The American novelist, essayist and poet, Barbara Kingsolver writes, “In my own worst seasons I’ve come back from the colorless world of despair by forcing myself to look hard, for a long time, at a single glorious thing: a flame of red geranium outside my bedroom window. And then another: my daughter in a yellow dress. And another: the perfect outline of a full, dark sphere behind the crescent moon. Until I learned to be in love with my life again.”

We’re entering into the season of Passover and coming quickly to Easter. Both stories speak of such unbelievable travails that culminate with a message of hope. Next Sunday, we’ll focus on the clear vision of hope in Easter, and the following Sunday we’ll look more at the hard days when doubt is our only true response. But today, we’ll take a long, hard look, at what helps us to be in love with life again.

Kingsolver’s words remind me of one of the lessons in the story of Moses that leads the Jewish people to freedom. Liberation didn’t begin with the locusts, or frogs, or rivers of blood; liberation began the moment Moses took a long, hard look. “Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. 3 So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.” The burning bush is an image that we might marvel at as kids – it’s graphic, strange and fantastical. A talking plant, full of fire, but not consumed. Moses finds God in a piece of life that he seems to only fully be witnessing for the first time – alive, bright and bursting.
What if every tree or shrub we came across spoke so strongly to us? What if we strived to take that long hard look at more of what comes before us? What stories of liberation, might the world tell in our wake? The story of Moses is essentially a story of witness; witness leading to action, liberation, and the Passover lessons we have carried with us for millennia.

Witness is a powerful religious practice. In Western circles we tend to look at it either as speaking to the power of one’s faith or religious experience or community – like we heard Emmett speak earlier this service; or to bear witness to pain or suffering and to extend compassion by doing so. Much of our denominational dialogue these past couple of weeks recognizing long-standing patterns of hiring practices that skew toward men, and toward white men in particular, is a form of witnessing to pain and actively extending compassion. It’s being seen.

Our UUA Leadership council sent out a difficult but beautiful letter to our Board Presidents and religious professionals on Thursday sharing the difficult news that two more senior staff at the UUA will be stepping down in the hope that a new leadership team can come together and move us forward. One portion of that letter I’d like share with us all now:

“While many feel shaken by this change in leadership, UUs around the country have also shared many expressions of hope and resilience. This reminds us that the UUA is much more than a staff and a board striving imperfectly to fulfill our mission.

You and your best values are also the UUA. Your congregations, together, are the UUA. Our children and their curiosity are the UUA. Innovative communities that are imagining new ways of living our values are the UUA. People of Color, people with disabilities, people who are trans, and others who have not always found a welcome in our
congregations are the UUA. Your creative ministry and prophetic voice are the UUA.

Thank you for your good ministry and for your support. Your love, generosity, and service are the UUA. Together, we are the UUA. Thank you.” This letter is a form of public witness – recognizing the pain some are feeling, and making it clear that those who feel on the margins are being seen.

Witness, the long hard look, is both seeing and being seen. We find this spiritual notion in other faith traditions as well, although it comes across in a sort of third way. In Hinduism, there’s a notion of Darsan. It’s means “to be seen.” It’s a religious reference to the blessing bestowed upon adherents who may worship before a statue of a God or Goddess in Hinduism. The belief is that by being seen by the God or Goddess, through the eyes of the statue, a blessing is conferred. Being seen is a blessing.

But as Jan Richardson’s poem said before, “This blessing will not fix you, will not mend you, will not give you false comfort; it will not talk to you about one door opening when another one closes. It will simply sit itself beside you among the shards and gently turn your face toward the direction from which the light will come, gathering itself about you as the world begins again.”

All too often injustices happen in the world, and those who are not directly affected seem to never show up. If you’ve experienced hardship, or trauma, and no one is there to lend a hand when you really need it, the experience can be felt as so much worse – dejected and alone. Our faith teaches us that not only are we not alone, but we covenant to affirm our interdependence (our 7th principle.) When we have the strength, fortitude or fortune to give – to take that long, hard look, we are called to do so.
Showing up isn’t about others seeing how special, superior, or important we are. We’re certainly not any more of those than anyone else. Showing up is about solidarity. And when a community goes through a hardship, distant intellectualizations from the safety of our living rooms don’t offer comfort. Knowing someone’s there when you need them matters. Being seen is a blessing.

Sometimes the long hard look is humbling. *(Tell story of the elephant and the blind men.)* Now this story is often told to describe how difficult it is to talk about God, the Holy or the Sacred. To my Christian friends, I come off (at best) as an agnostic, to my atheist friends I come across as a raging believer. The story about the elephant is probably where I actually land in the theological spectrum. There’s a there, there, but we each come to it from our perspective and location.

But this story also applies to understanding any truth in the world, perspectives, challenges, hopes and pains. Sometimes it’s Rich’s earlier story about the magic rock that helped bring joy when it was thrown away (skipping along the water), and sometimes it’s in how we approach larger institutional challenges. From where we’re sitting, we experience the world very differently. Witness, the long hard look, can help us be open enough to hear the truths we’re not quite seeing yet.

It’s also the essence of the prayerful words of Dr. King we heard earlier today from his famous sermon, *Beyond Vietnam* which was preached 50 years ago this week: “Here is the true meaning and value of compassion and nonviolence, when it helps us to see the enemy’s point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves. For from his view we may indeed see the basic weaknesses of our own condition, and if we are mature, we may learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers
who are called the opposition.” Will we forever be so certain that the truth we find from our individual perspective be universal, or will we make space for others who are coming to that same truth from another place? The elephant from our story does have a trunk, and a tail, and legs, but the long hard look helps us to find that it’s more than its separate parts. *When we come upon the burning bushes in our lives, will we hurry past and see only a shrub, or will we find that newness of life that burns bright and bursting?*

Witnessing is also a way of facing; facing the hard things in life. Sometimes accepting, sometimes wrestling with. James Baldwin famously wrote, “Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.” Turning toward, facing, is the first step in building the world we dream about. It’s repeating Moses’ words, “I will go over and see this strange sight” and history will never be the same.

To return once more to where we began, Barbara Kingsolver’s words, “In my own worst seasons I’ve come back from the colorless world of despair by forcing myself to look hard, for a long time, at a single glorious thing: a flame of red geranium outside my bedroom window. And then another: my daughter in a yellow dress. And another: the perfect outline of a full, dark sphere behind the crescent moon. Until I learned to be in love with my life again.”

When we’re down and out, going into another season of Passover and Easter feeling burnt, drained, in despair – what is your single glorious thing? What is your Burning Bush – that which is set afire, but never consumed – that forever draws you forward to purpose, to freedom, to liberating the world from our tendencies to despair?

*Find that glorious thing, and write it on the tablet of your heart – return to it again and again. Our lot is not made easily to peace, and ease.*
I’ll close with the worlds of noted Buddhist author, Jack Kornfield: "If you can sit quietly after difficult news; if in financial downturns you remain perfectly calm; if you can see your neighbors travel to fantastic places without a twinge of jealousy; if you can happily eat whatever is put on your plate; if you can fall asleep after a day of running around without a drink or a pill; if you can always find contentment just where you are: you are probably a dog."