

Sermon: "Emergence" (Laurel)

In the words of scientist and religious naturalist Ursula Goodenough, "[T]ales of natural emergence [are] far more magical than traditional miracles. Emergence is inherent in everything that is alive, allowing our yearning for supernatural miracles to be subsumed by our joy in the countless miracles that surround us."

I once tried to save a butterfly.

I live next to an old golf course that was converted to a nature preserve and now has walking trails where all the neighborhood dogs explore. One morning, as Henry and I walked down the path next to the pond, I noticed a thin, brittle branch hanging out over the gravel trail. Attached to its tip was the celadon bud of a green and gold cocoon.

So I gently broke the branch and carried it home to keep it safe from the trampling paws of at least my own dog.

And I watched, rapt over the next two days as the casing turned translucent and the black and orange of the monarch wings started to show. I so wanted it to thrive, to burst into the world whole and glorious. I put out sugar water and flowers, milk weed buds and thick green leaves.

But it got stuck. Part of the chrysalis shell held too tightly to its body, trapping two of its legs. That meant that it couldn't use its legs to hold on to the branch and so it couldn't pump the fluid from its body into its crumpled wings and come fully into bloom. And I wanted so badly to be able to help - it was such a small thing and no less heartbreaking for it.

But emergence is not a thing we can do for each other. That's an inside job. Breaking free of the safe place of reordering is sometimes even more challenging than the falling apart and remaking ourselves. It's when we open ourselves, expand into our fullness that we feel the vulnerability of showing that fullness to the world outside our cocoon.

The last few years became a very insular time, one of reordering and trying to stay safe. Both in our individual lives and in the life of this congregation. In March of 2020 we closed our doors and this place became a capsule. We entirely re-ordered how we operated. Everything was online - suddenly church was about seeing each other's faces in little zoom squares instead of the backs of each other's heads in these old wooden pews. We digitized everything and now have an incredible level of agility with information sharing and co-working and teamwork.

But our need for the cocoon has changed, we're no longer living in a world dictated by concerns about safety, not in the same way. So the focus of our work as a congregation has begun to shift - we're not meeting monthly to talk about Covid levels anymore, we're starting to stretch our wings.

This year we've done incredible work to rebuild our Religious Exploration program so that we have the infrastructure to engage and support young people and families. We taught high school OWL and our Youth Group is gaining momentum.

And we've reinvigorated some beloved traditions like circle suppers and the chili and caroling event at Christmas time. We're having the murder mystery dinner and the tea party and finding our way back together.

A lot of organizations struggled immensely these last few years and are having an even harder time breaking free of the cocoon - the transition from upheaval to flourishing is rife with fear and vulnerability and earnest hope.

We as a congregation are not stuck. And we don't need saving, which never works anyways. Sure, we haven't seen the huge spike in new membership that congregations hope for and there are now so many ways to engage that we don't always see everyone face to face on Sunday mornings, but there's life in this place. There are new faces and old friends returning. There's an abundance of love. There's all the work we've done these last few years to transform with the world so that we can emerge more vibrant and graceful than we were before.

And like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon, that's an inside job. Our ability to flourish is a result of everything that goes on inside this place, all of the ways we contribute to the fullness of this community.

So let's expand our wings together, let's emerge into this new season boldly, vibrant and expansive and alive. The world needs more beauty, it needs more room for connection, it needs the hope of hopeful things. And we are most certainly that.

Amen and blessed be.