



# Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

“The Radiance of the Divine (Uncovering Our Stories)”

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The cemetery is on a hill, the highest elevation in the surrounding county lands, a lookout through the overgrown woods and tall sturdy trees that block some, but not all, of the winds at the hilltop. It is a peaceful place, green lawn and stone markers all arrayed around a small white wooden chapel, the sort of thing you'd see worked into a cross-stitch or painted in watercolor, depicting a bucolic church scene. Although there are still some people being buried there to this day, part of this graveyard is old indeed - old, at any rate, for the United States. The small church and the earliest known occupants of the cemetery predate the existence of the country. If you were to explore this peaceful green space, you would notice that the closer you got to the woods behind the small chapel, the older the graves got. The stones are harder to read, some of them leaning at angles, beset by moss and lichen and looking even more ancient than the dates carved on them suggest, for those where the dates are even still discernible.

Hold the image of what this spot looks like in your mind, please. Big sky overhead, tall trees surrounding, small white church with a red door, and gravestones from modern to colonial times. We're going to come back here.

Right now we're going back to our first reading.

“I am the hearing which is attainable to everyone  
and the speech which cannot be grasped.  
I am a mute who does not speak,  
and great is my multitude of words.

Hear me in gentleness, and learn of me in roughness.  
I am she who cries out,  
and I am cast forth upon the face of the earth.  
I prepare the bread and my mind within.  
I am the knowledge of my name.  
I am the one who cries out,  
and I listen.”

The poem this comes from, “[The Thunder, Perfect Mind](#),” is one of over 50 ancient texts unearthed at the town of Nag Hammadi in upper Egypt in 1945. The discovery of these papyrus texts bound in leather had a tremendous impact on the study of early historical Christianity. The gnostic Gospels and other texts therein were believed to have been hidden (and some almost certainly destroyed) in an effort to create a cohesive Christian scripture and orthodoxy. “Gnosis” is a word derived from the Greek root word for “knowledge” and means particularly “special knowledge of spiritual mysteries.”

This poem, in a voice both decidedly within the realm of the Divine Feminine and also speaking boldly outside the too-easy binary definitions of not only gender but all aspects of human existence, is not in the Bible. It’s not anything I ever heard in a Catholic church. I first heard this text in a Unitarian Universalist church, which makes sense - the early gnostic Christians placed the highest value on personal experience of the divine, much as the liberal religious tradition that describes our history also embraces reason and personal experience over scripture and tradition. And it shook me to hear this, to hear such a powerful voice of wisdom transcribed to place themselves both within the constructs of good and of evil, of above and below. How else can we consider the concept of the Divine, particularly in a tradition that would claim for God both omniscience and omnipotence?

I am that I am.

“I am that I am” is not just a line in our second reading, it is famously how God is purported to have named themselves to Moses when Moses experienced God speaking to him in the story of the burning bush in the book of Exodus in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. Given this association, it’s an audacious line to put in the mouth of any fictional character, much less that of a [woman dying in a horror series](#) on a popular streaming media platform. Before we get to that famous line, though, I’d like us to revisit this part of that text:

“And it’s like a drop of water falling back into the ocean, of which it’s always been a part. All things... a part. You, me and my little girl, and my mother and my father, everyone’s who’s ever been, every plant, every animal, every atom, every star, every galaxy, all of it. More galaxies in the universe than grains of sand on the beach.

And that’s what we’re talking about when we say ‘God.’”

The stories that I was told about God when I was small did not sound like this. In the Catholic Church we spoke of the church as the “body of Christ” but this metaphor never felt large enough to me. Yes, it made sense to me that we were called to care for everyone within the church the way we should each care for all the parts of our bodies - but what about everything outside the human body? What about the fiery energy of the stars and the life clinging hard at every deep sea volcanic vent? What about those dinosaurs we talked about, and everyone who lived before us, not to mention everyone who will come after?

It is the sense of scale that I wanted to hear as I discovered the world’s wonders. It’s what made me hear this monologue and think of this other piece of writing, this ancient gnostic text where the person putting ink to papyrus was imagining the vastness of God throughout space and time.

In this monologue, given in the moments where the character Erin Greene is dying, the vastness of God becomes both larger and more personal. Let's pick up with the last few lines:

“The cosmos and its infinite dreams. We are the cosmos dreaming of itself. It's simply a dream that I think is my life, every time. But I'll forget this. I always do. I always forget my dreams.

But now, in this split-second, in the moment I remember, the instant I remember, I comprehend everything at once.

There is no time. There is no death. Life is a dream. It's a wish. Made again and again and again and again and again and on into eternity. And I am all of it.

I am everything. I am all. I am that I am.”

I remember. I comprehend everything at once. I am that I am.

You are that you are.

We rely so much on stories. They shape the way we think of the world. The stories we may hear in houses of worship in our childhood may affect our relationship both to the concept of God and our understanding of how we should treat each other. If we are all connected in this profound way, each holding within ourselves the moral complexity of being-ness:

“I am the one who is honored, and who is praised,  
and who is despised scornfully.

I am peace,  
and war has come because of me.”

If that is who we say we are, if the narrative of all we are is so large, then we must know and understand that this miracle is repeated in each of us. We must live with one another in a way that recognizes this profound connection and honors it.

This is our interdependent web of all existence. We are all of it and we are but a part of it. We long for stories big enough to describe these seeming contradictions and we long for the strength to hold all of this complexity.

I started learning my first stories about God and the world in a big brick church at the bottom of a tall hill. On the top of that tall hill, there sits a little white chapel, with a red door. It is surrounded by peaceful green grass, and stone grave markers march steadily away towards the line of trees. Yes, it's time to go back to that beautiful place I described at the beginning. Sacred Heart Chapel, in Bowie, Maryland. The place where my story started, but not just mine. So many people learned about faith there, heard names for God and words about God and stories about Jesus and stories that humans told one another about how to behave with one another.

One of the people who also learned their faith language there happens to be Mike Flanagan, a writer and director whose credits include the Netflix series *Midnight Mass* and who wrote the monologue that was our second reading. This monologue meant a lot to me before I learned that Mike and I shared this in common, that he served as an altar boy at many Masses where my father served as deacon, that the design of the chapel in the series was influenced by that little white chapel on the hill - and when I learned that, the story grew another layer. I took one faith path out of that place, and he took another, and there are countless others whose journeys are unique. But we are all connected, we all have ground of our history and part of what shaped us laying in the earth at that hill and its surrounding land.

Up on that hill, outside that chapel, my father is buried. The last time I went to visit his grave, this past December, I noticed that the woods behind the chapel, heading past the last of the graves and further down the hill, were full of orange surveyors' flags. "What's that?" I wondered in the moment, but in short order I turned my attention to spending time at this place where I said goodbye to my father's earthly existence.

Soon, I learned what those flags were, along with many people - you may have heard this story, too, because it received some [national coverage](#). The little white chapel is a historic building - first built in 1744, it is the site where John Carroll was installed, the first Catholic bishop to be declared such on North American soil. It is also the site of the Jesuit plantation called White Marsh. This plantation existed because of the labor of enslaved people, and the small orange markers in the woods represented hundreds of graves of those who worked this land, in bondage to others who did not see their humanity.

There are stories on every part of this land, this land we now call home, this land that was home to so many before us and will be home to so many after us. There are the stories we know and tell again and again, and there are the ones that are buried. When we receive new information, when we dig down into the ground of our being and ask, at every age, “who are we? And how are we to be?” we must give our attention to that which is brought to the surface.

In a [recent update](#) on the ongoing project at Sacred Heart - where parishioners are working with anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, and the descendents of those enslaved at White Marsh - it is noted, “this is an important act of justice and work of mercy, to care for each of our brothers and sisters buried on our parish grounds, especially those who were not treated with respect and dignity during their earthly life.”

Justice and mercy. Equity and inclusion. There are stories untold, there are stories erased, there are lives who were destroyed by systems that perpetuated this erasure. I am grateful that the place where I first learned about some of the many names of God is doing this work. And I implore all of us to examine the stories of our own lives, the stories of our own times. There are still stories untold, there are stories and lives erased, lives are still being destroyed by systems that have perpetuated this erasure. If we are to learn to tell better stories of how we are to be with one another, if we want to act with justice and mercy right now, in a direct counterpoint to these erasures, we must examine the truth in our hearts. Black lives matter. Trans lives matter. We

must not allow the injustice of erasure to continue. "I am the one who cries out, and I listen."

May we listen.

May we learn.

May we answer.