First Reading - "Progress of Mankind" by James Freeman Clarke, in "The 5 Points of the New Theology," 1886

The fifth point of doctrine in the new theology will, as I believe, be the Continuity of Human Development in all worlds, or the Progress of Mankind onward and upward forever. Progress is the outward heaven, corresponding to the inward heaven of character.

The hope of progress is one of the chief motives to action. Men are contented, no matter how poor their lot, so long as they can hope for something better. And men are discontented, no matter how fortunate their condition, when they have nothing more to look forward to. The greatest sufferer who hopes may have nothing, but he possesses all things: the most prosperous man who is deprived of hope may have all things, but he possesses nothing.

The Apostle Paul tells us that one of the things which abide is hope. If hope abides, there is always something to look forward to, — some higher attainment, some larger usefulness, some nearer communion with God.

And this accords with all we see and know: with the long processes of geologic development by which the earth became fitted to be the home of man; with the slow ascent of organized beings from humbler to fuller life; with the progress of society from age to age; with the gradual diffusion of knowledge, advancement of civilization, growth of free institutions, and ever higher conceptions of God and of religious truth. The one fact which is written on nature and human life is the fact of progress.

Second Reading - "The Hope of Results" by Thomas Merton

Do not depend on the hope of results . . . you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself...you gradually struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people . . . In the end, it is the reality of personal relationship that saves everything.

Sermon - Onward and Upward Forever, By Rev. Gretchen Haley

I have done tons of reading on the meaning of “mission” from a religious perspective.
I actually did a special research project in my second year of seminary that had me interviewing UU ministers across the country about what it meant to be mission-driven.

And yet for some reason, when I hear the word “mission,” I still find the first thing my brain conjures up, is that image of George W. Bush, with that "Mission Accomplished" banner stretched across the USS Abraham Lincoln him, with his thumbs up.

I mean, there is someone who thought - mistakenly it turns out, that he had done what he came to do.

And I know, we've all expressed our outrage, even our shame, at the hubris involved in declaring a war over that was yet to really begin.

But I think it's always like this, when we try to assess our progress. A sense of success comes down to when you decide to take the measurement, and what your imagination will allow you to conceive of what will come next.

Because, like we said a couple weeks ago, life does go on. We are characters plopped down in the midst of a story already in the works, and a story that will go on long after our own narrative comes to an end.

And if that's the case, then how are we to know, when and if we can hang our own "mission accomplished" banners?

Perhaps you’ve heard the story of the Zen Master, who lies on his deathbed. His followers have assembled around him, insistent on hearing his last words of wisdom.

As he lays there, he looks out at all of them and gasps, “Life is a journey.” His disciples pass along this nugget of truth in hushed whispers, until it reaches the newest of his followers.

And as it comes to this new disciple, he loudly and irreverently begins to laugh. The guru himself, on his deathbed, no less, hears this, and reconsiders. And so the absolutely last words the disciples hear are, “So, life is not a journey!”

Despite our desire to live by love alone, to enjoy the journey - we all have at least some sense that Life is not a journey!

That it's not the process that matters - it's the result.

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1 I have seen this story in multiple places, but most recently in Tom Owen-Towle’s Theology Ablaze, in his chapter on Evolution (309).
Life is measured by our *impact*, by the progress we have made, by the continual development we have shepherded in our lifetime. “The *Progress* of Mankind, onward and upward forever.”

Progress did seem so inevitable back in the late nineteenth century when James Freeman Clarke offered us these words as a cornerstone of our liberal faith. Slavery had been overcome. Women’s rights were gaining currency. Education reform was breaking out everywhere. A new day of freedom and equality seemed unavoidable.

You might say, liberals traded in one kind of predestination - the kind that rests in God’s hands, the one that our religious ancestors so forcefully rejected - for another - that is, the kind that rests in our own. As our hymn goes, “We’ll build a land that will bind up the broken.” We *will*. It’s predestined.

When we learn about James Freeman Clarke in seminary, it’s often as a way to talk about the dangers of liberal optimism, our naive faith in humanity. Because as Clarke spoke those words of hope - Onward and Upward Forever - he couldn’t have known to anticipate - the Great War. The Great Depression. Hitler, or the Holocaust. Hiroshima. Japanese internment. The Second World War that would see maybe 70 million dead. Korea, Vietnam.

These are not the signs of continuous human development. Of “mission accomplished.”

James Freeman Clarke couldn’t have known to imagine racism would remain so deeply entrenched after slavery had ended, that we would repeat our tendencies to marginalize one group after another, that hunger would persist in the land of plenty, that we would know of active genocide, and yet feel unable to stop it. The AIDS Pandemic. The state of our political process. The legacies of all those wars, the traumatic stress, the homelessness, the wounds.

These one hundred and twenty five years later, we can no longer confess a clear and inevitable human development. Just as we rejected the Calvinist claim to unavoidable salvation for the elect - it’s hard to agree with Clarke and his contemporaries now - we *know now*, there is nothing automatic in human progress, in growth, nothing to say that time will save us any more than God will.

As Rebecca Parker, President of our Unitarian Universalist seminary on the west coast, Starr King School for the ministry says, “We discover that the world does not appear to be any better off after two hundred years of social activism. On a personal level many of us come to a life crisis that forces us to face the fact that there is something broken in this world - in ourselves, our families, our churches, our workplaces, our communities - that for all our ingenuity, commitment, and genius, we cannot fix. Sometimes we can’t
even get our own churches to be places where people are civil to one another. We come up against our helplessness. We come up against the limits of our faith.\(^2\)

If Life is not a Journey, and instead it is measured by our results, the difference we make by our living, when we realize how often our great and worthy work often fails to impact even those closest to us, we find ourselves in despair. We face a choice to either to give in to that despair, and grief, and let our hopelessness paralyze us - or try to escape the despair through the ever-available sea of distractions - and we all have our favorites - last week, Chris said, golf, TV, skiing, right? I turn to Facebook, and TV singing competitions, Words with Friends, and pop culture magazines.

An another alternative - in these moments, we remember the other way to think about hanging our "mission accomplished" banner. The other "last words" from the Zen Master: Life is a Journey! The \textit{path} is more than the destination. As I've said often this year, the means are our ends, and there is no other measurement of our success than the love we cultivate along the way, the learning we experience, the ways we grow in relationship and in health.

"In the end, it is the reality of personal relationship that saves everything."

When things aren't going as we thought, when things seem all confused, and impossible, and we are teetering on that edge between despair and distraction, we get a phone call from someone who knows us, or we have breakfast with someone who will listen - and somehow, suddenly, we can keep going. We remember, the results will come, or they won't. But we keep going, and we hang our "mission accomplished" banner not when everything's "all done" and "perfect," because we know our lives are the \textit{middle} of a great big story - with volumes before us, and volumes after us. But we hang it when we find ourselves able to stay in the struggle, and yet somehow, keep our hearts open, keep finding joy, and life, in the midst of it all. The power of personal relationships that saves everything.

It wasn't until I did my reading last year in preparation to see the Ministerial Fellowship Committee that I started to learn more about James Freeman Clarke - something beyond the ways he symbolized our naive optimism. He was actually a great minister. A forward-thinker, and a person who helped bend "the moral arc of the universe towards justice" - as his contemporary, Unitarian minister Theodore Parker put it. And in many ways, we might say we are here today because of James Freeman Clarke.

See, Clarke believed that in order for Unitarianism to survive, it had to grow beyond New England. It had to grow beyond the culture and patterns established in colonial days. And he believed that if it failed to respond to the cultural and social differences of western America, it would simply die off. And yet, as the UUA website puts it, Clarke

\(^2\) From \textit{Bless the World: What Can Save Us Now}, 107.
knew "he could never change the deeply entrenched customs by argument, so he would have to lead by example, creating a new kind of Unitarian Church." Which is why, when he was fellowshipped in 1833, he asked the Boston Unitarian Ministers' Council to ordain him as an evangelist, a first for Unitarians. And it's why that same year he headed west - which in those days was Kentucky - to Louisville, to plant the first Unitarian church there. And it's why a few years later he co-founded *The Western Messenger*, a journal that became one of the main ways that Unitarianism spread and flourished even further west than Louisville. To Colorado, for example.

Reading about his life, and his vision for Unitarianism, and his valuing of diversity - he was a pioneer in comparative religion, by the way, and was one of the first to actively seek to create a congregation that held widely diverse beliefs - I mean learning more about his story, I have stopped hearing his words, "Onward and Upward Forever" as a belief in *inevitable* progress, as an insistence on valuing results. And I've stopped hearing his valuing of "hope" as a matter of simply believing that the future will definitely get better one day, if we can just hold on.

I don't mean to argue his intention. It's possible, even likely, he meant them that way, but his life tells a different story. His personal motto tells a different story. "Do your nearest duty," adopted from Goethe. He said it often, we're told. And he lived by it. "Do your nearest duty." Which I hear as a parallel to what I told you last Sunday - "find your greatness," another way of saying, do what you can. Do what you're supposed to do. Say yes to the mission of your own life. And *this* is the promise of progress. That we will all keep saying yes to our nearest duty, saying yes to the mission of our own lives.

James Freeman Clarke was a man who over and over said yes to the mission of his own life, a mission in service of the power and possibility of a liberal faith. It was this personal sense of commitment that made him believe progress was possible. He sacrificed much for a larger vision, and he was blessed to see many results in his lifetime. And yet, there were many disappointments - westerners seemed intent on scorning an institutional religion, and resisted the foundation building that would have allowed them to have real social influence. And just when he thought progress was being made in western Unitarianism, he watched a lot of energy go into fights between those who still wanted to be called "Christian" and those who were starting to feel a wider sense of spirituality, even dropping a claim to theism.

I think there's no way James Freeman Clarke - or others of his day - really believed progress was inevitable. But I do think he and others believed it was *possible* if everyone did their nearest duty. Maybe not immediate results, maybe not even results in their lifetime. He references evolution, after all - and evolution happens in thousands, or millions of years, not lifetimes, or even in a few lifetimes. And though he points to progress as the rule of evolution, just as much, it is struggle and cooperation,

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relationship and mutual transformation. It is slow, and sideways, and sometimes backwards.

Sociologists will tell you, despite the popular rhetoric, there is no such thing as a slippery slope - in any direction. Humans don't get on a track that's inevitable, unstoppable. We stop and we start. We change our minds. We go back and forth, we stand still. Just because things start, doesn't mean they will end up that way. Just because we have established a right to access to birth control doesn't mean that another day that same right might not be up for grabs. As one of my favorite writers, Rebecca Solnit says, "history is not an army, it is a crab scuttling sideways, it is the slow drip of water wearing away stone."

We who seek to save the world;
We, soul savers, earth protectors, precious caretakers who seek a better life for ourselves, our children, for those who will inherit the world we leave behind;
We who long to imagine our walk together will make a difference - in the wide and difficult world, in the private corners of our living rooms - in the confines of our own weary hearts;
We who seek to build a congregation, who seek to gather up those who resist being gathered, who seek to transform lives - our own, and even the lives of others:

*Progress does not come in a straight line. What we preserve today, it will just as likely find new ways of challenging us tomorrow.*

We must hold both of these truths as measures of our mission:
1) Life is not a journey - and so we must say yes to the charge of our hearts, and do our nearest duty; and
2) Life is a journey - we can only stick with it, in the struggle, keeping our hearts open to growing love - so that another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed. The reality of personal relationships saves everything

Both of these must be held together, in all their paradox. So that *no worthy result will compromise the health of relationships; no meaningful destination would fail to cultivate greater love.*

There is no way to covenant; covenant is the way.

*Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law.*

Onward and Upward, forever.

Blessed be. And, amen.