



THE YORK UNITARIAN

St Saviourgate Unitarian Chapel, York, YO1 8NQ

January 2022

FROM THE MINISTER

Happy New Year?

As I write this I don't know whether we'll be welcoming in the New Year under official restrictions or not, though it's fair to assume that whether or not there are rules governing our meetings, it will be wise to be cautious. Anyone we come into contact with may be infected with Covid-19 or may not; it may be the Omicron variant or it may not; our immune systems and booster jabs may hold out against it or may not. We may be able to trust the people making the rules to act in our best interests, or we may not.

Once again circumstances remind us that all our decisions are based on imperfect information, that we can only do the best we can to make a sensible judgment based on probabilities and logic, and then hand the rest over to whatever higher power we conceive: God or spirit, fate or destiny or blind luck. As Unitarian Universalist minister Robert Fulghum observed – a piece of wisdom he believed in so much he made it the title of one of his books – most of the time the only prediction we can truly make is, 'Maybe, Maybe Not', so it's wise to get good at living with a certain level of uncertainty.

In a brilliant article about trauma and theology*, Oxford scholar Dr Tim Middleton

writes, 'In recent months, it has become apparent that the COVID-19 pandemic represents a case of trauma on a worldwide scale. All of the symptoms are there: the initial feeling of shock and disbelief; the numbness and emptiness that clouds our thinking as we struggle to process events; and the perpetual state of hyper-arousal whereby fear now saturates our lives.' Middleton quotes trauma theologian Shelly Rambo's 2010 observation, 'I feel the fragility of the world more acutely than I did ten years ago. I view persons as more vulnerable in it,' and points out that the pandemic has made it 'painfully clear what she meant about the fragility of the world and the vulnerability of humanity.'

Many of us enter 2022 with greater awareness than we had a few years ago of the fragility of the world and our own vulnerability, and although of course I would like to wish everyone happiness for the New Year, in many ways happiness seems too uncomplicated a wish for our complicated world. Instead, I'd like to wish you as much safety as you can find, a firm foundation of faith in whatever brings you hope and comfort, and a compassionate approach to yourself and others as we continue to navigate whatever these strange times bring.

* <https://lsri.campion.ox.ac.uk/projects/theology-trauma-and-covid-19>

A MONTH OF SUNDAYS

at 11am

Sunday 2 January

Revd Stephanie Bisby

Make it So

Music by David Hammond

Sunday 9 January

*Chris Newsam

Expect a Miracle, Really?

Music by Helen Drewery

Sunday 16 January

Revd Stephanie Bisby

The Banquet of Community

Music by David Hammond

Sunday 23 January

Chris Carr

President of the Yorkshire Unitarian Union

Music by Laura Jones

Sunday 30 January

Laura Cox

Faith in Climate Justice

Music by Nick Morrice

**Chris Newsam says:* I live in Malton with my wife Janice and elderly dog Sophie. I have been a Quaker for over 20 years with an increasing interest and leaning towards Unitarians. Over the last eighteen months I have been studying Interfaith Ministry with the OneSpirit Foundation and hope to be ordained next July.

I am a retired Charity Manager and professional fundraiser. I recently completed The Unitarian Worship Leaders Course (Foundation) with Unitarian College and looks forward to leading services when I am able to do so.

Expect a Miracle, really?

I hope to explore what miracles might be and how we respond to the word 'miracle'. Also what is a faith community in this 21st century in the midst of multiple crises and challenges. In an open and inclusive way leaving room for hope and trust within and beyond our Chapel community.

JANUARY EVENTS

Congregational Meditation

Thursdays at 11am

In the chapel, weather and regulations permitting, otherwise on Zoom.

Details from Dee Boyle.

Rice and Dahl Lunch

Sunday 16 January

This lunch will be served after the morning service. There will be only rice and dahl. This is not only to raise a significant amount of money - ideally each person contributing the cost of a lunch out in town - but for us to experience in ONE of our daily meals the only meal many families live on every day. Funds raised will go towards CHANCE, the children's charity in Nepal which is one of our current year's charities. All are welcome.

Details from Barbara Barnes and the Social Action Group.

Comfort Book Café

Tuesday 25 January at 6.30pm

An opportunity to get together on Zoom for a conversation inspired by Matt Haig's

The Comfort Book about the books, films, music and art that bring us comfort and joy.

Details from Stephanie Bisby.

Poetry Group

Wednesday 26 January at 7pm

On Zoom

Details from Dee Boyle.

Residents' Weekend Opening

(Regulations permitting)

Saturday 29 and Sunday 30 January

Sign-up sheet for helpers on the noticeboard in Chapel.



Chris Newsam

FEAR NOT

*The address by Revd Stephanie Bisby
on Sunday 19 December 2021*

Have you ever had a phone call which started like this? ‘Don’t worry.’ Or ‘don’t panic.’ Or ‘don’t be alarmed.’ And no matter the good intentions of the person on the other end of the line, what happens then? Yeah. Okay, now I’m worried. What just happened? Don’t worry, but there’s been... a fire, a flood, an accident, a burglary... because let’s face it, nobody ever rings you up to say, ‘don’t worry but I’ve just put a fiver in the post, buy yourself some chocolate.’ At least, I don’t think they do. Nobody ever has with me.

‘Fear not,’ the angels said. If the angels said, ‘fear not,’ it’s because they thought the shepherds had a reason to be afraid; that being afraid was a normal, rational response to whatever was going on.

For the longest time, I thought that simply had to do with the fact that the angels were there. And let’s face it, ‘fear not’ seems like something worth saying when you’re faced with an angelic messenger, whatever exactly one of those looks like – maybe a six or eight foot glowing humanoid form, with wings, hovering above the hillside, or maybe something else entirely – it’s not like Luke actually tells us what form the angel took. But anyway, it was clearly something out of the ordinary, something that was probably going to leave them a bit rattled.

Lately, though, I’ve started to wonder if there was more to the instruction ‘fear not’ than that. Maybe the shepherds weren’t just going to be scared by the angel. Maybe there was also something a little bit unsettling about the news the angel brought. ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.’ The angel is bringing news of a change, and we’re most of us a little bit unsettled by change. This may be ‘good news of great joy’ but even positive changes are still, well, changes. This baby lying in the manger is pretty much going to upend civilisation as we know it, and even if the shepherds don’t know that, presumably steaming off into the city to track down this baby wasn’t on the cards when they left home, and they haven’t packed for a

journey or told their families they’re going, and who’s going to look after the sheep while they’re gone...

I don’t know about you but I’ve always been rather fascinated with the minor characters in stories, the bit players we don’t know much about, and I love it when someone sits down to try to imagine what everything must have looked like from their point of view. Think Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* – the story of two minor courtiers in Hamlet – or Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* – the story of Charlotte Brontë’s mad woman in the attic. Or, of course, the medieval mystery plays, which bring to life the Bible’s minor players in some deliciously bonkers ways, as they chat amongst themselves in an idiom more suited to the Yorkshire dales than the hills of Bethlehem, and swear by saints who weren’t going to be born for another two centuries after the story’s supposed climax.

One modern translation of the Wakefield Second Shepherd’s play has the shepherd respond to the angels, ‘This was as sweet a sound as ever yet I heard. But a marvel like this is all new, and I’m scared.’ Yeah, that’s a fair response. But then the shepherds all obediently take off to find the baby. No argument. Personally, I’ve never quite believed that. Maybe it’s because I’ve always been a bit of a doubter, but it’s not as if there weren’t rationalists in the Bible, people who needed to see it to believe, and sometimes didn’t quite believe it even then. Just look at Thomas. So I’ve always thought that at least one of the shepherds probably carped a bit at the suggestion of taking off travelling. Disputed whether the angel was real, or a really vivid dream, the result of too much cheese, or whatever the ancients thought induced nighttime visions. Argued about who was going to care for the sheep. Because surely they weren’t just afraid of the angel, but of the strangeness of the night, and the possible consequences of departing from their normal routine. I’m pretty sure that just because the angel said ‘Fear not’ they didn’t all suddenly find themselves free of fear.

Conquering fear is hard, and normally it doesn’t just happen magically. It takes years of effort and training. If anyone has read Frank Herbert’s *Dune*, or seen the recent film, you may remember the Bene Gesserit litany against fear: the words recited by devotees of this mysterious religious order to steel themselves against pain and the risk of harm.

'I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain.'

It's not an accident that Frank Herbert's words echo religious teachings from a whole variety of traditions. Fear is an obstacle to enlightenment, it keeps us from our true selves. It cannot be fought directly, only allowed to pass, or replaced with an alternative emotion. In Buddhism, for example, loving-kindness or metta meditations are seen as an antidote to fear. Buddhist teacher Sylvia Boorstein explains 'Fearlessness comes from benevolence and goodwill in the face of whatever oppresses you. You are afraid, but instead of fighting what faces you, you embrace it and accept it—you develop loving-kindness as a direct antidote to fear.'

The Bible suggests that love drives out fear, and modern science backs that view.

New research from the University of Exeter has found that being shown pictures of others being loved and cared for reduces the brain's response to threat.

The study found that when people were presented pictures of others receiving emotional support and love, the amygdala, the brain's fear center, didn't respond to images showing threatening facial expressions or words.

The study, published in the journal *Social, Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, suggests that being reminded of being loved and cared for dampens the threat response and may allow more effective functioning during, and activation of soothing resources after, stressful situations. (*Anxietycentre.com*)

Marianne Williamson's well-known words from *A Return to Love* argue that love and fear cannot co-exist in the same space, and follow in the longstanding tradition of associating fear with darkness and love with light – a tradition which is problematic in some ways, yet enormously powerful.

'Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, "Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?" Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.'

She also writes:

'Love is what we are born with. Fear is what we learn. The spiritual journey is the unlearning of fear and prejudices and the acceptance of love back in our hearts. Love is the essential reality and our purpose on earth.'

Marianne Williamson reminds us, as the angels reminded the shepherds, and their story reminds us, that we always have a choice between fear and love. At the centre of the story is a child who hasn't learned to fear, who is surrounded by the purest of love. And if ever it feels as if we've lost that light, as if darkness is winning out, we only have to look at the cycle of the seasons to remind ourselves that, solstice to solstice, the world turns, and even the longest, darkest night comes to an end with the glow of sunrise.

*Fear not, said he for mighty dread
had seized their troubled minds,
glad tidings of great joy I bring,
to you and all mankind.*

Fear not, there is good news.
Fear not,
love conquers fear,
light drives out darkness,
winter gives way to spring,
and new life is always a reason for hope.
Fear not.

Thin Places

by Brinley Price

I think
of thin places:
Ones that wake in me awe,
Others that make me soar with joy,
Though brief.

Edens,
Gates of heaven:
The beauty of spring song,
The breathtaking view from a peak,
Blue deeps;

But now
In this lock-down
Only seen on a screen,
Heard from speakers or reached through prints
On walls.

So sad
I once rarely
Sought their sanctuaries,
Journeyed from this city's grey wastes,
To drink,

To stir
From soul's torpor,
From its suffocation,
And, finding skies vaster than self,
Dissolve.

This poem was inspired by Claire Wilton's service on the theme of thin places in 2021.

'Winter Solstice – dark night ensouled'

by Chris Newsam

On this night-day
crisp-sharp-darkness secrets dreaming

Earth still, wind gasping for breath
Fire, withholding its very light-being
Flickering embers - don't warm cold dry bones

This deep deep black satin
Itself only transient - mortal

We turn once more
Pathway our pilgrimage
Encircling the glowing ember
Solstice to solstice

What dream awakens?
Here - now?
Out with the old - borne with the new?
Yule and Christ-Mass entwined

MEMBERS' NEWS

Our condolences to Myrna Michell
on her recent loss of a close family member.

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York Interfaith Meeting (on Zoom)
Tuesday 11 January at 7.30pm
(You will be able to join from 7.20pm onwards.)
Dee Boyle and others will talk about how their
personal faith has developed or changed over the
course of their lives so far.
The meeting will be chaired by Daryoush Mazloum.
Contact Dee for details of how to attend.

Tom Hughes' birthday celebrations in Chapel.
(Photos by Barbara Barnes)



'POETRY IN A PANDEMIC'

Copies of the book *Poetry in a Pandemic* by Dee Boyle are available to buy in chapel to help raise funds for one of our current chapel charities, which is a project in Nepal.

The books are £5 if bought in chapel and £6.50 if you need them to be posted out to you. Please contact Dee if you would like a copy by post.

USEFUL CONTACT DETAILS

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