

OPENING

**Aria rings the gong*

Prelude: "Breaths by Ysaye M. Barnwell, UUCS Choir

Welcome & Greeting Each Other: Aria

On this chilly morning, I would like to welcome you in to the warmth of community.

Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Spokane, where *we join together to create a nourishing liberal religious home and champion justice, diversity, and environmental stewardship in the wider world.* In short, to create community, find meaning, and work for justice. Welcome to each and every one of you. We embrace all that you bring with you; your unique beliefs background, and experiences. Whether you are one of our long-time, church elders, have been here a short time, are joining us for the very first time, or are streaming with us this morning, welcome. We are so glad to have you here.

Before we greet one another, I have a short announcement:

The Risk Management Team is partnering with Spokane Alliance to offer a "Brown Bag Listen Session" this afternoon, after the second service, from 12:45 - 2:15 p.m. Childcare will be provided and we will be meeting in the Chapel. This will be an opportunity for small group discussions about comfortable security measure for our congregation's continued safety in these challenging times. Please bring your own lunch.

[*Second service only*] I'd like to remind you that this morning service is a multigenerational one. This means that we will *all* remain in the Sanctuary, as a whole, together, instead of sending our children and youth to religious education classes.

Now, please take a moment to greet one another.

[*Gong to end the greetings*]

Chalice Lighting: Isabel, Elizabeth lights

Thank you. We'll have lots of time to talk more with one another during social hours, after the service, which, as always includes great coffee and good conversation.

We now turn from our informal greeting of one another to formally begin our service by lighting our chalice, the symbol of Unitarian Universalism, the symbol of our unity and solidarity, of our openness and inclusion, of our community and individual uniqueness. May this small flame be our offering of warmth to those who are cold and alone, and a light to those in darkness. May it be a flame that ignites justice in our world, and a beacon of hope to those in need. May it reflect

at least a spark of truth wherever truth is lost, and cast a healthy shadow of doubt wherever truth has been found.

GOING HOME

Mythical Introduction: Isabel Call

This worship service is special because it's a collection of many stories from people in our community.

[*Second service only*] So if you're young or young at heart, come on down and cuddle up on these cushions. There are some things to play with, and you can bring your parents or friends if you want. You're welcome to sit here for the whole worship service, or get up and sit in a chair any time you want.

I'm going to start us off with an old story that is traditional for this time of year. Once upon a time, there was a man named José and a woman named Maria who lived together in a small town. Maria was pregnant. She and José were very excited... and nervous, because they'd never been parents before. José was a carpenter, and he was working extra hard to earn money to take care of the baby. But in the evenings, he and Maria had been setting up their home, and building a cradle.

One day, José got a letter from the government. It said he had to go to the big city, Bethlehem, where his great grandfather was born, to put his name on a list, the census. He had to go in person to Bethlehem. It didn't make any sense, but he would get in trouble if he didn't go. It would take weeks to get there, and weeks to get back, and it would be expensive. He wouldn't be able to work, and he wouldn't be able to be with Maria when she gave birth. When José told Maria, she said, "José, I want to go with you." José was surprised and a little relieved. Maybe they could find a way to stay together. He said, "How can you travel with your big belly? And what about when it's time for the baby?" She replied, "I don't know how we'll make it work, but we will. There are kind people everywhere. And we will have each other." They talked and talked, and planned, and then they began selling everything they owned so they would have money for the trip, all the way down to the cradle they'd built for the baby. They gave away all their food that would go bad, and their neighbors gave them advice, and food that would travel well, and blankets for the new baby. The next morning, Maria and José packed up their donkey and set out toward the unknown.

They walked and walked, through open countryside and little towns. As the days wore low, they would aim for another small village, and introduce themselves to the people who lived there. There was always someone who helped them find a safe place to stay, in a courtyard or corner of the barn. Sometimes they found an inn and paid for a real

bed, with warm water to bathe. But most nights they made due with the simple hospitality of generous strangers. In the mornings, they would help their hosts out with morning chores, share some breakfast, and hit the road.

Sometimes Maria walked alongside José, chatting. Sometimes she rode on the donkey, feeling its warm strong muscles below her, carrying her into the future. During quiet stretches, Maria and José wondered about what was to come. They had been building a home together, but now everything was disrupted, and home was only what they and their donkey could carry. They did not choose this journey. But there was something drawing them forward, something totally unrelated to the government census, a spirit that gave their lives meaning, even if they didn't understand it.

The first part of our story ends here, with Maria and José walking toward Bethlehem on a cool afternoon, the sun shining low and bright. Soon they will find a place to stop and rest. As they fall asleep, they will try to imagine Bethlehem. I'll be back later to tell you more of their story.

Please rise in body or spirit with me as we sing, O Little Town of Bethlehem. After we sing, we will hear from Elizabeth Wilhelm, about her journey home.

Singing Together: #246 "O Little Town of Bethlehem"

Reflection: Elizabeth Wilhelm

In our multigenerational services when I was in junior high and high school I would always only agree to light candles because the idea of getting up here and saying actual words out loud was just not going to happen.

When I graduated from high school, though, I came up here for the first time and spoke. I thought that today, speaking on the theme of returning home that it would be nice to reflect on some of the same ideas I talked about then. But I honestly have no idea what I talked about.

What I do remember from that bridging service, was the congregation affirming to us that we could always come home here, no matter the nature of that homecoming. My 18-year-old ears heard that as 'even if you make a big ol' mess we will still be here for you' which was important for me to know. "No matter the nature of that homecoming".

Fast forward six years, and I didn't know it yet, but I was getting ready to come home to this church. In a manner that would have made my anxious teenage self very concerned - I had just quit my job, abruptly left Seattle, and decided to drive around the western United States by myself for a few months, with no real plan. Just a map and a heart overflowing with wonder.

During those years when I was away, I had started to acknowledge God's presence in my life. I had started becoming more aware of the guidance that God had always been offering me. I had started to trust that guidance.

And I came in these doors again, in some ways the same kid who grew up in this congregation from my nursery days at the Glover House on up, and in some ways a completely different person. I came home full of not knowing. That had never crossed my mind as a possibility for the 'nature of my homecoming'. Full of not knowing.

And the miraculous part - I wasn't worried about it. I just didn't know, and that was okay. It was okay because I was moving through my life being led by faith. As I have come home here the past couple of years, it hasn't felt like coming 'back' because it has been so full of new openings. Full of wonder and peace.

God led me home. I know that in my soul and in my bones. I was called home. Full of mystery, curiosity, and faith. If my intellectual mind had been making my decisions my life would look very different, and I wouldn't be up here right now.

But my intellectual mind wasn't making my decisions, and doesn't make most of my decisions anymore - because God called to my heart, and to my soul to lead me, and through that faith, I was brought home. Home to a world of beginnings.

Offertory: Isabel

We now gratefully give and receive this morning's offering, which sustains this community and its mission to the larger world.

Candles of Care: Aria, Elizabeth lights

Each time we gather as a congregation, there are always those who are with us in our minds and hearts, and who we want to wrap in our love and care.

We kindle light this morning for Jane Huigura's family, "*for unto them a child is born....*" Jane's granddaughter was born this past Thursday in Portland, Oregon.

We light a candle this morning for our friend, Reverend Sara LeWall, the minister at the UU Church in Boise, Idaho. She was recently arrested on the San Diego side of the border, near Tijuana. She has since been released.

We light a candle this morning for Ann-Scott Ettinger, her father, and family. Ann-Scott's father is in the early stages of liver failure after battling peritoneal cancer these past few years.

We also light a candle for Jackeline Caal, from Guatmeala. She was seven years old and tried to legally cross the border, but it was closed. She was detained by Border Patrol and was denied medical care for 90 minutes, while she lay dying.

Let us share a moment in silence, embracing others who are here in our hearts this morning. You are welcome to say their names aloud, as you are willing...

Those named aloud and those remembered in the silence, and all those who are suffering elsewhere in our world this hour, we hold in our community of compassion.

SEEKING SANCTUARY

Mythical Introduction: Isabel Call

[Levi comes up with guitar to sit in Isabel's chair.]

I'm back, to tell you more about José and Maria. When we left off, they were on the road to Bethlehem. As they got closer to the city, it became harder to find a place to stay. The villages were crowded with other travelers reporting for the census, and people were grouchy and rushed. One day, they saw their last patch of countryside, and then they were swallowed up in the city. They had arrived in Bethlehem. They found an inn, but all the rooms were taken. The next one was full, too. At the third inn, they were out of luck again. But when José explained that Maria was expecting a baby, soon, the innkeeper came outside to take a look at her. "Oh my goodness!" said the innkeeper. And so she set up a cozy place for Maria, and José, and the donkey, in the barn.

Once Maria was settled, José went out to try to register for the census. He had to wait in a long long line, and the people who worked for the government were rude and bossy and unpleasant. He signed his name in one place, and then they told him to come back tomorrow for more paperwork. He returned to the barn, disheartened. He was doing the best he could to follow the rules, and he was being treated like a criminal. He was looking forward to a good hug from Maria and her big belly.

But that's not exactly what he got. While José was out, the baby decided it was time to come out. Maria told the innkeeper, who hollered to her next door neighbor, who sent her daughter down the street, who came back with the midwife, a wise old grandma with kind eyes and a firm and soothing voice.

Now, Maria had not imagined giving birth in a barn, but she was brave, and hopeful. This place of sanctuary was not what she would have chosen, but sanctuary it was. And when José came in, and held her hand, she knew that it was a sacred place.

[Levi begins playing guitar.]

José let go of all his worries about bureaucracy as he held Maria in labor. It was the strangest, most amazing thing he'd ever seen, a miracle. When the baby arrived, the midwife lay him on Maria's chest. José gazed into the baby's face, a face no one had ever seen before that moment. He didn't know the baby's gender. He didn't know the baby's future. But he knew that the baby mattered.

No matter what happened, out *beyond* his control, no matter that they were in a barn, he, José, would be a sanctuary to this baby.

We'll continue this story later. But please me, and Levi, and Aria in singing Sanctuary. The three of us will sing it once, and then we'll all sing it together two times.

Singing Together: Sanctuary

Make us aware we,
are a Sanctuary
each made holy, loved right thro-ugh.
With thanks-giving,
we are a living
Sanctuary, anew.

Reflection: Levi Keesecker & Family

Levi: We are eva, Elliot, and Levi Keesecker.

Eva: We are going to talk about Sanctuary. When you think of Sanctuary or sacred place, you might think of a church or home. But we feel like a sanctuary can be any place where you feel safe and loved, so there are many places taht can be a Sanctuary; not just churches or homes.

Elliot: You might even find Sanctuary with unexpected people in unexpected places. For exmaple, José and Maria from the story you are being told today found Sanctuary in an unexpected place. In this case it was a barn with unexpected people. This is an examples of an unexpected Sanctuary.

Levi: When I was going through a difficult time as a teenager, I found Ssanctuary with a miraculously kind and wise stranger that I encountered on a walk. Over the course of a few hours together, I found Sanctuary on a quiet country road with someone I'd never seen before. This is an exmpale in my life of finding Sanctuary unexpectedly. But you can also find Sanctuary somewhere you visit everyday. All three of us find Sanctuary in our bedrooms and our family's living room.

Eva: In fact, we spent time together writing this reflection in the living room...cultivating Sanctuary as part of our opportunity to be here with you today. For that we are grateful.

Elliot: Please join us together as we sing the song, "Sanctuary" once again.

Singing Together: Sanctuary, reprise
[Levi leads; Aria and Isabel stand up to join in singing]

Meditation: Aria

Over the course of the last several months, our children and youth have been adding some meditation tools to their spiritual toolbox. You have silently made mandals with felt shapes and used meditation jars. Some of those tools might be near you. If they are, you are welcome to use them now. Whatever tools you use, you are *all* invited to spend some time, now, in silent meditation.

[Aria ring gong to end silence after about 3 minutes]

BECOMING A FAMILY

Mythical Introduction: Isabel Call

We left off with José and Maria and their new baby. The next morning, José went out into town again to deal with paperwork. He had another frustrating day, but he returned at dusk with some flowers for Maria, and the innkeeper lent him a clay jar to put them in. They went on like this for days, learning to be parents, fending off the worries of the world with small tokens of affection. José built a new cradle, out of a manger, and a rocking chair for Maria to nurse the baby in.

Then one evening, as José was rocking and singing to the baby, and Maria was folding diapers by the light of a candle, they heard a knock on the barn door. Maria opened it and found a young man holding a lamb in his arms. He gestured behind him, to two other men, and said, "Is the baby here? We are all shepherds, and we've been dreaming of the little one." He was so earnest and friendly that Maria invited them in. They sat on the straw around José's feet, and the young man said, "A few mornings ago I woke up from a beautiful dream: there was you [he pointed to Maria], holding that little baby, and you were surrounded by light. And so I told my brother here, and he had the same dream!" "Sure did," said the brother, "except in mine, it was you [he pointed to José] that was holding the baby." "And then," continued the first man, "Cousin here said, 'you wouldn't believe the dream I just had.'" "That's right," said the third man. "I dreamt of a barn, just like this one, with a star overhead, and us bringing a lamb to it. Then tonight we saw a star shining bright over Bethlehem and decided to make our way here with this lamb. The star led us right here to this barn."

José and Maria could tell the shepherds were just as surprised as they were. They all sat together in the candlelight and talked about their lives, their joys and sorrows, and they became friends. The innkeeper came out with tea for everyone, and the midwife stopped by to check on Maria and the baby. The innkeeper asked, "Have you decided on a name yet?" And Maria and José looked at each other and smiled, and said, "Jesus." "Jesus," said everyone there, trying it out on their own tongue. "Jesus, yes, that's a lovely name," said the innkeeper.

Many years later, José and Maria would still tell this story to each other whenever they had a quiet evening to share a cup of tea. It had been a tumultuous time in their lives. But even in a strange city they had found profound kindness. Even among strangers, they had found community. And it was the love of that community that made them a family.

Musical Interlude: "Lunar Lullaby" - choir

Becoming a Family: Kelsey Christensen & Family

Alex: Hi, my name is Alex and I'm part of a foster family. Being a foster brother is hard work, but it's totally worth it in the end. You have another member in the family and another person to share memories with. Giving someone else a home doesn't only help another person, it also gives you a bigger heart to share with more people. When I was adopted, I knew that I would be in a home with a family that would love me forever and would never leave me behind. Adoption is important because everyone needs love and it brings families together.

Kelsey: Hi, my name is Kelsey Christensen. Aria asked me if we saw our family's journey in the story of the birth of Jesus. I thought I would have to tell her to find another speaker. But then I thought about it some more and think that maybe Mary and I have a few things in common. Like Mary, I became a mother in a way that was quite surprising to me. We had no guarantees that our story would include any happy endings, or adoptions in our case, but we knew that we would do absolutely anything for any of the children in our care. In our faith, we talk about the inherent worth and dignity of all people. In my mind, supporting foster care is one way that my family and our community can support children who all deserve to reach their full potential. We might not get to be a part of their story for very long, or we might be part of their "happily ever after," but my faith tells me that I am spending my time and energy with people who matter. Sure, people look at me like I'm crazy when I can't give them a quick answer to the question "how many children do you have?" It's complicated. But we've been blessed to share all we have with seven little ones so far and we know there is always a possibility for more. We've also found a whole community of people who were strangers to us before our fostering journey. They have amazed us with their wisdom, their willingness to share, and there is always a sympathetic ear.

We know that every child deserves a family who will love them unconditionally. I am so proud to have a group of kiddos who call me “mom,” no matter how long we are together. Building our family has been full of stress and struggles, but we know that wherever this journey takes us, it will always be worth it. Thank you.

Singing Together: Hymn #408 “Wonder of Wonders”

Benediction: Aria

Though we close this time together,
may you carry *our* story in your heart.
May it wrap you in love and light.
Amen, Blessed Be, Salaam Alaikum, and Shalom.

Shalom Havayreem