

## UUC Sermon: “The Good News In Bad Times”

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### **Description:**

*Bad news seems to be everywhere these days, like a dark cloud hanging over everything we do. What if, rather than turn our eyes away from the catastrophes happening around us, we lean into the dark clouds and surrender to what they have to say? Let’s set aside a naive hope that all will turn out well and surrender to the notion that we are the midst of the collapse of our current world order and entering into the dark mysteries of a global rite of passage. What is the Good News in that? There are surprising virtues hidden in those dark clouds of uncertainty, grief and fear. Let’s discover them together as a learning community of curiosity, compassion and care.*

**All Ages Story:** *Snake Vision* with Randy Morris

**Meditation:** *The Clear Sphere Heart Meditation* with Randy Morris

**Reading:** Excerpt From *Letter To A Young Activist During Troubled Times* by Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Ph.D. (for text, see below)

**Video Prelude:** Joanna Macy on *Embracing Our Pain* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tua1GVpFSZI>) (3:35 minutes)

### **Sermon:**

Many thanks for the invitation to give this sermon this morning. When I was first asked to do so by Jean and Chuck Fowler, my good friends and long-time colleagues in the study of the great eco-theologian Thomas Berry, I was excited about the prospects of sharing some of my thinking with an open and hospitable audience. I was especially happy to speak in a theological setting, where my usual need to defend my spiritual outlook from academic criticism could take a rest and I could just tell it like I see it. But once the initial enthusiasm passed and I sat down to figure out what I wanted to say, I realized that to tell it the way I see it can be a bit of a downer for people to hear. After all, there is a lot of bad news out there! But then from my root tradition as an Episcopalian, I remembered that the New Testament was referred to as ‘The Good News’ or ‘The Gospel’ because it was liberating the people from a vengeful and judgmental god-image as described in the Old Testament. Instead, The Good News offered a path of salvation through a loving and redemptive god-image as depicted in the New Testament. I began to wonder what The Good News for these times might be, seeing as how we are witnessing events, such as the rate of extinction of species, that have not been seen for 65 million years. What is The Good News for these times?

I speak to you today as an initiate of the Hiroshima Mysteries. By that I mean that I was born and raised in Richland, Washington, the town that manufactured the plutonium for the bomb dropped on Nagasaki, and I lived for three years in Hiroshima, Japan, the city that was obliterated by the first nuclear weapon. That bomb was dropped on a civilian population and it killed 120,000 people in its initial blast, with many more dying in the decades to follow from radiation poisoning. As retired general Barry McCaffrey notes in a recent Seattle Times op-ed, the chances of a nuclear device going

off again in the next ten years is very high. I have spent a lifetime ‘feeling into’ the consequences of nuclear weapons, and I can assure you, it doesn’t feel good! I also speak to you as a student of biology, the science of life. I am extremely sensitive to the stresses on life that are being caused by overpopulation, malnourishment, zoonotic epidemics, species extinction and climate chaos. Not good at all! And I speak to you as a student of the psychologist C. G. Jung, who wrote extensively about ‘psychic epidemics’, when archetypal forces take over the masses, break through the individual’s moral and intellectual self-control, and annihilate his or her capacity for individual choice. In 1946, just after the close of World War II, Jung wrote in a prescient paragraph:

*“... the tide that rose in the unconscious after the first World War was reflected in individual dreams, in the form of collective, mythological symbols which expressed primitivity, violence, cruelty: in short, all the powers of darkness. When such symbols occur in a large number of individuals and are not understood, they begin to draw these individuals together as if by a magnetic force, and thus a mob is formed. Its leader will soon be found in the individual who has the least resistance, the least sense of responsibility and, because of his inferiority, the greatest will to power. He will let loose everything that is ready to burst forth, and the mob will follow with the irresistible force of an avalanche.”*

Sound familiar? Yes, bad news surrounds us; the darkness around us is deep. To speak in a theological context in these dark days is to speak with a prophetic voice – not the kind of judgmental prophet from the Old Testament who criticizes the profligate ways of the people and exhorts them to do better, but the kind of prophet who tries to puncture the trance of numbness and despair that afflicts our collective consciousness. By naming the darkness, the prophet seeks to advance the dignity and power of awakened consciousness. He or she wants to penetrate despair by offering new futures that can be believed in and embraced by the people.

In the future I want to talk to you about, a future that is consistent with the deadly darkness around us, the news is stark. This much is clear: there is no hope of returning to things as they once were. There is no return to The Garden. Hope that existing systems will save us is, I believe, no longer possible. Such hope is a crutch that holds us back by defending us against the harsh truths we need to confront. We must think in dramatic new ways, hope-free.

When I search for a model that can bring meaning to the current state of humanity, I find it in the language of initiation and rites of passage. I believe the human species as a whole is going through a generations-long rite of passage in which it must die to its most cherished beliefs about itself. Ideas of human exceptionalism, that we hold dominion over the beasts of the earth, is out the window. Only when we face our darkest fears and open our hearts to witness the magnitude of the suffering, suffering that will surely get worse in the coming years, can we enter into the liminal and unknowable vessel of our collective transformation. I can’t see a future beyond this middle passage, this ‘dark night of the species soul’. To predict anything about it will be using an old consciousness to anticipate a new consciousness never seen before. As Einstein so presciently said, “You can’t solve a problem using the same consciousness that created it.”

So in the midst of the uncertainty, sorrow and fear of humanity’s collective rite of passage, its dark night of the species soul, what is The Good News? How can I live a life of purpose and meaning in a deteriorating world? How can I be a good citizen of these dark times?

Here is where the power of Snake Visions begins to assert itself. The lesson that Snake impressed upon me was this: *the way I choose to look at things, will determine what I see.* When I look at things through the eyes of contemporary consciousness, I see conflict, violence, diminishment, and death. We are in the age of global collapse, when the systems that sustain life on earth are breaking under the weight of overpopulation, climate chaos and predatory capitalism. But when I look at things from the perspective of the West door – the place of darkness, initiation and transformation – I see opportunities galore! In fact, this is the most exciting moment to be alive in the history of humanity, because what I do, the actions I choose to take on behalf of life, no matter how small, will play a vital role in the future of the human species.

Not only that, but Snake reminds me of a lesson I learned from the psychotherapist Miriam Greenspan, who speaks about the revelatory power of what she calls the ‘dark emotions’. As the daughter of two holocaust survivors and an experienced psychotherapist, Greenspan knows well the fear of falling into darkness and not being able to return, that the more we lock up our dark emotions, the greater the fear that they will devour us. Her therapeutic advice is to listen to what the dark emotions have to say, and then listen some more, since we get better at it the more we practice it. When we are able to be in the presence of these emotions with awareness and receptivity, they become our teachers. Greenspan writes, *“The dark emotions bring us information and supply us with energy – the raw material of spiritual empowerment and transformation. When we know how to listen to them, we can ride their energy, like a wave, with awareness as our protection. Emotional energy flows, and a hidden doorway in the heart opens. Something shifts. A transmutation occurs: a movement through the pain to spiritual power. ... Finding the power of the sacred, not despite suffering, but in the midst of it: this is the alchemy of the dark emotions.”*

In that short video we just watched, my beloved teacher Joanna Macy showed us what it means to find the power of the sacred, not despite suffering, but in the midst of it. She spoke of how we tend to pathologize pain, when what we need to do is befriend pain. Why? Because when we break through the outer shell of our suffering we discover within it our fierce love for the beauty of the world, because truly, we only despair for the things we love. In her simple gesture of picking up a frost covered leaf and marveling about its beauty, Joanna teaches us that when we embrace our pain for the world, everything in the world becomes more vivid, more alive. How can this not be Good News in bad times?

So let’s look more closely at the light that is embedded in the darkness that surrounds us. Using Snake Vision, let’s see if we can locate the sacred revelations that await us if we abandon hope, and surrender to the wisdom of the dark emotions.

Take the darkness of Uncertainty. My training as an academic is rooted in Western culture’s obsession with Truth and Certainty. For thousands of years, the pursuit of truth has led to the rigor of scientific inquiry and the idea of a ‘well ordered’ life. But now we are living in an age when certainty and order are challenged by gaslighting, misinformation and feckless leaders who spout opinions mired in ‘alternative’ facts. What revelation awaits us in the dark emotions of uncertainty? In such a time, it is more important than ever that we become ‘students of uncertainty’ and engage in a quest to locate within ourselves a mythopoetic identity that is both resilient and timeless, that can hold the tension of opposites between fixed opinions and free-floating anxiety, that can find some sense of constancy amidst the flux of experience. I am reminded of the opening lines of one of my favorite David Whyte poems: *“It doesn’t matter to me if there is one god or many gods. I want to know if you belong or feel*

*abandoned, if you know despair or can see it in others. I want to know if you are prepared to live in the world, with its harsh need to change you. If you can look back with firm eyes, saying ‘this is where I stand’...*”

By opening ourselves to uncertainty and letting go of fixed notions, we enter into the future improvisationally, not certain of anything, but deeply engaged in the art of creating music out of whatever the future brings our way. It is in such a state that the revelation of your own mytho-poetic identity will most likely announce itself to you. And once you know where you stand, where your ecological niche is in the web of life, you are grounded in the dynamic processes of the cosmos itself, a place of deep belonging and communion. How can that not be Good News in bad times?

What about the darkness of grief and sorrow? What Good News, what revelation, awaits us there? We won’t know until we allow grief and sorrow to do their work. But the trance of collective consciousness would have us believe that to talk of grief and death is anathema – something to be avoided, denied and placed in that big bag of the shadow that we drag behind us. However, when we turn to face grief and sorrow, to become what Francis Weller calls ‘an apprentice to sorrow’, Snake Vision rises up to assert a different way of seeing things. With Snake Eyes we see that sorrow is an intensely communal emotion, deserving of community rituals of solidarity and release. By making us aware that “everything we love, we will lose”, sorrow expands our sense of who we are, reminding us of our place in the wider community of the more-than-human world. To grieve the extinction of a species, the beauty of which took million of years to create, but which will never again be seen on the face of the earth, is to be in a loving relationship with those beings and with the creative forces of the universe that gave them birth. It is to be reminded of them as our kin, our ancestors, our teachers, our beloveds – not as simply an object among other objects, but as a communion of subjects of which we are all a part. Instead of a striving ego embedded in a death-phobic (and therefore death-dealing) culture, our apprenticeship to sorrow has the revelatory power to awaken us to our own exquisite but perilous relationship to the web of life that gave us birth, and to which we will return. How can this not be Good News in bad times?

And what about this pervasive sense of fear, the foreboding sense of doom that sits like a heavy rock on our chests, hardening our hearts to the wonder and joy that surround us? What is the revelatory power of that dark emotion? Fear is all about contraction, turning away from the light and rolling into a ball of protection. But in our earlier reading, Clarissa Pinkola Estes offers us a different view. Through Snake Eyes she writes, “*In my uttermost bones I know something, as do you. It is that there can be no despair when you remember why you came to Earth, who you serve, and who sent you here. The good words we say and the good deeds we do are not ours: They are the words and deeds of the One who brought us here.*” Now in Old Testament times, Moses knew who he served and who sent him here. In New Testament times, Jesus knew who he served and who sent him here. These are the venerable God-images that have shaped the evolution of Western consciousness. Unfortunately, that same consciousness is now destroying planet Earth.

The Good News that fear is teaching us is that a new god-image is emerging in the global psyche of humanity as a whole – not as a new religion, but as an awareness that underlies all religions. No one can say for sure what form it will take, but hints are all about us. We can see it in the resurgence of the archetype of the Feminine, with its finely-tuned compassion for all beings in the web of life. As Joseph Campbell said, the New Story will be a mythology of the unified Earth as one harmonious being. We can see it in the revival of the idea of Soul, the interiority and reverence within each person, as well as

the interiority and reverence of the Anima Mundi, the Soul of the World. We can see the shape of a new god-image in the emerging paradigms of science that are moving away from the outworn Newtonian view of the universe as an ordered mechanism, into one that recognizes the universe as alive, conscious and the eternally present ground of our own consciousness. Recent images from the Webb telescope reveal, not a cosmos, but a process of cosmogenesis, of gigantic stars being born of the same stuff, and using the same processes, that created us. The beauty of it makes grown scientists cry! The new god-image, whatever shape it takes, will recognize the entire universe as a unified organism of extraordinary design, reflecting a massive Creative Intelligence. It will recognize that human beings are a bit of that Creative Intelligence recognizing itself. And that Creative Intelligence will become a willing partner to the human species as it navigates its way through its dark night of the soul.

We can actually hear the guidance it offers through what Thomas Berry calls the ‘spontaneities’ of human experience – the dreams, synchronicities, intuitions, intense feeling states, body symptoms, epiphanies, and other psychic phenomena that we experience as visitations from something outside of our ego, something ‘other’. That ‘other’ is the dream of the Cosmos speaking to us. Our job, as conscious human beings attuned to the Creative Intelligence, is to prepare a receptive place for this guidance to land and to act upon the hints that it is giving. In doing so, we fulfill the cosmic role of human intelligence and play our part in the ongoing evolution of the Earth, assisting Earth to fulfill its cosmic destiny: to become a planet of Love. How can that not be Good News in bad times?

So it appears that being born in dark times like these is not a curse, but an opportunity; not an affliction, but an assignment! Everything that we love and hold dear is heightened in intensity. Gratitude and beauty live on the surface of things. Excitement hovers in the midst of the uncertainty. Curiosity abounds, and we are being called by the Creative Intelligence of the Cosmos to live the most meaningful lives ever lived on this planet. As Snake Vision teaches us, when we approach this pregnant time with gratitude and reverence, great things will decide to approach us.

I leave you with this blessing from John O’Donohue for The Good News in bad times:

*May the beauty of your life become more visible to you, that you may glimpse your wild divinity.*

*May the wonders of the earth call you forth from all your small, secret prisons and set your feet free in the pastures of possibilities.*

*May the light of dawn anoint your eyes that you may behold what a miracle a day is.*

*May you discover a new generosity towards yourself, and encourage yourself to engage your life as a great adventure.*

*May the outside voices of fear and despair find no echo in you.*

*And may you know that despite confusion, anxiety and emptiness, your name is written in Heaven.*

*May Divine Beauty bless you!*

**Randy Morris, Ph.D.**, is Professor Emeritus at Antioch University Seattle where he taught in the BA Liberal Studies Program for 30 years and was the coordinator of the Psychology and Spiritual Studies concentrations. His search for an eco-spiritual revelation adequate for our dark night of the species soul has led him through experiences as a vision quest guide, dream worker, martial artist, musician, community ritual leader and elder-in-training. Randy's investment in the future takes the shape of four grandchildren, with another on the way! He can be reached at [rmorris@antioch.edu](mailto:rmorris@antioch.edu).

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Excerpt From: **Letter To A Young Activist During Troubled Times** by Clarissa Pinkola Estes

... Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach. Any small, calm thing that one soul can do to help another soul, to assist some portion of this poor suffering world, will help immensely. It is not given to us to know which acts or by whom, will cause the critical mass to tip toward an enduring good. What is needed for dramatic change is an accumulation of acts — adding, adding to, adding more, continuing. We know that it does not take "everyone on Earth" to bring justice and peace, but only a small, determined group who will not give up during the first, second, or hundredth gale.

...One of the most calming and powerful actions you can do to intervene in a stormy world is to stand up and show your soul. Soul on deck shines like gold in dark times. The light of the soul throws sparks, can send up flares, builds signal fires ... causes proper matters to catch fire. To display the lantern of soul in shadowy times like these — to be fierce and to show mercy toward others, both — are acts of immense bravery and greatest necessity. Struggling souls catch light from other souls who are fully lit and willing to show it. If you would help to calm the tumult, this is one of the strongest things you can do.

...There will always be times in the midst of "success right around the corner, but as yet still unseen" when you feel discouraged. I too have felt despair many times in my life, but I do not keep a chair for it; I will not entertain it. It is not allowed to eat from my plate. The reason is this: In my uttermost bones I know something, as do you. It is that there can be no despair when you remember why you came to Earth, who you serve, and who sent you here. The good words we say and the good deeds we do are not ours: They are the words and deeds of the One who brought us here. In that spirit, I hope you will write this on your wall: When a great ship is in harbor and moored, it is safe, there can be no doubt. But ... that is not what great ships are built for.

...This comes with much love and prayer that you remember who you came from, and why you came to this beautiful, needful Earth,

Clarissa Pinkola Estés, Ph.D.