

Reverend Claire Feingold Thoryn
March 1, 2015
Theme: Brokenness
Sermon: Migration Is Beautiful

Call to Worship:

Good morning. We have a special service today, and it is all thanks to the inspiration given by Follen member Karen Longteig, who came to last year's Church Auction of Goods and Services. I had up on the auction a sermon topic, and she had the winning bid! This is always a rather fraught proposal—it is a fun thing to offer, but the topic is a total wildcard. I have minister friends who had warned me off, saying they had had to preach entire sermons on soccer or chickens. Well I was very lucky that Karen won, because she told me about her love of monarch butterflies and her concern for their wellbeing, and asked that I preach on them. Debra and I got together and decided monarchs were so inspiring we could organize the whole service around the lessons of the monarchs, the iconic orange and black butterflies that migrate from Mexico to different parts of the US each year. The worship theme for March is Brokenness, and the monarch butterfly has lessons for all us about brokenness and resiliency.

And so let us settle and rest into this space. Here we have everything we need, in this moment. There is air in our lungs, a roof over our head, caring people around us, sunshine coming in from the windows, and snacks waiting for us downstairs. Here we have everything we need, in this moment. Let us be present, alive, awake together.

Reading: “No Title Required” by Wislawa Szymborska

It has come to this: I'm sitting under a tree
beside a river
on a sunny morning.
It's an insignificant event
and won't go down in history.
It's not battles and pacts,
where motives are scrutinized,
or noteworthy tyrannicides.

And yet I'm sitting by this river, that's a fact.
And since I'm here
I must have come from somewhere,
and before that
I must have turned up in many other places,
exactly like the conquerors of nations
before setting sail.

Even a passing moment has its fertile past,
its Friday before Saturday,
its May before June.
Its horizons are no less real
than those that a marshal's field glasses might scan.
This tree is a poplar that's been rooted here for years.
The river is the Raba; it didn't spring up yesterday.
The path leading through the bushes
wasn't beaten last week.
The wind had to blow the clouds here
before it could blow them away.

And though nothing much is going on nearby,
the world is no poorer in details for that.
It's just as grounded, just as definite
as when migrating races held it captive.

Conspiracies aren't the only things shrouded in silence.
Retinues of reasons don't trail coronations alone.
Anniversaries of revolutions may roll around,
but so do oval pebbles encircling the bay.

The tapestry of circumstance is intricate and dense.
Ants stitching in the grass.
The grass sewn into the ground.
The pattern of a wave being needled by a twig.

So it happens that I am and look.
Above me a white butterfly is fluttering through the air
on wings that are its alone,
and a shadow skims through my hands
that is none other than itself, no one else's but its own.

When I see such things, I'm no longer sure
that what's important
is more important than what's not.

Homily: Migration is Beautiful

The poet, looking at the butterfly, says:

When I see such things, I'm no longer sure
that what's important
is more important than what's not.

Have you heard of the idea of “the butterfly effect”? The term describes “chaos theory.” A meteorologist named Edward Lorenz was trying to explain why it is so difficult to make long-range weather forecasts. As he put it: “Does the flap of a butterfly’s wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?”¹

It's an insignificant event
and won't go down in history.

And yet, for all we know, that one butterfly can change everything. So, what about millions of butterflies?

Last month I was in California for a conference with about 500 other Unitarian Universalist ministers. The first day, I heard that there was a monarch butterfly sanctuary nearby, within walking distance.

So one afternoon a group of us set out on foot to find the butterfly sanctuary. Let me tell you, in this group of ministers, there was not a one of us that had a sense of direction.

Our 15 minute walk was like the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. We went up the same hill twice without ever seeming to walk downhill. We all had GPS on our phones yet still could not figure out which direction to walk to find the sanctuary.

However, we finally found it.

It was a small area, right in the middle of a residential neighborhood, so there were houses right up against it. The sanctuary was really just a few trees, a garden, a small path—not much bigger than my backyard.

In the air were hundreds of butterflies.
Flying near us and high above us.
And they were all over the trees.
A few branches of the trees were thick with monarchs—
on the popular branches, all you could see were butterflies, no leaves visible.
It was really quiet in this little pocket of a neighborhood, just the silent butterflies, flying
and nesting.

¹ Writer's Almanac

We humans had had trouble with our 15 minute walk, even aided by GPS. But these monarchs had been traveling for thousands of miles. They had no GPS, no signage.

They followed an ancient and mysterious instinct,
the migration instinct.
Their bodies led them to sanctuary, to places where
the climate and the trees and the milkweed plants
all came together to make a home,
a waystation before they had to start their journeys again.

Monarch butterflies spend winter in Mexico, high in the mountains, and then when it starts to get too hot, they travel north to the temperatures better suited to their needs—cool, but warm enough for many growing wildflowers and plants for them to eat and rest on.

Since most monarchs only live for a few months, the whole round trip takes longer than one butterfly's life: the monarch that flies into Mexico in November might be the great grandfather of the monarch that first set out the March before.

And yet still, they all somehow know exactly where to go.

Monarch butterflies are probably the most recognized butterfly there is, if not the most recognizable insect in America.

At each stage of metamorphosis they are beautiful:
as caterpillars they have white, yellow and black stripes; then the caterpillar becomes a beautiful pale green chrysalis with gold dots;
as butterflies they have orange and black wings.

It seemed like there were so many monarchs flying around in that sanctuary. But even just a few years ago, there had been many more.

Just twenty years ago, instead of just a branch or two being covered in butterflies, it would have been whole trees.

Instead of individual butterflies in the sky,
there would have been clouds of butterflies in the air
so thick the sky looked orange.

The North American monarch population has declined by 90 percent over the past two decades. [In 1996], there were a billion monarchs. Today, there are only about 35 million.²

² <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/10/141010-monarch-butterfly-migration-threatened-plan/>

One billion to 35 million might still sound like a lot of butterflies so here is another image.

When the monarchs were all at home in Mexico, they used to cover 45 acres of forest. That's like 45 football fields of butterflies. Now, they only cover a little more than one acre of forest...just over one football field.³

These are records lows,
and each year is worse than the last.

That loss is so dramatic that scientists have petitioned the US government to have them classified as an endangered species.

We could lose the monarch, and its amazing migration, forever.

When I hear such things, I'm no longer sure
that what's important
is more important than what's not.

There are three main things that endanger the monarch.

First: illegal logging of their forest home in Mexico.
The Mexican government is working on that one.

Second: climate change.

Third: loss of the plants and habitats the monarchs need along their migration pathways in the US.

About climate change: I know you have heard of "global warming." But that can be a confusing term when we have 7 feet of snow outside. A term I like better is "global weirding." Because of how humans have been changing the earth's climate, the weather is just: weird, less predictable, more extreme.

The monarchs time their migration very carefully to the spring weather and the equinoxes. But in the past two years alone there have been both unusually very hot and unusually very cold temperatures along their pathway—devastating their population.

Beyond climate change, the monarchs have another big obstacle: the loss of the milkweed plants and habitats the monarch needs as it migrates.

Monarchs have evolved to eat and lay their eggs on milkweed, a type of wild plant. Milkweed used to grow everywhere!

³ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/30/us/monarch-butterflies-falter-under-extreme-weather.html>

But now, where once there used to be fields of wildflowers, now there are fields of corn.
This isn't because Americans are eating more corn.
It's because corn byproducts are used in gasoline,
and so farmers can make money by planting lots of corn.

Even that on its own wouldn't necessarily be so bad, because it used to be that milkweed
would grow easily between the rows of corn.
But over the last few decades, farming has used more
and more pesticides and herbicides—
poisons that kill bugs and other plants.
And the corn crops they are planting have been genetically modified to resist those
herbicides, so the farmers can just spray the poison everywhere.

Now nothing grows in between the rows of corn.
It's just dirt.

And so the monarchs have to keep flying and flying, trying to find places to lay their
eggs, places to eat.
They get tired, they get weak,
they can't lay many eggs,
or they die before they are able to lay any eggs at all.

Monarchs aren't the only beings losing their habitats
and dying during migration—
we can see this with bees and birds, and yes, humans.

There is a reason why the monarch is the symbol of immigration reform.⁴

Migration is beautiful, until it is deadly.

Our earth is changing, and we are the ones changing it.

The tapestry of circumstance is intricate and dense.
The flap of a butterfly's wing can change the world.
But what if there are no more wings to flap?

Rachel Carson, whose life work was to warn people about the dangers of environmental
toxins like pesticides,
a few months before she died wrote a letter describing a morning she spent outside,
watching monarch butterflies fly past:

“... I shall remember the Monarchs,
that unhurried westward drift of one small winged form after another,

⁴ <http://migrationisbeautiful.com/>

each drawn by some invisible force. ...
[F]or most, at least, this was the closing journey of their lives.
[... We] felt no sadness when we spoke of the fact that there would be no return...
when that intangible cycle has run its course
it is a natural and not unhappy thing
that a life comes to its end.”

Rachel Carson’s heart would break to learn of what has happened to the monarch since her death.

It is a natural thing for each butterfly to die, and for a new butterfly to take its place.
It is not a natural thing for 965,000,000 butterflies to die in the span of a couple decades.
And it is not something we have to accept.

In just a few weeks, the monarchs will start their journey from Mexico to many parts of the US. Monarchs need milkweed to lay their eggs on, and for their babies—the caterpillars—to eat.

Remember how I said the monarch sanctuary I went to was hardly bigger than my own backyard?
You don’t even need a backyard.
Monarch sanctuaries can exist wherever we plant them.

If you would like seeds to grow native milkweed for monarch butterflies, we have three colors of seed available for you to take home: white, pink or orange, at the Social Justice Action Table at coffee hour downstairs.

Please just take one package so everyone who really wants to plant the seeds can have some.
The Social Justice Action Team will have other suggestions for where to get more seeds and seedlings.

It has come to this: here we have gathered together,
on a sunny morning.
It’s an insignificant event
and won’t go down in history.

And yet: the tapestry of circumstance is intricate and dense.
Imagine the butterfly waking up, ready for spring,
fluttering through the air, looking for a place to rest on her long journey.
And she finds a home, because you planted milkweed.
And the monarch migration continues, because of you.

When I see such things, I'm no longer sure
that what's important
is more important than what's not.

May we make a difference in this world.

Amen.