

## **Service of the Longest Year**

December 30, 2018

5:00 p.m.

created by Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott  
St. Charles Ave. Baptist Church

### **Welcome + Introduction**

You have done a remarkable and brave thing by showing up here tonight. Putting on “going out” clothes, making your way here, climbing those steps, walking into this big room. Bringing yourself here to this place is a courageous act.

Poet Muriel Rukeyser famously asked, “What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?/ The world would split open.”

Thank you for coming to hold space for truth-telling tonight. You’ll not be asked to speak or share. You will have an opportunity to enact a ritual at these tables beside me in just a little while, but you don’t have to do that, either. Know this is a safe and sacred space for you to come as you are.

May our time of poetry, scripture, prayer, silence, and song be a balm to your soul on your journey toward peace and wholeness.

### **Opening Poem**

The Unbroken by Rashani Rea

There is a brokenness  
out of which comes the unbroken,  
a shatteredness  
out of which blooms the unshatterable.

There is a sorrow  
beyond all grief which leads to joy  
and a fragility  
out of whose depths emerges strength.

There is a hollow space  
too vast for words

through which we pass with each loss,  
out of whose darkness  
we are sanctioned into being.

There is a cry deeper than all sound  
whose serrated edges cut the heart  
as we break open to the place inside  
which is unbreakable and whole,  
while learning to sing.

### **Invocation**

Darkness by Sharlande Sledge (adapted)

God of heaven and earth,  
in this drama of the holidays,  
our lines do not follow the expected script.  
Some of us are aching from the inside out  
while others are cheerily celebrating their joy.  
Amid talk about fulfillment and peace,  
loss and pain loom large.

Remind us that you come to us  
as the Incarnate Christ  
whether we have mustered  
the strength to light a candle  
or needed to sit in darkness.  
You reach out to us  
whether we are singing jubilantly  
or weeping uncontrollably.

We wait for you to come to us  
where we are,  
as we are—  
numb,  
grieving,  
fragile,  
coping,  
out-of-synch with the season's songs.

Punch a hole in the darkness

that swallows us  
to let in a glimmer of hope.

Sometimes a pinprick of light  
is all we need.

Amen.

### **Meditation on the Longest Year**

This has been the longest year. The kind of year that guarantees I am, most certainly, not the same person on December 30 that I was on January 1. Does that ring true for you?

It has been a year of shifting and changing, a year of loss and failure. A year of shame and shadows, facing my fragility and short-comings. Some of the absolute very best, highest highs and absolute very worst, lowest lows have happened in my life this year. Do you know what that is like?

I can't speak for you or for what you have carried into this space tonight, and I won't presume to do so. But I can say with confidence that I know you carry so much. Even those of you who are total strangers to me, I know you are carrying grief, pain, terror, sadness, guilt, shame, fear, doubt, confusion, obligation, duty. Maybe only some of that or maybe all of that plus more. That's why showing up here tonight was such a brave action because you are showing one another that being human is really hard. You are telling the truth about your life. Hear me saying tonight: you're doing great. Thank you for sharing this longest year with me and with each other.

In our faith tradition here at St. Charles, we talk a lot about the stories and actions of Jesus as a guide for the road we are walking together. One of the very first acts of Jesus' adult life was building a group of people around him—his team, his tribe, the folks he was going to do hard work with, challenge the empire with, eat good food with, share wine with, laugh and weep with. With this team of people, he went out into the world to bless people in pain, people carrying grief and terror and sadness, just like you and me. He walked around setting people free. In fact, that's some of the language he used often, "I've come to preach good news to the poor and set the captives free."

Sometimes he literally meant meeting the needs of the poor, the oppressed, the incarcerated. And other times, he meant those who are captive to our suffering. He was forever restoring people to community, working mysteriously for people's healing and wholeness, promising that he offered lightness and ease of being to those who were burdened and weighed-down.

My hope tonight in gathering us all here is not just to ritualize what has been and welcome what will be but to do so together. By showing up together, for one another, we have made a team, a tribe, a group of folks to laugh and weep with. Even if your grief and pain and suffering is more than you can bear and remains a private matter, you are here alongside everyone else. That means you are not alone. We are setting each other free right here tonight just by holding our truth out in the light.

As you came in the door tonight, you saw the invitation to take a card and set your intention. I hope you have given some real thought to what you will release and leave behind in 2018, what you will carry with you into the new year, and a healing intention you will set for yourself in 2019.

While we can show up for each other and share the burdens we carry, we cannot do this work for someone else. Each of us must be honest in our own hearts about what no longer serves, what is holding us back, what needs to be released.

Each of us must be clear about what is good and true, the lessons and hopes we carry forward. And each of us must set our own intention about the life we want to live, the life to which we feel called, the life we hope is possible and waiting for us in the light of a new day.

In just a moment, I invite you to come to these table. To my left is a table of candles ready to be silenced. As you name to yourself what you are releasing, blow out a candle or two at that table.

To my right is a table of candles ready to spark. As you consider what you take with you and the intention you set for 2019, light a candle or two to mark that intention.

As you prepare yourself for this ritual, receive these words of blessing:

**For One Who Is Exhausted** by John O'Donohue

When the rhythm of the heart becomes hectic,  
Time takes on the strain until it breaks;  
Then all the unattended stress falls in  
On the mind like an endless, increasing weight.

The light in the mind becomes dim.  
Things you could take in your stride before  
Now become laborsome events of will.

Weariness invades your spirit.  
Gravity begins falling inside you,  
Dragging down every bone.

The tide you never valued has gone out.  
And you are marooned on unsure ground.  
Something within you has closed down;  
And you cannot push yourself back to life.

You have been forced to enter empty time.  
The desire that drove you has relinquished.  
There is nothing else to do now but rest  
And patiently learn to receive the self  
You have forsaken in the race of days.

At first your thinking will darken  
And sadness take over like listless weather.  
The flow of unwept tears will frighten you.

You have traveled too fast over false ground;  
Now your soul has come to take you back.

Take refuge in your senses, open up  
To all the small miracles you rushed through.  
Become inclined to watch the way of rain  
When it falls slow and free.

Imitate the habit of twilight,  
Taking time to open the well of color

That fostered the brightness of day.

Draw alongside the silence of stone  
Until its calmness can claim you.  
Be excessively gentle with yourself.

Stay clear of those vexed in spirit.  
Learn to linger around someone of ease  
Who feels they have all the time in the world.

Gradually, you will return to yourself,  
Having learned a new respect for your heart  
And the joy that dwells far within slow time.