



RISE UP, NEW FLAME

SUNDAY, APRIL 27, 2025
REV. T. J. FITZGERALD

Reverend T. J.:

I don't know how many of you were down with Hildegard von Bingen.

Congregation:

Woo hoo!

Reverend T. J.:

Yeah? All right, good. But anyone who can work glitter and verdant into the same verse of a hymn is all right by me. That has nothing to do with the sermon, I just am struck by the glitter. Always. So, for those of you who have been following along this year, today is the day that we close out our program year. Some people are like, "What's a program year?"

Well, I'll tell you. We spend hours and hours crafting an arc of this beautiful year with sermon series. And for those of you who didn't know, you're going to hear all about it today. But it's in this book, that talks about our theme year, Keeping The Flame: Then, Now, and Always.

We started with our Luminaries of Truth and Justice. We explored and we learned how Unitarian Universalist ideas were born and then grew in the world. In Chart and Compass, we retold and relived the history of the founding of this church, with parts of its inaugural sermon that we sort of wrestled with. We also celebrated our 125th anniversary of the church during that series, complete with 80 angry protesters in the streets. Yeah.

They say if you're protesting something, you might just be on the right side of history. But I say when people are protesting you, you might be making history, which is good. And by they, of course, I mean me. I made that up. Protesting the celebration of history does take a certain kind of person on these important anniversaries. It's part of the attack though, that we are seeing this un-remembering that people want, the erasure that is willful and weaponized ignorance. Many people in power want this for all of us, not just then, not just now, but also in the future and always.

Then in our series, *Kindle the Spirit*, we celebrated the people and the ideas that sparked our way forward and lit the pathways for us to follow. Yes, as people of faith, yes, but also, as just people of good conscience and lovers of freedom.

And in the last few months, with Lent, and with Easter, we looked inward with *Spiritual Practices That Light the Way*. And we sensed in ourselves, we tried to find ways to sustain ourselves, and we kept our energy and our focus on these times, and access the power that we need, and also, to persevere, respond rightfully, and justly, and to just sometimes keep going, or in some cases just to get out of bed in the morning, whatever it takes.

So we hope these movements, and ideas, and passions that we talked about through these past few months have given you some tools. Or if you're just hearing about them for the first time, great. We hope you take something with that too, some inspiration to do the work you've got to do to put down the work that is not yours to do, also important, and to draw closer in to this faith, to your faith, in a deeper and personal way.

And so, this Sunday, what we're doing, we call is a Theme Year Wrap-up. We're going to wrap this up. And I was joking with the other ministers about how inappropriate it would be for me to actually rap in the service.

No. I even had an offer from a well-known percussionist to lay down a beat for me. But I digress. You'll have to be satisfied, instead, with the rhyme and meter of Maya Angelou's iconic poem. I don't think we should ever get tired, I don't think we should ever get used to hearing more and more inside this poem, inside this text. In the season when breaking forth from the earth are still blossoms, and the patient force of life renewing itself in spite of itself, when so many in churches throughout the world right now are asking how, asking when, witnessing a resurrection of sorts and this new life, this poem tugs at something deep, at a root that is deep and true in us as humans.

"Up from the past that's rooted in pain, I rise. I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide, welling and swelling, I bear in the tide. Leaving behind nights of terror and fear, I rise. Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear, I rise, bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave, I am the dream and the hope of the slave. I rise, I rise, I rise."

I'm sure some of you are wondering what a white kid from Connecticut raised in Texas has to tell you all about Maya Angelou, but I'm going to do it anyway. Did you know that she was in one of the original casts of *Porgy and Bess* in New York? Yeah. Did you know that she directed an actual

feature film starring Alfre Woodard, the acclaimed actress? Okay, some of you know a lot of this stuff, some of you know the other things.

Did you know she worked with Ashford and Simpson, one of the most influential Motown groups, to set some of her words to music? All right, good. Got some good folks. Now, did you know that she was one of the first tenured faculty members at a US institution of learning that did not have a bachelor's degree?

Congregation:

All right.

Reverend T. J.:

Yeah. I could go on with the achievements in the accolades. I'd really like to, but let's just agree that Angelou was a great and fiery force unto herself, who transcended norms, expectations, and societal strictures to create a legacy like few others in the world. We can agree, right?

Congregation:

Yes.

Reverend T. J.:

All right. She was born on April 4th, 1928. And I'm sure, three years from now there will be a lot of celebration. I know I will be celebrating the centenary of her birth. But this year, this year on April 4th, 2025, a few weeks ago, the Defense Secretary of the United States gleefully announced that he pulled, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, one of her iconic books, from military academy shelves in libraries in the United States.

Congregation:

Boo.

Reverend T. J.:

Yeah, let it out. Let it out. It's the pettiness that gets me sometimes. It kind of feels like punching down to ridicule that level of ignorance that is parading somehow as action. But I'm going to do it anyway. I'm angry. Who's angry?

Congregation:

Yeah!

Reverend T. J.:

Yeah. I'm angry about the constant stories, these little-minded stories like this. And I worry for me about that. I worry for you. I worry about all who are with us around the world, hearing these things that are anger, that our rage might keep up rising in all of us, and down, and up, and down like a flame that's being ignited and extinguished, until I am worried that it will be dull, and that it will become bitter and molded, or be contained inward like some kind of sickness in this world. That is more what I'm afraid of.

I ain't afraid of anger, I'm afraid of bitterness. And when I have this worry, I find the wisdom in the words that Maya Angelou shared in television interview in the '70s. She said, "It is obvious that bitterness is like a cancer. It eats upon the host." Anger is healthy, I think. I think anger is like fire, it burns out all the dross and all the stuff. I think it's wise show it, to be opposed to injustice at all times for anybody. I think that's wise. And know that as soon as I feel myself insulted, the person who has insulted me is the second to know. As soon as I know, I say, "Stop, just a minute. Come here. I beg your pardon. You won't do that to me. That's your affair. Don't put that poison on me. I will not have it."

Could you imagine Maya Angelou telling you that? She went on. I digress. "That's much healthier. And fortunately, it is creative. Anything which is creative has a productive result." Yeah, if it's not practical, it's not spiritual. I say that all the time. And she says, "Anger is like fire, it is creative. And anything creative has a productive result."

There are a few in all of our lifetimes with as much creative force as she had. I am not holding us all to that standard. Don't worry, you don't have to do all the things she did. The way her life speaks to me, more sometimes than just in her poetry and in her art, isn't just the plaudits and the achievements that she made one by one, but the way she shaped a narrative of her life, the story of her life, into one that no one could see coming except for her.

That is authorship. That's true authorship, realizing a dream in oneself, in one's own life. The gentleness and the work she exercised over the years, to move from prize-winning literature, to stage plays, and writing movies, directing movies, starring even in television shows, and on and on, to composing poems for Presidents, to lectures around the world. The greatest work she created was all that she made of her life. And this we should always keep alive, not just for her, but for ourselves.

Now many are hurting this week, many are wondering this week, turning much thought and prayer to the death of Pope Francis, I know, this past Easter Sunday. The order of priests and religious professionals he served for most of his life, the Jesuits, was founded in the name of Jesus, and for centuries has countered the sick systems of misery-making that mean death and suffering for billions around the world. Some of the loudest messages he ever shared in his life, after taking the papacy, were shouted with action, also, with his life, rather than with words.

Living in simple quarters with his siblings, rather than in a palace. Declining a salary, and dying with a hundred dollars to his name. He recognized that all his needs were met by the church that he loved, by the church that fed him, by those who he loved with all his heart. So he had no money, but he was not poor by any means.

Now, many in my profession, I hope, have been reflecting on his ministry this week, in a lot of his writing, where I do detect a fair amount of what sounds like classical Unitarianism to me. But I digress. Very clear about the differentiation between Jesus, and God, and the Spirit. Again, I digress.

More than that, more than his writing, are his labors constantly on behalf of the poor of the world. I'm not talking about the poor of economic poverty only, those who are experiencing houselessness, or the ill, and the infirm in need of care. Of those, he did say this, "The poor are not a problem. They are a resource from which to draw as we strive to accept and practice in our lives the essence of the gospel."

Congregation:

Amen.

Reverend T. J.:

Amen. And to loosely quote his namesake, Francis of Assisi, "Preach the gospel with all your heart. When necessary, use words." Yeah, Beth knows it.

He converted papal residences into places of care, and housing, and of feeding for the economically poor. He made it clear what he felt his church should be doing by his actions. He named the poor as a resource, but he wasn't only talking about the economically poor. He was also talking about the poor in spirit among us. Those who torture their own logic to amass incalculable wealth solely to serve their own ends and means, to crowd out fields of innovation with monopolization, to stay in power, to stay in control through political and economic pressures. This short-sighted, self-centered way of thinking is one of the most dangerous postures for a soul on this planet.

Francis railed against a monoculture like this, of an economic system founded only on self-interest that results in economic inequity. In case the world wasn't paying enough attention, The Nation, the Jesuit magazine, which has titled Francis' obituary like this, this is the title of an actual obituary, "The Pope Who Decried the Savage Inequalities of Billionaire Class Capitalism." Full stop. That was the title.

Yeah. Okay, that's fine. We're clapping for the Jesuits, that's fine. Yeah. It went on to say this, "As long as the problems of the poor are not radically resolved by rejecting the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation, and by attacking the structural causes of inequality, no solution will be found for the world's problems, or for that matter, for any problems."

Congregation:

Yes.

Reverend T. J.:

Right. That's just the Pope talking, I don't know. I want to be clear, I'm not anti-capitalism as a philosophy or something to practice. What he is talking about is unchecked, unbalanced accumulation of power and wealth in a few dozen people that outstrips the wealth of the entire rest of the world. Just want to be clear what we're talking about here.

Congregation:

Teach it, preacher.

Reverend T. J.:

That's right. I didn't even write that part down. I just felt like I had to say it. When the Pope said the poor are not a problem, they are a resource, I think he did not mean those impoverished poor. I think he's talking about these suffering people too. I think he meant the poor in spirit, who are very rich in money and capital, who are part of making inequality work in the favor of the markets through fear and intimidation. Poverty is a boot on the neck of the people in it, yes, but also on the neck of every person who fears it, who fears falling into it themselves. And I know some of us are here now. That feeling, that boot on the neck, has a purpose. It is structural and it is effective. The exploitation of that fear is a moral wrong and it's a societal sin. Just going to say it.

The threat of poverty is a tool of an economy that runs on extracting maximum profit from minimal investment, and on the appreciation of that investment over time through interest. We all get this, right? Appreciation by interest.

See, one of the hallmarks, one of the hallmarks of our faith that draws out our wisdom through the ages, and cultures, and perspectives is that we try to appreciate without appropriating. Appropriation is an extractive act. It takes something by somebody else that is theirs, and tries to make it your own, to possess it. Appreciation is what leads us to love. Of one of the most influential poems by one of the most influential spirits in the whole human race, the poem even names it the incredible wealth that is right here before us in the lives of those we love who are nearest to us.

Oil wells, gold mines, diamonds are in the priceless experience of our siblings, of our fellows. It is in the interest in those that compounds our love. It is the appreciation of those gifts that truly gives us life, interest, appreciation, that rises like the flame of old but new in this life of our faith. Interest in the poor, not only in compounding wealth. Appreciation of the fullness of all people, not only the appreciation of funds. Relationship building is wealth building.

You hear me? And Angelou tells us it is a resource, right in our own backyard, right in our living room, right in the sanctuary, and right online, stretching out across the globe as we sit here. That is the primary building we do. These are how we tend the flame and honor the spirits of this faith that have brought us here to this moment. And it is a perilous moment. I know that for many, to be sure.

The arrest this week of a sitting state judge, shocking. The numerous deportations of citizens of all kinds, or just people who have every right to be here, without any due process, families included, leaving for foreign soil, taken. I wonder myself if our ancestors really had enough to prepare us for this, for this times? Maybe they didn't fully. Maybe not. But that's okay, because we are here now.

We are witnesses to these abuses of power, the boots on the necks of our beloveds. And we are not going anywhere. Yesterday was the one-year anniversary of the opening of the Truth Pregnancy Resource Center. It's a ministry of this church that did not flinch in the face of a state's mechanized hatred against women, that provides the truth and the accurate information to all who pass through their doors. It is here a year later and going strong.

We made 120 gift bags for the people who they are serving just this week. And in the last year, 250 people have joined this church. People, what are you doing? Welcome. While churches around the world are dwindling, offering more and more of what less and less people want. And this week, as hate-filled bills proceed to amendments and votes in the legislature that stigmatize so many of our members, and their families, and our beloved beautiful siblings, members of this faith are working, not in Channing, but tirelessly down at the capitol, to counter this hate with reason, with understanding, always, and always, and always with love.

Even with all this, there is much in the world, I know, that makes us angry. I know, but remember, anger is like fire. It is creative, and anything creative has a productive result. We draw from the depth of creative persons, yes, in our midst, and make our own, trust our own creative impulses to make meaning from the story of the lives we are each writing every day together.

Whether that is an iconic artist, like Maya Angelou, whose brilliance shines, whose brilliance challenges, whose mastery delights in so many ways, in so many places, that even a banning of her books will not overcome it. Or maybe it's the creativity of a saint who lived in our midst among us, who put his principles into his religion, ahead of worldly powers and prestige, and recognized the poor with the sacred interest of a parent and the blessed appreciation of a friend.

Popes and poets, we may not be. But creative ways to fight against the onslaught, against decency, against the campaign, against humanity, are what we have used to guide this faith for centuries. And this church brings those who venture here. For all that is our life, we will keep fighting. For all that is our life, we will keep creating. For all that is our life, and in every way we can, we will love and keep loving, as long as the flame of our faith rises again anew. We rise. We rise. We rise.

Congregation:

Amen.