

"THIS I BELIEVE: In the Land of Mystery"

Sandy Reimer

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READINGS:

Responsive Reading - "This I Believe"

Leader - I believe that some common-thread-artery pulses through each of us, connecting everyone, making us many aspects of some kind of sacred Oneness.

~Joan Stevens

Congregation - Unnamable God, I feel you with me at every moment; You are my food, my drink, my sunlight and the air that I breathe. ~ Psalm 16

Leader - I believe that God is a caring God who provides support and strength during difficult times in our lives and helps us recognize peace and beauty around us and within us in ordinary times. ~ Joanne Pohlman

Congregation - God is our refuge and strength, our safety in times of trouble, whispering to the heart, "Be still and know that I am within you." ~ Psalm 46

Leader - I still believe in "God" in the sense that as a whole, all beings collectively contribute to a consciousness that serves a purpose beyond our immediate selves – and when we recognize it, we are made more whole. ~ Jamie Baldwin

Congregation - God is joy and compassion, patience and unchanging love. ~ Psalm 103

Leader - I believe that God calls us—and receives us—in many ways and along many paths. ~ Libby Dunn

Congregation - "Do not fear: I have called you by name, you are mine." ~ Isaiah 43: 1

"This I Believe" by Sally Kimberly— When I was a student at University I attended a national Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship conference. There was a speaker there from Africa who talked about "God in a Box". He stated that Western Christianity made God too small; that we tended to circumscribe the qualities and powers of God. He cautioned against any tendency to limit God, and I have always remembered that. When anyone categorically states that god-is-this or god-is-that, my doubting hackles rise up. But I do not believe that God is unknowable. Theologian Bart Ehrman states he is an atheist because there is suffering in the world. That there is suffering does not prove there is no God. It tells us something very concrete about God that we can know for certainty: God allows suffering. I believe all theology from the time humans have been able to conceive of a Higher Power has been an attempt to explain why.

In my mid-20's I was involved as a passenger in a head-on collision. The passenger door opened and I was thrown with my seat onto the highway. As I was flying through the air I remember thinking "God, don't let me die now—I haven't figured "It" out yet." My next thought was to protect my head. If I had been asked at that time, or even now, I am not sure I could say what "It" was, but I think it was all the unanswered questions still in my life. The longer I live I find there are more and more questions constituting a great Mystery.

When I was little, I remember lying on the playground looking up at the sky trying to understand infinity. I remember thinking "I'll be glad when I grow up because then I will understand infinity". I still cannot comprehend it, any more than I can comprehend the vastness of God. However, I have come to the point where I am comfortable with the

Mystery. The practical application to my life is that I am no longer afraid to fly on airplanes.

"Taking on the mystery is acknowledging that we cannot name the mystery, though we try; we cannot claim the mystery, though we do. The mystery names and claims us, inviting us to take it upon ourselves, as if we were God's spies. ~ *Time to Live – Seven Tasks of Creative Aging*, by Robert Raines.

SCRIPTURE – 1st Kings 19 - the story of Elijah, "and God was in the still small voice."

SERMON - Our worship theme, "This I believe," is modeled after the NPR series of the same name, where people submit an essay affirming one of their pivotal beliefs and supporting that belief with a story. This is my story.

My extended family lineage includes no poets, not even poetry readers, no one who went to plays or discussed novels, no one who read a literary magazine other than *Reader's Digest*. Everyone and everything was very linear, very literal, very concrete. I was a pleaser, for sure, and in everyone's eyes – my parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents – I was a very good girl. I certainly was warm, friendly, and extraverted. And I had a natural ability to be concrete and organized, so I fit in most of the time.

But there was this other part of me that no one understood. If they had had the words, they probably would have said that I had a dreamy side, but that would have been a stretch for them to name. They would, however, have been right, for the part of me they didn't understand was a dreamer, a fledgling poet, one who loved words and phrases and ideas that transported me from the literal to the what might be, that made connections with what couldn't be seen or heard or clearly defined. And that part of me bothered all my adult relatives. I don't remember any nasty adjectives being flung at me, but I do remember being told by aunts and uncles and grandparents and parents: "You read too much." It's how they named what they didn't understand. Reading fed the dreamer in me. Reading allowed me to escape from the endless chit-chat of the women in my family and from the equally endless supposedly-good-natured banter that passed for connections among the men. Reading allowed me to escape to horizons beyond the corridors of my sheltered life.

Early awareness of this part of me came in the summer twilight hours when I was in mid elementary school. My week-night bedtime remained the same year round, so when summer came with its long hours of daylight, going to bed at 8:00pm meant that I had to be in bed when it was still light out. I had a comfy double bed, a hand-me-down from my parents when they got a new bedroom set. One summer night, when I was an especially restless 9 year old, I remember imagining that I was an acrobat in a circus. I was bounding up high on my bed, got caught mid-bounce by my parents, and trouble ensued. From then on, whenever I couldn't go to sleep, I'd creep from my bed over to my bedroom window that looked out over our back yard. I'd kneel on the rug, my elbows on the windowsill, my chin leaning on my arms, and I'd watch the night fall. There was a huge old tree at the edge of our yard with a gigantic hole in the front that I thought must have been caused by a lightning strike year before. On those summer evenings, I'd see the owl perch on the branches of that tree, pronouncing the end of the day. I'd watch the fading colors of the sunset reflected back onto the leaves of the trees and the walls of my

playhouse. Sometimes I'd see a bunny hopping away into the woods behind our fence. I would sit at the window for what seemed like hours, only to scurry back into bed when I heard my parents come up the stairs.

On week-ends, my family went to my aunt and uncle's cottage in southern Maryland off the Potomac River. Often they had adult friends join them for the week-end, so, along with my parents, the adult to child ratio could be as high as eight to two, the two being me and my brother, who was five years younger. As I became 10 and then 12, when I needed to escape from all those adults, I'd just get out my book and read for as long as possible, until someone said, "Put that book down and come over here with us."

More importantly, as I grew even older and I was allowed to walk down to the water and out on the dock by myself, I'd take my book, especially in the late afternoon or early evening, and go to the end of the dock. I'd bring a cushion and sit flat on the weathered boards, with my back to the bench, out of everyone's sight. I'd always tell my parents that I was just sitting there reading, but often I wasn't. Mostly I would sit at the end of the dock and watch the water and the shifting light, and I'd just be. I'd be there and yet I'd also be somewhere else, somewhere both inside myself and all around me as well. I can still hear their voices calling me back in – *Sandra Lee* – when I'd been gone too long for their comfort. I wasn't lonely; I wasn't afraid; I wasn't bored; I wasn't acting out. I simply was at peace in a part of the world that wasn't concrete or defined.

For a long time, I linked what I had felt as a child to the time of day: it was the twilight and the setting sun. Or I linked what I had felt as a young teenager to nature: it was the world of the water and waves and the wind. Or I linked what I had felt when I was older to my need for a little distance from these caring, omnipresent adults in my life: it was time alone drifting into another world of awareness.

When I was a senior in high school, I stumbled into that same space in a very different place: at my church. Like UCG, my church building had many additions, so that you had to go through a series of adjoining wings to get from one meeting space to another. That cold winter night, it was already dark after our youth group meeting ended, and the quickest way to get from our youth room to my family car in the parking lot was through the Sanctuary. I walked into the complete darkness of that church Sanctuary, a place I had never been other than in the light of Sunday mornings, in the midst of the crowded congregation, or as part of the youth choir on busy Christmas Eves. I stopped on this night, sat down, all alone in that vast silent space. There was a streetlight outside shining a little bit of light through the stained glass windows on one side of the pews and shining as well through the stained glass circular rose window over the altar. I was transported. Here was the twilight, here was the water, here was the wind, here was the poetry and the peace, and the solitude, and it all came together in that moment, and it was God.

This I believe: I believe in God. I believe in God's presence in my life. I believe in God's presence in our lives. I believe in God's presence in creation. Yet, if you think for a moment that I can draw you a definitive picture of God, I can not. If you think I can paint concrete images of God in words or creeds, I cannot. I do, however, believe in God and for a very long time, since I was a child, I've been at times in the presence of that Presence, a Presence both within me and beyond me, a Holy Presence of peace and love

and stillness, a presence of poetry and music and mystery, a Presence that has touched my soul and shaped my life.

The God part of that has been more clearly visible and describable to me is the God I see in action: the God I see in every kindness, in every moment of service, in every welcome of acceptance and understanding, in every miracle of forgiveness, in every unexpected healing and reconciliation. And for a long time, throughout my 20s and 30s and into my 40s, that was the God I knew best and lived with and lived for. I have not forsaken, nor will I ever forsake, that God of service and action. Yet I have in this later chapter of my life also reunited with the God of my childhood and adolescence, the God of Presence in whom I can rest.

This other side of God, like that dreamer part of me, dwells in the land of Mystery - not in the land of magic - but in the land of mystery, where what is cannot be easily explained, yet is always a gift, yet is always grace. And I know this side of God in the simple ways of my childhood: at sunrise and twilight, as I sit on the dock and watch the waters and the moon. I know this God again in the quiet of this Sanctuary and other sacred places, and as I navigate the rough waves of painful and difficult and frightening times in my life. I know this presence of God in the midst of tears and grief; I know this presence of God in the midst of joy and gratitude. I know this presence of God, as the prophet Elijah experienced it, in the still small voice inside that Mystery that we cannot find words for, that we cannot fully name ourselves. Instead, as Robert Raines reminds us, it is the Mystery that names us and claims us. "Do not fear," says Isaiah, "I have called you by name and you are mine." Our call is to be open, our call is to find those places and those ways which open us to that Mystery and allow us to be in and with that Holy Presence.

I believe in God - and that belief is the rock, the foundation, the wings, and the promise of my life.

PRAYER - I begin our time of prayer with a story about a little boy at the children's in a church. The minister was talking about God and where to look for God. The little boy said "I find God when I'm walking in the woods." The minister responded saying, "You don't have to go to the woods to find God, because God is the same everywhere." And the little boy said, "But I'm not the same everywhere."

Let us pray: As we breathe in and out slowly, we name silently those places where we feel closest to you. We remember those places and times when we have felt surrounded by or in touch with the Holy, with your Spirit.

We are not the same everywhere, God, so open our souls, we pray, open our hearts, open the schedules of our days and of our weeks and months, to seek those times and those places where we are receptive, where we can hear the melody or the touch of your still small voice within and around us. And, let us not sink into the swamp of rigidity, even about what is sacred, so that we may also recognize your holy presence in what is new and surprising.

For all the ways and times your Spirit moves within us and among us - in the stories of our lives, in sacred places, including this church, in the hands and hearts of others, and in service to this world - we give thanks. Blessed be. Amen.