

“A Familiar Hope”
A Sermon by Alex Jensen
First Parish in Wayland
May 24, 2020

“And I’ll bring you hope when hope is hard to find. And I’ll bring a song of love, and a rose in the wintertime¹.”

On September 25th in 1918, the world looked eerily similar to how things are today. As our reading this morning² tells us, schools were closed. Public gatherings were banned until further notice. Churches and communities of worship shuttered their windows, as governors made calls for health care workers to report to over-taxed hospitals. It would be four weeks of this historic social distancing before bars, theaters, and other places were allowed to reopen. People were frightened and scared. Some knew dear friends and neighbors who had come down with the flu overnight and died the very next day. The pandemic seemed to strike without mercy, causing so many to wonder if life would or could ever be the same after so much pain, loss, and devastation.

In the wake of Memorial Day, it seems fitting that we might also remember the lives of those who died from the 1918 influenza outbreak toward the end of World War I. With the *New York Times* front page this morning filled with the nearly 100,000 names of those who have died from COVID-19 in the US³, our minds are already turned toward remembrance for those we have lost. While already one of the deadliest wars in history, the 1918 influenza outbreak would claim up to 50 million lives worldwide⁴, larger than the civilian and combatant casualties of the entire war.

It’s interesting that our memory of this earlier pandemic seems sparse. Nowadays, it’s hardly a cultural reference point for students in classrooms. Those who lived through this experience dwindle in number each year, as more and more this memory becomes left to the pages of history.

John Barry, a professor and eminent historian of the 1918 Flu, recalls stories from his aunt about what it was like to be a child during the pandemic⁵. In her words, a ten-year-old at the time, it was the only time she ever saw her father cry. Just across the street, a family had lost both breadwinners to the flu, leaving behind several children without their parents.

Now in 2020, over a hundred years later, we find ourselves facing a different pandemic. For starters, the viruses themselves are different. While both are respiratory illnesses, today we face a novel coronavirus instead of a flu strain. Unlike the 1918 Flu, the

¹ *Singing the Living Tradition, Hymn #346 “Come Sing A Song With Me,” by Carolyn McDade.*

² “How Boston Reacted to the 1918 Flu Pandemic” by Jack Lepiarz, *WBUR*, <https://www.wbur.org/commonhealth/2020/03/11/boston-1918-flu-pandemic-coronavirus>.

³ “Remembering the Nearly 100,000 Lives Lost to Coronavirus in America,” <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/05/24/us/us-coronavirus-deaths-100000.html>.

⁴ *Britannica Academic*, s.v. “Influenza pandemic of 1918–19,” accessed May 22, 2020, <https://academic-eb-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/levels/collegiate/article/influenza-pandemic-of-191819/2537>.

⁵ “John Barry, Eminent Pandemic Historian – ‘Tell the Truth,’” Center for Strategic and International Studies, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200519_John_Barry.pdf.

coronavirus of 2019 and 2020 has a higher rate of transmission and spread⁶. And although we have faced pandemics in the past, this outbreak today is unprecedented. If the coronavirus outbreak were a liturgical season like Easter, we would be on the eleventh Sunday of Pandemic; eleven Sundays since we moved to hosting services virtually. This is much longer than the four weeks of shutdowns in 1918.

Being in this eleventh week of shutdowns, it might seem hard to find hope. For some of us, this prolonged time of social distancing and isolation might really be getting to us. We might be sitting in a deeper sense of loss and lack in motivation. At times, we might even be feeling like our own soul is dying; that what makes us love and appreciate life seems hard to find amidst the distance. Many of us miss gathering with our family and friends. And some of us have also lost loved ones in this time, meaning we must navigate this grief and sorrow without being able to celebrate their lives in physical community together. Additionally, we have also witnessed the impacts the coronavirus has had on the most vulnerable amongst us. In communities of color, like Chelsea—a city with predominantly immigrant and Latinx populations—we see how race continues to impact who from amongst ourselves are hit the hardest in times of crisis⁷.

Even with the recent discussions of Massachusetts reopening, we know that social distancing will likely be a reality for many of us for months to come. We might be afraid that things are opening up too early. We might be someone who can't risk getting sick because we, or someone we love, are immunocompromised, meaning life as usual must wait until a vaccine is available. The UUA has asked us and other member congregations to plan for virtual services through the next summers⁸. Today, we find ourselves holding familiar questions to those who lived through the 1918 Flu: *What might these uncertain times mean for our future? How will this change things for years to come? How can we hold hope and continue to keep hope alive in times like these?*

In this time of such unanswerable questions, we might turn to history as a source of hope. Our Unitarian and Universalist predecessors also faced such questions in 1918 as they navigated the impacts of the Flu. Just like First Parish today, religious communities in 1918 had to reckon with an uncertain future. *There aren't guidebooks out there for how to do ministry in a pandemic.* We, as well as other communities of faith, are finding ways to best help, respond, and show-up for one another and our world as we make meaning of these strange times. You might even be surprised with the beautiful ways Unitarian and Universalist communities in the past responded to the hurting and aching world of 1918.

⁶ “How Does the New Coronavirus Compare with the Flu?” *LiveScience*, <https://www.livescience.com/new-coronavirus-compare-with-flu.html>.

⁷ “Chelsea, City of the Working Latino Immigrant, Emerges as a COVID-19 Hotspot,” by Marcela García, *The Boston Globe*, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/04/07/opinion/chelsea-city-working-latino-immigrant-emerges-covid-19-hotspot/>.

⁸ “Message from the UUA President: Updated Guidance for Gathering,” by Susan Frederick-Gray, *The Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations*, May 14, 2020, <https://www.uua.org/pressroom/press-releases/message-uua-president-updated-guidance-gathering>.

In Provincetown, the city saw a huge outbreak of influenza. Just ten days after the flu had been spotted at Boston's Commonwealth Pier, Provincetown was up to 415 cases⁹. Nobody knew how to respond to the increasing numbers of illnesses and deaths. The city was strapped for resources, with many physicians and nurses gone in responding to the First World War. Places across the city had to shutter their windows and close their doors. Yet, one place—the Unitarian meetinghouse—kept their doors open. They lined their sanctuary and pews with makeshift beds and screens to serve as a hospital when other medical resources were taxed. Suspending worship services, they felt their values were best expressed through meeting the needs of those who were sick in their community. In other words, the Unitarians in Provincetown stepped up in a time of great risk. They were brave in how they kept hope alive in a time when hope seemed hard to hold.

We have a rich legacy in what it means to live our values and put faith into action in times like today. At our congregation and across the country, I've seen the beautiful ways communities are responding to the needs of others. *We, too might realize that, while our physical building is closed, what makes us a community hasn't.* I've been touched by the generosity you've shown one another and our wider community through grocery runs and mask-sewing teams; through sharing toilet paper supplies and providing much needed financial support for organizations on the front lines of this pandemic. We, too, are showing up in beautiful ways that are helping to keep this familiar hope alive under these difficult circumstances.

When I think about what is hopeful today, it's how we are responding to the call to care for one another. Unlike in 1918, our community is able to gather virtually and cultivate hope together. *This is the only time in history when you can attend virtual services from just about any Unitarian Universalist congregation across the nation! You can really rack-up those extra Sunday service attendance points!* The world, itself, is more connected now than ever; internationally, scientists are openly collaborating and sharing information toward developing a vaccine¹⁰. We're seeing how communities are helping each other in ways they haven't in the past. We're understanding just how interconnected we are to one another, and to this wider web of life and existence.

Personally, I'm also finding hope in the small acts of kindness I witness day-to-day. Just last week, my housemate, Steven, and I were on our way back from the store when a car pulled up next to us. As the window lowered, the woman in the passenger's seat explained through muffled tones that Steven had dropped his credit card while leaving the store. They had driven for blocks searching for us, determined to return it. In a time of so much fear, these total strangers went out of their way to ensure that he got his card back. It was a sign to me that even in these moments, people are still doing what they can to help; and we so desperately need one another to make it.

Our Time for All Ages this morning, "When You Are Brave" by Pat Zietlow Miller, speaks about cultivating hope in dire times: "At times like these, the world can seem too big,

⁹ "The Spanish Flu and Provincetown," *ptownie*, March 27, 2020, <https://ptownie.com/spanish-flu-provincetown-history/>.

¹⁰ "John Barry, Eminent Pandemic Historian – 'Tell the Truth'," Center for Strategic and International Studies, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200519_John_Barry.pdf.

too loud, too hard, too much...¹¹” Sometimes our inner lights might feel small. We might even be feeling like our flame is going out. The good news is that our inner sparks turn into bright flames when we keep hope alive. We must be bold, like the Unitarians and Universalists before us, to carry this flame.

So what is our theology that's holding us in this time? It's doing what each one of us can to help one another and create a world in which each one of us lives our fullest life, free from illness, poverty, injustice, and hardship. As UUs, it's our theology to steward this flame and keep the faith alive for the world we seek to create. When we light our flames in unison, just as we do each Sunday in our chalice lighting, we become a part of something larger than ourselves. We become whole in putting our values into action in pursuit of this world we yearn for. We align ourselves in the tradition and the familiar hope of UUs in our past that we still carry today. We must bring this hope for one another, especially now, when hope is hardest to find.

May we be brave to live into this rich charge and tradition. May it be so. Amen.

¹¹ “When You Are Brave,” by Pat Zietlow Miller, *Little, Brown Books for Young Readers* (2015).