

## BEING A BEACON, NOT A BUNKER

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### READINGS

Believing – by Rev. David Rankin

I believe in the Holy,  
lifting, sustaining,  
among us, within us,  
around us.

I believe in Living,  
with a song to sing,  
in awe, in adoration,  
out of joy, out of praise.

I believe in Loving,  
in intimate communion,  
of gentle compassion,  
and the giving of roses.

I believe in Seeking,  
daring to explore,  
doubting without fear,  
cautious in certainties.

I believe in Prophecy,  
the spirit of outrage,  
clapping like thunder,  
healing the world.

From the Koran

God is the Light of the heavens and the earth.  
The parable of His light is, as it were, that of a niche containing a lamp;  
The lamp is enclosed in glass, the glass shining like a radiant star;  
a lamp lit from a blessed tree--an olive tree that is neither of the east nor of the west—  
the oil thereof is so bright that it would nigh give light of itself even though the fire had not touched it:  
light upon light!

God guides unto His light him that wills to be guided.

Matthew 5:15-16

No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

## SERMON

One of the great gifts of living on the West Coast of North America is that we can actually answer the question are you a mountain person or an ocean person from direct experience. Having such easy access to both mountain range and seaside, we know which place speaks to us, which makes us feel more connected to our lives and to the mystery of creation we sometimes sense about us.

I am decidedly an ocean person. Don't get me wrong, mountains are great, but it is by the sea that I can feel small, powerless and humble, and still a part, even if only a tiny part, of the grandness of all creation. I feel connected and grounded by the sea. I feel lifted up and enlarged.

I love the bright windy days and waves crashing on craggy shore. I love the fog that hugs the coast, muting color and sound. I love tides pools at low tide, greeting anemones and starfish. And I love old lighthouses. .

They speak of both danger and safety, of beauty and isolation. The many-prismed glass that magnifies and intensifies the light sending forth a beacon through the storm, through the fog, through the night, are both great feats of engineering and works of art. I love the long spiral climb to the top to view the expanse of ocean. I love the romance and risk, the loneliness and unceasing work of the lighthouse keepers in days long past. The fire needed to be tended. Wicks trimmed. Prism cleaned of the smoke that might obscure the saving light.

The light holds out hope of deliverance from the storm, a redirection around the rocky shoals. It is a beacon that helps guide a wayfarer to a safe harbor.

Even as lighthouses are all but obsolete with today's navigational technologies, we work to save abandoned lighthouses. Why do these relics tug at us still?

Because we know that lives were saved by the shining of their lights.

Because they represent a communal effort, the community built these towers to direct their loved ones and complete strangers safely home.

Because our hearts are moved in knowing that we do care for one another. Just as I might shine a light to guide someone home, someone else will be there for me.

Can you remember a time you felt isolated, tossed about on a dark and seemingly endless sea? What beacon saved you?

The Lighthouse is an apt metaphor for our faith, for we are both beacon and safe harbor. And we must be both.

I've heard so many stories from people who say, I didn't know church could be like this. Sometimes your stories are about dramatic, even tearful, homecomings. Other stories are more gentle and slow to develop. I was just looking for a place for my children and the service didn't drive me screaming from the room. In fact, I found I wanted to stay.

Some feel right at home. Some need to test the waters. Learn to trust again. After abusive experiences in other churches. After times of betrayal.

For many, this church, this liberal religious movement is like a safe harbor in a storm. And there is a great human tendency to sail into the harbor and stay there, safe and warm. Or like Gerry, sitting drinking cocoa by the fire with doors shut tight against the storming world. In times like these, the temptation is so great.

But if all we are is a safe haven for religious liberals then the vision is too small. We would turn our beacon into a bunker and remain safe and warm there. Yet part of adopting a beacon mentality rather than a bunker mentality is remembering that this church and what we stand for is not about you. It's about something larger.

We are meaning making, purpose seeking people. Ultimately, we want to be a part of something that helps us rise above the daily-ness of life, above our immediate concerns. We know that if we all, together, have our minds set on freedom, we can move the world, we can heal the world. We are warmed by the fire as we tend the light, yet we must always remain conscious that our light shines for others.

And that means we must keep our light shining so others may find their way. We keep our light, not under a bushel but we shine it out. We continue the work of trimming the wicks and keeping the prism clear of smoke. We keep the fires burning. I love the image from the old hymn that Gerry brought to us.

Trim your feeble lamp, my brother: Some poor sailor tempest tossed,  
Trying now to reach the harbor, In the darkness may be lost.

Let the lower lights be burning! Send a gleam across the wave!  
Some poor fainting struggling seaman You may rescue, you may save.

Light is a metaphor in many religions. In our reading from the Koran, the light of God is so bright that the oil could illumine even without the spark of fire to set it ablaze. Yet your light may not feel so bright, it may indeed feel rather feeble, but it is still so very necessary. Your "lower light" burning may yet rescue someone trying to make harbor in the darkness.

And truly engaging this faith also means that we must sometimes head back into the storm itself. Unitarian Universalist theologian Paul Rasor speaks of the power and depth and challenge of liberal theology – what he calls a *Faith Without Certainty*. To engage this faith with any depth means we always consider and reconsider our theology. And it needs to show up not just in how we think, but in how our hearts are touched, how we live our lives.

"Theology is not something we do just with our heads," Rasor writes. "We must also use our hearts and guts, as well as our hands and feet. A more formal way of saying this is that theology involves the interplay of three dimensions: the rational/intellectual dimension, the emotional/spiritual dimension and the practical/lived dimension.... (FWC, p.xx)

Rasor continues, "Another question is: how convinced are you? How deeply do you identify with the label you use? Doubt is always an inherent part of faith and theology should never be free from doubt. Religious liberalism has always to some extent involved faith without certainty. German theologian Dorothy Solle has pointed out that faith without doubt is not stronger, it is simply more ideological. The more important question is, How does your theology matter in your life?... (FWC, p.xxi)

"How we live our lives may be the most telling form of naming our theologies, but stopping there leaves them incomplete as well. To say, 'I live a good life, therefore I don't have to think about theology' leaves the process unfinished. It easily becomes an excuse to avoid articulating the basis for one's actions. Part of the task of theology is to articulate the religious underpinnings and moral principles that support our actions. It may be as simple as the biblical commandment to love God by loving our neighbors, or as complex as seeking to align ourselves with the creative force that draws the evolving universe toward greater interdependence, or as straightforward as trying to live out a particular vision of a just community or human fulfillment. Whatever it is, the task of theology is to help us name these principles and to say how our actions relate to them." (FWC, p.xxii)

We must practice theology, embody theology. It is what our liberal faith asks of us. Knowing this is part of why we are here. We need a faith that allows us the freedom to think, to feel and to act. If we don't engage in these theological tasks our light may go out.

Rev. Robert Latham told us last Sunday that if we continue to think small, if we avoid the demands of our faith to define and live a clear mission, we will remain small and become superfluous. Robert has been a minister in our movement for some 50 years and he doesn't want to see his life's work become a footnote in history.

We can only shine our light – be both beacon and safe harbor – by being clear about our mission.

So what do we believe that is a light for a weary world?

Rev. David Rankin summed up his faith this way:

I believe in the Holy,  
among us, within us,  
around us.

I believe in Living,  
with a song to sing,  
in awe, in adoration,  
out of joy, out of praise.

I believe in Loving,  
in intimate communion,  
of gentle compassion,  
and the giving of roses.

I believe in Seeking,  
daring to explore,  
doubting without fear,  
cautious in certainties.

I believe in Prophecy,  
the spirit of outrage,  
clapping like thunder,  
healing the world.

Because we believe in the Holy, that mysterious something that arises in human community, that brightens the light that shines within and among and beyond us....

Because we believe in Living fully, engaging in life, singing, dancing, in joy, adoration and praise....

Because we believe in Loving tenderly, allowing a vulnerability that becomes a strength, that encourages intimacy and emotional generosity....

Because we have created such a safe haven of Holiness, Living and Loving....

Then we can continue to seek, to explore the waters, troubled and calm, to move through the world with healthy doubt, confidently but without arrogance.

And because we can venture out while still tethered to such a community....

Then we can also engage our prophetic voice, clapping like thunder, and healing the world.

Finding the safe harbor can transform us, not so that we can stay safe, but so that we may in turn shine the light, a light that can heal the world.

Our world-healing message is about faith hope and freedom manifested in community. We are not a sacramental church, although we have sacraments – like Water Communion and Flower Communion – that add a richness and depth. We are a covenantal community. We are the gathering of all souls, all saints. We do not worship community; we worship that which is larger than ourselves which we find manifested in community.

In that spirit, we become a community of faith. We have faith in ourselves and so we can leave behind old notions that humans are bad, sinful, ultimately flawed and in need of saving by an outside force.

We have faith, too, in the goodness that lies at the heart of the universe, although that can seem hard to hold onto at times

We are a free faith and so we enter freely into covenant with one another.

We promise to ourselves and to each other:

To live our faith together.

To live lives of integrity, of joy and of service.

Together, in this free covenantal community, we shine a brighter light.

In these troubled days, we need the lighthouse in the storm more than ever. The very time that we might want to close down, sit by the fire, find our own comfort, we need to shine the light determinedly. Even when our lights feel feeble, community becomes the multi-faceted prism that magnifies and intensifies.

We need to keep the fires burning. We may well be warmed by the fires ourselves. But we must keep them burning. If ever there was a community that might want to become a bunker, it is the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist church in Knoxville where a tragic shooting occurred this summer. Yet even while they gathered to re-sanctify their church, to make it safe again, they were shining their light of a free faith, of their belief in the inherent goodness of us all, of their prophetic voice.

I wonder how many people saw the news coverage and thought, "I didn't know a church could be like this."

We shine our light, not just to warn people away from meaningless lives of shame and guilt, selfishness and materialism. We exist to welcome people lost in the storm to a safe harbor.

In truth we can't be a beacon unless we also operate a safe haven. And without the safe haven, there is no light strong enough to shine.

You are loved.

You are safe here.

May you, may we all keep the fires burning.

May our light ever shine.

Amen.

Blessed Be.