us – still reeling from this unthinkable catastrophe, unable to come to grips with what had happened, and feeling lost and afraid.

And as I climbed into the pulpit that day, I was as lost as anyone. Still, I knew I had to do everything I could to bring a word of encouragement.

Well, in the middle of that sermon, folks began staring and whispering and pointing just over my right shoulder. In that sanctuary, you see, there are some windows that go right down to the floor and that open onto a small grove of redwood trees.

Now, I didn't see anything because it was behind me. But I can describe to you what happened in that moment, because it is something that the good people of Danville still talk about, 18 years later.

You see, what people saw, behind me, just outside the window, was a deer - and not just any deer – but a large, magnificent stag with a full rack. And it stood there, apparently looking at me, with its head cocked, as if it were listening. After a few moments, it turned and looked straight in the window, at the congregation, nodded, and then bounded away.

People say that it felt like a Visitation. A sacred presence. A word of assurance from the universe.

Now, for a skeptic like me, of course, I don't believe in such things.

And yet....

Now, I share these stories with you, my friends, because my hunch is that you have stories of your own. My guess is that you have your own experiences of “news from across the sea.” They may be more, or less, dramatic than my stories - but I'm guessing that even reasonable, highly-rational Congregationalists like you and me have seen mysteries that we cannot explain.

And perhaps those little mysteries are like a bridge across a Great Chasm. Maybe they are like a crack in the wall that exists between what we know and what we cannot know.

All I can say to you this morning, my dear friends, is that such things are, in some way, connected to my own deep belief, that there is something about the universe that is Trustworthy and Good, and that is pulling for us.

And friends, this bedrock belief I have in an indescribable, unknowable goodness is what I have to offer you -

as the reason for the hope that is within me.

Amen.

