

“Out of the Shadows, Into the Light”

Rev Nathan Detering

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“Here is the world; beautiful and terrible things will happen.

Be not afraid.

Because this is what we are about:

We hold hope for each other when hope is hard to find.

We plant seeds that will one day grow.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

We cannot do everything,

But we can do something.

So forget your perfect offering.

There is a crack in everything.

That is how the light gets in.”

“Do you have any metal in your body?” the nurse asks...

“In my body or on my body?” I ask.

Both, she says.

“Do lead fillings count?”

“Those are fine, she says, but I need the wedding ring off, and the jewelry.”

“You mean the clunky watch? You call that jewelry?.

“Yeah, take it off. And let me see your fleece.

Yeah, that needs to come off, too.”

“Just curious “I say. “Like, what would happen if I did have metal in me or on me and I went in the machine?

“Well, it wouldn't be pretty,” the nurse says, in that direct, clipped way

That nurses who have seen it all say things that make the rest of us freak out.

“And we wouldn’t want anything to happen to that pretty face, would we?”

At which point Karyn, who is with me, rolls her eyes.

“Flattery helps,” I say. *“Because I’m a little anxious.”*

Which I share with us so that we don’t let my public senior minister role lead us to think I’m somehow naturally endowed with Holy Poise or Blessed Chill in the face of fear.

Ever since I was a little kid anxiety has been my burden to bear,

Maybe this is true for some of you,

Which is why I so treasure our shared ministry,

because we say that whatever fear comes we promise we don’t have to bear the fear alone, and the Spirit of Life shines light on all of us..

there, there, there...wherever you sit this morning, wherever you come from and whatever you’re facing, light shines on you.

Outside the Metrowest MRI center where I am peeling off all my metal,
The sun shines through the leafless trees, casting spider shadows
On the parking lot.

And, too, because this was right around election time, the shadow

Of what will or won’t happen is casting its own shadow....

So much uncertainty then, so much uncertainty now,

Blocking out sometimes so much of the shine of daily life,

The wonder, the play, the preciousness,

Which is why I am so drawn to the poem Maria read for us,

That little toddler sunstruck by the circle blaze dancing down the isles

Of the plane.

Can we cast our eyes away for a moment from the tweeting and the
bloviating and 24/7 news
And the important work that will never be finished,
and the marches and the meetings,
and try to be just a little sunstruck?
Have we forgotten how astonishing all this is, this being light and life
And air and breath?
I have, I do.

Which is why I was so scared, so full of fear that late autumn morning
To get that brain MRI, recommended out of an abundance of caution
After a fainting episode I had had one Sunday afternoon.
Because even though my doctor was confident all I had was bad case of
dehydration after a morning of preaching with too much exertion and
passion and fire ☺, and not enough water and food,
I was certain that I had every terrible disease listed on WebMD,
Which is a website seemingly designed to make hypochondriacs out of us
all.

*“So put these on,” the nurse says, handing me headphones, “because
There will be a lot of banging.
And hold this button, which is our panic button, because it’s loud
And dark in there,” she says, pointing to open dark mouth of the MRI
That seemed almost eager to swallow me,
“and press it if you need to come out...but try to not to press it, ok, because
Then we have to start all over.”*
“You’re fine,” Karyn’s hand says as she squeezes mine,

Which is a marvel in itself, that after 19 years of marriage all you need are hands can communicate what you most need to you hear.

I lay down on the hard, plastic bed, put the headphones on,

Trade Karyn's warm hand for the red panic button,

And try to breathe as the machine slowly swallows me inside itself.

"At least maybe I'll get a sermon out of this," I tell myself,

Which is more consolation than you may realize,

For the way our ministry helps translate and transcend the hard things...

But with the machine hovering inches from my eyes,

And Karyn now out of the room, and the only light all the way

At end the tunnel beyond my feet, and shadowy dark everywhere else,

And the nurse beyond the glass in the next room looking at my brain

On the screens,

And the banging and buzzing, oh the terrible banging and buzzing,

Saying to my whole my body: *alarm, alarm, alarm!*

And my thumb hovering now over the red panic button,

The only words I could think of, words I will preach on later this month,

Were the words I memorized as a Catholic kid altar boy from years of

serving the 6:45a.m. mass...

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, he makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul...

And these lines...

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you

Are with me, your rod and staff – they comfort me...

Over and over, these words floating through me,

There in the dark mouth of the machine, the light so far away,
Reminding me that in my life God is presence and not protection,
And, yes, beautiful and terrible things will happen,
And, yes, now is the time I need to let others hold hope for me,
And, yes, the cracks of my anxiety are widening and widening,
And, yes, I need now for the light to get in...there at the end of my feet,
I can barely see it, but it's there...

"Good job," the nurse says over the microphone, *"all done."*
As the machine slowly, too slowly slides me out of its inky dark
into the bright fluorescent lights of the windowless room,
And Karyn waiting for me on the other side of the door,
And the second nurse I see behind the glass, me trying
To read her facial expressions as she finishes looking at my brain
On the screen, trying to decipher in her brow and the edges of her mouth
Any clues to my fate,
my anxiety making me certain that I catch in her eyes a flash of foreboding.

3 days. 3 days of shadowy, hovering, hurting, hiding worry,
3 days in the dark valley with God's rod and staff.
I can't hold hope on my own, I need others to hope hold hope for me,
So I tell the Dr. I would rather he call Karyn with results than me,
So I'm not jumping out of my skin every time the phone buzzes.
And I wait. And I lean on others. And I ask for help.
And I sing Spirit of Life in the dark of night.
And I try to let the light of the ordinary moments I normally take for granted
sunstrike me,

Because sometimes fear offers that gift, too – it can clarify your perspective and your priorities.

How long with wait? 3 days.

Ok, let's pause here, because right about now our Stewardship Team,

And the board with their light bracelets, and the staff are wondering:

I thought Nathan was going to give a stewardship sermon today.

Doesn't he know how much money we need to raise this year?

Did he get carried away with his stories again and forget?

Well of course not, but the reason I share my story is that I see

Some parallels of my journey into the mouth of MRI,

All coiled with fear, and waiting for better news,

And asking for help, and reaching for light....

And our journey in the times we're living in.

Because at a time when news is called fake, and leaks

Are called lies, and 90 million people failed to cast a vote

In one of the most turbulent elections in history,

And the 46 million who did vote for the President is called a mandate,

And a free press are named 'enemies of the state,' a Stalin-tactic,

And 'America First,' a slogan used by American Nazi sympathizers in the 30's, is declared at the inauguration,

And immigrants are labeled 'bad hombres' and 'bad dudes,'

And transgender rights labeled a question of state's rights,

Which was the same said about segregation 60 years ago,

And the previous president is labeled 'a sick person' an early Saturday morning tweet by the current president...

Do I have to go on? I don't have to go on...

Because – and this isn't a partisan statement, even if it might be a political one – As I UU minister I feel we are living in dark valley times, shadowy times, fearful times, anxious times, asking for help times, give me your hand times, looking at the end of the tunnel for the glimpse of light times, Psalm 23 times...

And though it needs to be acknowledged that we the people,
And especially the privileged, have become a bit lazy, taking our democracy
For granted, our values for granted, our principles for granted,
The fear of these days, like the fear I felt back in the autumn as I waited
For the doctor's call, has been clarifying, hasn't it?
Because in these shadow times we have reached out,
We have asked ourselves and each other how we can have a meaningful
impact,
And how to find some meaning in these times of change and challenge.

And so we have here to UUAC, in greater and greater numbers,
With greater and greater energy,
Bringing our fear, but basking together in the light,
Because we hold hope for each other when hope is hard to find.
And that has made and is making all the difference.
That we need your generous, generous pledges to keep making
These difference is obvious.
That you can never know the impact your generosity has
On the person next to you is less obvious, and why I hope you will give.

Because we don't know when the call will come;
We don't know how long we must work harder than we ever
Have to contain the fear and reach toward the light.
3 days later the Dr. did call, I see Karyn picking up the phone
In the window as I work outside in the yard with the afternoon
Sun on my neck,
And when she holds a thumbs-up so I can see her
I tilt my head back and close my eyes into the light and breathe deep
Breaths of relief.

But what if the call had been made with different news?

What then?

I think of that often, knowing that one thing that belonging to religious
Community teaches you, as Hemingway says,
*That life breaks all of us from time to time, and some are made strong in the
broken places.*

Which is to say, you, who I love, would and will and do make me strong,
As we make each other strong,
For whatever may come, reaching for the light, standing in the light,
Until the shadows flee away.

Amen.