## Sacred Seasons

**A Sermon by the Rev. Angela Herrera Koren**

First Unitarian Church

December 8, 2024

Most of you received a letter from me this week. It was a big letter that went out to everyone on our email list. In the letter, I shared that I will be leaving my position as Senior Minister at the end of this program year, in May. I am doing so for health reasons. And I'm sharing this news now, because I have to make some accommodations in my work to take care of my health until then. So that I'll be okay. Which I will be if I lighten my load. That's a critical factor.

It hasn't been an easy decision to make. It comes after a lot of discernment and soul searching. I love this congregation very much. I've been a minister here for almost fifteen years. It was my first job out of divinity school: assistant minister. I was just thirty-three when I started.

The year I started seems like another world ago. Our country's first black president was in his first term. Same sex marriage was about to become legal throughout the country. Momentum was building toward the Paris Climate Accord.

First Unitarian had around the same number of members then as it does today- around 750. We had outgrown our old sanctuary, and we were about to build this one. And then we were going to grow some more. That growth was already underway when I became senior minister in 2017. By January of 2020, we had 840: almost 100 more members than a decade earlier. Bob LaVallee had arrived as our new Associate Minister. We were on a roll.

There were big problems to be faced in the world, for sure. We addressed them in this pulpit and in social justice programming. The 2016 election shook religious liberals. The influence of Christian nationalism and its regressive goals was deeply alarming. But overall, there was a sense that we knew how to meet the challenges of the times as a community.

And then everything changed, didn't it.

Hiring Bob turned out to be one of the best decisions I ever made. Bob had done his internship at a large all-virtual church, which meant the day we had to go into pandemic lockdown, Bob already knew how to run services on Zoom. We did not miss a beat. One Sunday there was a virus out there somewhere, but everything was normal. Seven days later we were on Zoom, for what I thought would be a few weeks.

It turned out to be eighteen months. Time in which we lost one million Americans. Time in which there was one collective trauma after another. Twenty-four members of this congregation died. People who, on that last Sunday in person, we didn't know we'd never see again. Ministers everywhere had to reimagine everything about how to do church, multiple times: when we went online, when we came back, and every time the protocols had to be revisited. Our congregation suddenly lost all the growth it had done in the last decade. Meanwhile, wildfires and air quality warnings and catastrophic storms became the new normal. Fire even tore through the center of Albuquerque one year, right through the bosque. Unemployment went up. Costs went up, for individuals and families and for

institutions. Our utilities are higher. Our insurance cost here at the church is thousands of dollars higher each year- and that's largely due to climate change, to things like those fires and storms creating a lot more insurance claims overall. And then there's all the crime. So much crime. Break ins and property damage especially. One day someone shot my office window out, I think with a BB gun.

It's no wonder tensions have been high. In society. In families. And inside churches, too. And what's also true is that leadership is a different experience now than it was even five years ago. It's much harder. For many ministers, it has become less sustainable.

Since 2017, I've been part of a group called SMOLUUC: Senior Ministers of Large UU Congregations. There are around forty or so UU congregations qualify as "large." At our annual retreats, we usually have 25-30 of their senior ministers. Pre-pandemic, the turnover rate was around 1-2 people per year. Senior ministers who retired or left their position for any reason. It had been a long time since anyone had died- that would have been very unusual. A turnover rate of a couple of people per year, including when we gathered in February of 2020.

For comparison, in 2021 and 2022, by my count, fourteen senior ministers retired from or left their jobs or announced their plans to, and one died while still in her job. Of those who left, two died from cancer soon after and another received a very poor prognosis.

Each of these colleagues had their own unique circumstances. But when you look at the whole picture… you get the picture.

The deaths of my beloved colleagues are very sobering. I've been managing stress related health issues for the last few years. I've done that in all of the ways you might expect or suggest: supplements, medicine, self-care, a clergy support group, exercise, a therapist. I recommend these things to everyone. They have helped a lot. I am proud to have led First Unitarian through these very challenging times. And. My health just isn't having it anymore.

I had hoped to power on a bit longer this year, keeping those issues mostly private, buoyed by the sabbatical I took from August-October. But upon returning to work, I began to experience some very concerning symptoms. One Saturday, as I was trying to prepare everything for the next day's service, my wife- a master level nurse- looked at me and asked in all seriousness, "Do you need to go to the hospital?" I finally had to admit, even though I love what I do, my health will no longer support doing it in the same way I have been.

It is frustrating and humbling.

I think this must be something like what the Olympic gymnast Simone Biles described when she had to take a break from her work. She was at the Olympics in Tokyo, competing with her team, when she realized something was wrong that she couldn't ignore. She was on the balance beam, about to do her routine, when she suddenly knew that if she tried to complete the aerial twists she had planned, she was absolutely going to get seriously injured. Although she had been doing gymnastics all her life and was one of the best, her body was not going to cooperate. In gymnastics, that's called getting "the twisties." Simone

Biles respected that inner limit. She scaled back her routine in that moment on the balance beam, and then took a break from gymnastics all together.

Healthwise, I'm experiencing something like the twisties. (In fact, if this were a Jewish congregation, the place where I am standing would be called a bimah.)

So, I'm going to scale back on my routine, and then step away from congregational ministry. Between now and May, I'll be preaching and leading services one Sunday per month, and delegating the other weeks to Bob, and our intern Ron, and guest preachers. We have lots of excellent guest preachers available: our minister emerita Christine Robinson, community minister Jane Davis, seminarians like Beth Elliot, and prophetic community leaders like Cathy McGill. We have talented musicians and lay leaders. So, we're going to have a lot of good church. And I'll be here for it, I just won't be up in front as much. I'll be sitting with you, or focusing behind the scenes on pastoral care, administration, supporting the congregation in preparing for this change, and other aspects of wrapping up this long ministry, including- in the spring- saying goodbye. It is not time for that yet. I'm still here. If we start saying goodbye now, and I'm still here in five months, it's going to make me look like an awkward guest.

And can I just say, it's amazing to be in my fifteenth year. Long enough to see this church through some very different seasons. Those early days, in our old sanctuary. And leaning into our growth. Growing our music program to full size. Saying goodbye to the senior ministry before mine when Christine retired. And the launch of a new season after that when we remodeled the social hall. There was the season in which we were only on zoom. And the one we are in now, where we are recovering, recalibrating, and welcoming new members. So many now! I love it.

For the last five years, since Bob joined the team, he and I have met 1:1 almost every Tuesday, to collaborate and conspire on behalf of this place as its ministers. We always begin our meetings with the question: Where did God, or the holy, show up this week?

We have an expansive notion of God. And let me remind us all that an expansive notion is a very biblical sort of notion. To think of God in expansive, creative ways and to see God in unexpected places is the most traditional thing we can do. In the bible, God shows up in many ways. A burning bush. An earthquake. A stranger who wrestles a patriarch to the ground in pitch darkness. A cetacean intervention- sending in a whale to swallow a reluctant prophet. And on and on. God is never clearly defined but is apparently something that, "You know it when you see it."

And what do we mean by "the holy?" That which is sacred, divine, or worthy of reverence and devotion.

Where did God, or the holy, show up this week?

Our answers are wide ranging:

- When we found a way to be together, when we couldn't *be together*.
- In the baby dedication, when the baby wiggled and looked around the room and saw his community smiling back.

- In the board meeting, when a hard conversation was filled with wisdom and love.
- In that moment when I barely began the meditation, and everyone softened and sighed.
- On the riverbank, in a ritual of affirmation and blessing for someone's new name.
- When a child whispered a confession into my ears, moments before the service started, and my love for her almost overwhelmed me.
- The holy was there when one church member fostered another's beloved dog, while they were hospitalized.
- In the care team sending cards that say, in this first holiday season since the death of your loved one, we remember with you.
- In the choir's voices blending, humans making beauty for beauty's sake.
- In the multicultural, interfaith, gay, Star Trek wedding, where everyone was their whole self and love was its big, joyful, whole self and everyone there was blessed by it, and I think maybe so was the whole world.
- It was in the food pantry line, where kids were hopping up and down the church steps and swinging on the bars, and where someone played live music while people waited, and where people were laughing together despite everything, right there in the line.

God, the holy, is in all of it.

I have deep faith in the future of this place. In all of you. This community is all of us, and it transcends us. We've received it from those who came before. If as a community we keep showing up with our love and support, we'll pass it down to those who come after. Each of us is part of that for a certain number of years. They aren't infinite for anyone, as far as I can tell. The strength of this place, the holiness of it, is in what we make it together. There has not been even one time when Bob and I were asking where God or the holy showed up this week, and one of us said it was in that one person alone. No. It's always passing from one person to another. The spirit moves among us here.

It has been a great honor, and deeply meaningful, to join with this community for all these years. And it means the world to me to know that after my ministry ends our ministry will continue. (Again, we're talking about five months from now. Not today.)

There is one thing I'm wondering about though. And that is what the story will be about our church's financial health.

Here we are in this season of recovery and recalibration, after a hard turn a few years ago. We are growing again. But at the moment, our operating budget appears to be headed in the other direction. We build our budget based on pledges- on what members say they plan to give in the coming year. We still have fewer households making a financial pledge than we did in 2020. Since this year's pledge campaign kicked off in October, we've received a steady flow of pledges for 2025. And they are, on average, larger than last year. Thank you so much to everyone who has pitched in by filling out a pledge form. The average pledge is around $2600- significantly higher than last year. That means, on average, people who've made a pledge are planning to give about fifty bucks per week to church. Since that's an

average, it means some people pledged more and some pledged less. We have pledges from ten dollars to thousands of dollars. Not everyone has the same means, but it all adds up.

The problem we're facing right now though, is that we haven't heard from as many people yet as we did last year.

The cost to run this place and keep our current staff next year is around $1.1 million. We've diversified our revenue streams a bit since I started back in 2010. Our endowment is about four times bigger than it used to be, and while we don't spend the money donated to it, it is invested, and a portion of the proceeds from those investments does support the church financially- that's around $37k this year. We also receive income from renting the Vanguard building next door, which we purchased a few years ago. And we share our campus with two other congregations, Minara Muslim Community and Albuquerque Center for Spiritual Living. They pitch in as renters, which also helps pay our operating costs. So, between the endowment and rental or lease income, we have about $200k in revenue. The rest, over $900k, must come from pledges.

As of this week, we have $719k in pledges. Last year by this time, we had around $782k- and we kept getting more pledges after that. So, we are running behind. I'm worried about that. A shortfall would mean I have to make some hard decisions about staffing before I leave in May. A reduction in staff means a reduction in church programs.

The board is going to finalize the 2025 budget on January 11. That's coming up fast. What we need is for about 100 more individuals or households to make a pledge. Not a donation, but a pledge for next year. The pledge comes first. We use it to plan the budget. The donations that fulfil the pledge can come anytime in 2025.

One hundred more. You know what? I believe there are enough people in this community for that to happen. It is possible for us to lean into growth once more, as we have done in the past, and to not shrink back. Before inauguration day in January, we could be fully funded, ready to go, strong as a community, to meet all that the year will hold.

And this year, it's going to hold a lot. Endings, new beginnings, rituals, acts of service, and subtle and exuberant expressions of love. A lot in which God or the holy shows up, and we'll know it when we see it.