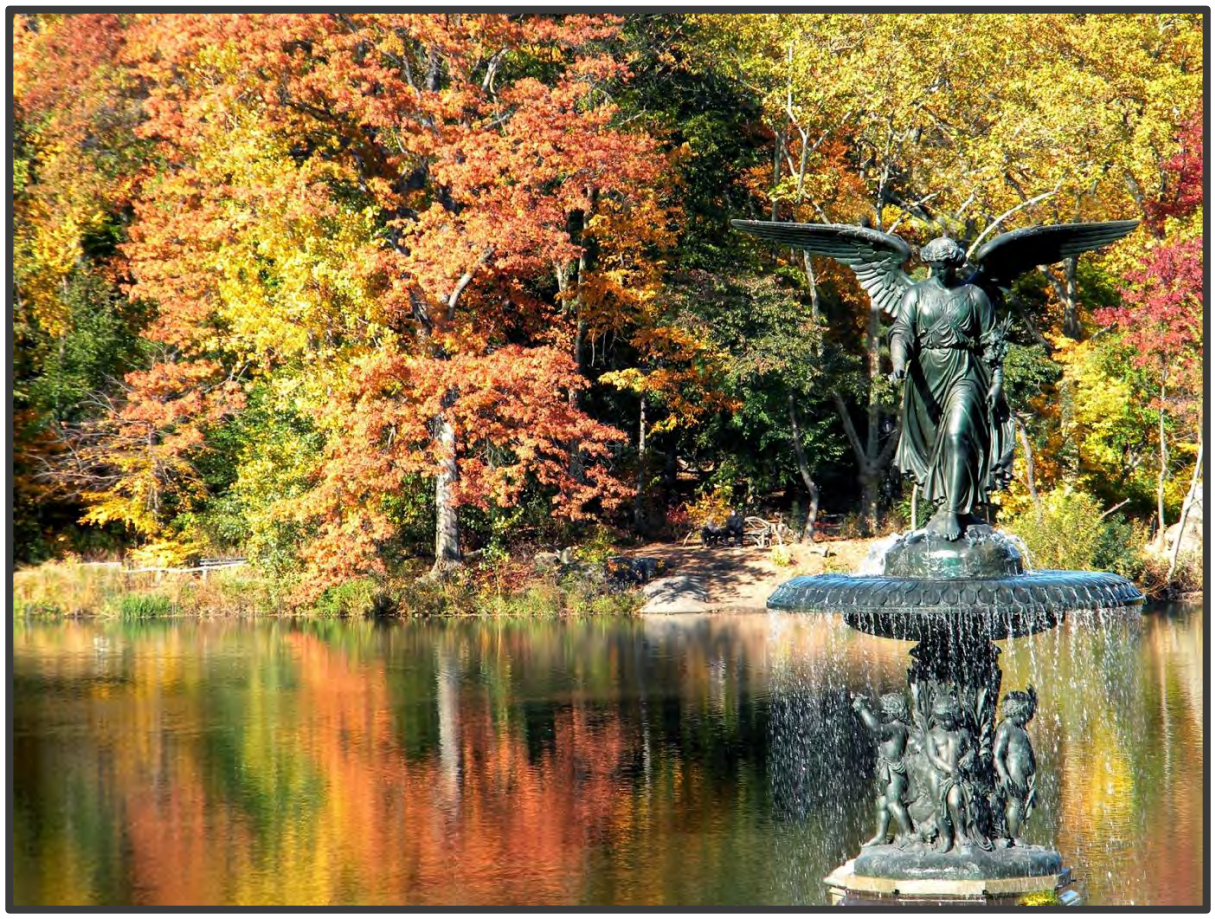

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“This House of Mercy”

First Parish in Wayland
September 13, 2026

Rev. Lauren Smith

Homily: "This House of Mercy"
Given at the First Parish in Wayland
On September 13, 2026
Rev. Lauren Smith

Don't say, don't say there is no water
to solace the dryness at our hearts
I have seen

the fountain springing out of the rock wall
and you, drinking there.[1]

We are called here to heal, to connect, and to serve, to be a source of living water at the heart of the community.

What need for solace brings you here?
What solace can you offer? What can we offer together?

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There's a fountain in New York City's Central Park that embodies the good news at the heart of religious community—the assurance that there is healing to be found here, and comfort. There are teachings and practices and inspiration to stoke our wisdom and our courage.

I first encountered the Angel of the Waters as an undergrad at the University of California at Santa Cruz, where I majored in theater arts. During my last year at UCSC, I took a directing studio, during which we students staged scenes from Tony Kushner's extraordinary play, *Angels in America*.

[1] Denise Levertov, from "The Fountain," 1961.

The play follows an unlikely array of characters thrown together in New York City in the early years of the AIDS crisis. There's Hannah, a sturdy Mormon matriarch, Belize, a West Indian drag queen, and the protagonist, a young man named Prior who reveals early on that he has AIDS. An angel enters the narrative in a few places, as does Roy Cohn, the infamous political fixer allied with Joseph McCarthy. But there's also a statuary angel, the one on the cover of this morning's order of service.

The play's epilogue and a few other scenes take place at Bethesda terrace. There's a lake there and a fountain topped by an angel with outstretched wings.

The play's epilogue brings together many of its characters. Prior addresses the audience. He says:

> This is my favorite place in New York City. No, in the whole universe.... In autumn, those trees across the lake are yellow, and the sun strikes those most brilliantly. Against the blue of the sky..., those trees are more light than vegetation. They are Yankee trees, New England transplants....
>
> [And t]his angel, she's my favorite angel.... This is the angel Bethesda.

Then Prior invites Belize to tell the angel's story: "Oh, says Belize,"

> ...well, she was this angel, she landed in the Temple Square in Jerusalem in the days of the Second Temple, right in the middle of a working day she descended and just her foot touched the earth. And where it did, a fountain shot up from the ground.... If anyone who was suffering, in the body or the spirit, walked

> through the fountain of Bethesda, they would be healed,
> washed clean of pain.[2]

The word Bethesda comes from the Hebrew Beth Hesda, which means “house of mercy” or “house of healing.”

The statue was commissioned by the City of New York to celebrate a great humanitarian and engineering feat—the creation of an aqueduct that brought fresh water from over 40 miles from Westchester County to Manhattan. Before the construction of the aqueduct, most of the city’s residents relied on well water, which was inadequate to meet the needs of a growing population. It was also polluted. There were repeated outbreaks of yellow fever and cholera in the early 19th century. At the height of the crisis, cholera took the lives of 1 in 39 New Yorkers in a single year.

The Croton aqueduct was opened on a June day in 1862. 22 hours later, fresh water began pouring into the newly built reservoir in Central Park, bringing relief to the suffering city.

I tell you this as we gather our water, this water which is a symbol for our courage, our connection and our mutual care.

This is the meaning of religious community:

Healing, connection, service.

> Don’t say, don’t say there is no water
> to solace the dryness at our hearts
> I have seen

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[2] Tony Kushner, “Angels in America: Perestroika,” 1991.

the fountain springing out of the rock wall
and you, drinking there. And I too
before your eyes

found footholds and climbed
to drink the cool water

This is the water.

This is the water.

This is the House of Mercy.

The water we have collected today will be boiled and put to use. I will use it to bless babies and the dying and for other sacred purposes.

Typically, when Unitarian Universalist ministers bless a baby, we dip a rose stripped of its thorns, into the water. I say:

We bless your eyes, that they may see clearly.
We bless your ears, that they may listen deeply.
We bless your lips, that you may speak the truth in love.
We bless your heart, that you may follow the path of love.
We bless your hands, that you may find meaning-filled work
We bless your feet, that you may travel far and wind but always find your way home.

And you are part of that blessing when it happens. The community is there, within this water made holy by your presence.

We sometimes have the gift of blessing the dying. At the close of life

We bless their eyes, with gratitude for all they have seen
We bless their ears, with gratitude for all they have heard
We bless their lips, with gratitude for truths they have spoken
We bless the hearts, with gratitude for the paths of love they have walked.
We bless their hands, with gratitude for all they have done in the world.
We bless their feat, which have traveled far and which, very soon, will return home.

In that tender room, when I offer that blessing, you will be present and so will everyone else who has ever poured their water into this water, everyone who has ever offered their heart to the thriving of First Parish. This water, this community.

Two dear colleagues, the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker and the Rev. John Beuhrens wrote a book together several years ago called *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the 21st Century*.

The chapter called "A Sanctuary for the Spirit" begins with the story of a French village and its people. Rebecca writes:

> The people of Le Chambon, a small village in France, harbored hundreds of Jewish children during World War II. Years later, when they were visited by one of the children—now a grown man—who had been sheltered there, he found himself asking why that village had sheltered Jewish children when so many others had not. He found his answer in observing their simple religious practices. Le Chambon was a Hughenot, Protestant village. A religious minority, accustomed to struggling to survive, they regularly gathered to sing hymns, to recall the faith of the ancestors who held fast to the spirit of love even in

> times of trial, to offer thanksgiving, and to pray for one another. When he asked them to explain, they said that they could not imagine responding in any other way. It was simply the shape their souls had. Their ways of worship had formed them for courage and resistance.
>
> "Sanctuary," [says writer Elie Wiesel], "is often something very small. Not a grandiose gesture, but a small gesture toward alleviating suffering and preventing humiliation. Sanctuary is a human being. Sanctuary is a dream. That is why you are here and that is why I am here; we are here because of one another. We are in truth each other's shelter."[3]

Or, as the Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman put it, "The only refuge for a [person] is in another [person's] heart. Therefore, I must make of my heart, a swinging door."

Let this place, this community we love, be a house of healing, a house of mercy, for all those who walk through our doors and for the larger society we serve.

> Don't say, don't say there is no water.
> That fountain is there among its scalloped
> green and gray stones,
>
> it is still there and always there
> with its quiet song and strange power
> to spring in us,
> up and out through the rock.

This water

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[3] Rebecca Parker and John Buehrens, *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the 21st Century,* 2010.

This water
This house
These spirits, formed for courage by our practiced faith.

The scene I mentioned earlier, the epilogue of the play *Angels in America* ends with a blessing.

Prior Walter speaks directly to the audience. He says:

> You are fabulous creatures, each and every one
> And I bless you: More Life.
> The Great Work begins.

May it be so.

Amen