Perseverance is our theme this February, and I can’t think of better examples of perseverance than Maya Angelou and Lucy Stone. You heard some of Lucy Stone’s story this morning from Amy, and perhaps you’ve known stories from Maya Angelou’s life – from her surviving sexual abuse, period of muteness five years following the murder of her attacker the rapist, probably killed by one of her uncles. As she said, “I thought my voice killed him; I killed that man, because I told his name. And then I thought I would never speak again, because my voice would kill anyone.” We are all better for the fact that she did speak again, eventually, and write. Extraordinary life. She died only four years ago.

And I threw in a little Thoreau this morning as well, because there’s a steadfastness in the life he lived – his life as a transcendentalist, naturalist, writer of Walden and the important essay on Civil Disobedience – lifelong abolitionist. These three persevered – were tenacious and determined to change the trajectories of their life stories and influence a wider culture, American culture – in a way that, unfortunately, still seems to be needed. Their perseverance made a significant impact on our lives, and our work is not done.

When one perseveres and has staying power, it can require some letting go as well. It took letting go to hang onto the dream Lucy Stone had. She had to let go of her father’s approval. She had to let go of all kinds of approval. It was about being a woman and going to college when only one college at the time admitted women, and then, in college, deciding she wanted to be a lecturer, which was not done by women at the time. How did she hang on to her dreams in a time of such discrimination and oppression? How did she shed the belief system around her and forge new ground?

Lucy Stone was a Congregationalist, but became disenfranchised by the fact that women could not be voting members of the congregation, and by their public condemnation of the Grimke sisters (these were sisters who had been raised by a slave-holding family in the south who spoke publicly against slavery). She was apparently expelled by the Congregationalists, after which she joined the Unitarians.

Are there any Lucy Stoners in the room, besides me? Lucy Stone was famous for hanging on to her maiden name when marrying – and that women who do so, are sometimes called Lucy Stoners.

When I arrived here last spring to candidate with you, I heard that you had had a hard winter last year. That the cloud cover had persisted for months and you had record snow and blizzard conditions and freezing rain and by the time I arrived in May to meet you, several of you told me how glad you were that winter had passed and we were into a different season. Of course, my first winter with you has been quite different. Except for the ice December 24th which triggered the cancellation of Christmas eve services, it has been a mild and sometimes even sunny winter. When I set aside worries of global climate change, I have actually enjoyed this mild winter. The winters in Michigan were never this mild, in my 15 years there. They were harsh and cold and difficult – for me – to endure.

In our Michigan backyard, however, we had a bunch of misplaced bamboo. Invasive species, you would call it, though intentionally planted, I am sure, in a different era. Hard to control. And most of the year, we fought mightily with the bamboo. However, in the winter, I admit to enjoying it. It would stand out. When all the other plants had turned brown and dropped their leaves, the bamboo would remain green. It would hang on to its color through the winter and then not turn brown until June, whether the other plants had renewed
their color, when everything else was budding and becoming green. I became fond of this bamboo because it always stood in contrast to the present season and reminded me that another season was on its way.

In the midst of winter, my bamboo was green and reminded me that spring will come.

And of course, we know that we who survive hard times, those who survive slavery and oppression, abuse and discrimination, intolerance of all kinds, we who not only survive, but can thrive best, are ones who have once experienced a nurturing environment – if you’ve experienced it, you can imagine it, and you can imagine experiencing it again. That experience, that knowledge, can help us hang on through the tough times. Through the grief. Through the uncertainty, through the winter months.

And here’s the good news, even if you’ve never experienced it – you have your whole life ahead of you to experience it. In fact, it can be considered the work of our lifetime to re-work those primary relationships until we succeed in creating a nurturing environment for ourselves – constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing our relationships until we nurture ourselves into that faith in Life necessary to persevere through the tough times.

And of course, we can’t do it on our own. None of us survive on our own.

How do we cope in times of trouble and persist with our dreams, despite the messages around us? Writing the paper wasn’t hard, Dan told us, it was writing it in spite of the image in his head of himself as poor, unshaven, unwashed, destitute, and depressed. Perseverance, he told us, is about choosing to believe that his past does not define his future. It is about believing he is not who he was, but who he is becoming.

How do we hang on to that belief in ourselves? How do we persevere?

We hang on to others. We hang on to the truth as we know it. We hang on through the fear .. we persist, we cope, we make do –

Sometimes our lives are in a growth pattern, like the spring, with new leaves and shoots bursting everywhere, color emerging and complexity developing. And other times, we’re in a winter kind of holding pattern, hanging on, changing to be sure, but less visibly–changes that happen under the earth, deep down in the root system.

It feels very much like this latter pattern these days in this country. At best, we persevere, holding on – re-evaluating our place in the world and the values at stake, the national narrative. I think of my friend Matthew’s sermon in December – the Rev. Matthew Cockrum, a chaplain at Salmon Creek Legacy hospital, when he spoke of Hope and how sometimes hope comes in the act of endurance. Endurance, perseverance – related acts, getting us through hard times until we can embody changes that must take place.

I’m not suggesting we don’t take action during this winter season of our nation. Quite the contrary – but I do suggest that it is hard, that we are weary, that it can feel hopeless and bleak – that the roots lie deep below the surface and are not easy to locate and find life. We must keep going, keep centered and steadfast – and not expect results to come quickly or brightly and shiny and overt. Our work is deep and slow, significant and hard to measure.
I want to celebrate this morning this kind of growth pattern, perseverance, because it’s harder to notice, harder to celebrate, little recognized or honored in our culture and in some ways, the most important kind.

It’s hard for me to imagine saving my money for nine years, like Lucy Stone did – not a part of the story we told this morning, but she did, in order to attend college. It took more than nine years to pay for college, but with student loans, I didn’t have to wait to go. I went first, and then figured out how to pay for it.

Which seems to be the way of the world. Patience is not an attribute particularly honored in this culture. We can get distressed if the traffic slows us down, or the line at the grocery store or post office is too long. I was talking with someone on the phone this week, as we were both looking at our computer screens for emails from each other, phone on one ear – and impatient about locating the information we had just sent each other – and sometimes in moments like that, I just laugh at the absurdity. We expect so much so fast that it becomes quite difficult to give ourselves up to whatever the moment brings.

I remember jogging on the beach in Central America, in Honduras, when I was there as a Peace Corps volunteer – I would jog, just for exercise. It was actually a very short-lived exercise plan. In part, because all along the way, on the beach, folks would stop me to ask what was wrong and where was I running to? Who was hurt? How could they help?

Though jogging is no longer a part of my routine, I do seem to spend an inordinate amount of time running here and there – often losing sight of the purpose and larger questions – like where am I going. Who is hurt? How could I be helped, or how can I help others?

Sometimes we have to settle down, in order to re-focus on the big questions and the root systems – and some times we just have to persevere until that focus comes. Often at the first diagnosis of a health problem, we have to hang on through the uncertainty and fear. Or in the midst of some great injustice, we have to hang on through the hurt and pain until we discover our next move, and a collective act of defiance and justice-making.

I think we all may have a little whiplash after the events of a year ago last November. We’ve had these great bursts of collective action – the women’s march, the meetoo movement, hashtag time’s up – but all the while, the administration that was put in place that unsettling day in November 2016 has been sounding its divisive rhetoric and taking unprecedented actions that will be hard to undo long into our future.

Perseverance. We almost define our history by naming those people and events who were out of sync with the rest of the world at the time, kind of like the bamboo in my Michigan backyard. We celebrate the Lucy Stoners, the first women and men in more recent history to declare that women share full citizenship and rights and partnerships alongside men. Or I could go back further and talk about Michael Servetus your original namesake - the name you took at the founding of this congregation. Servetus who hung onto his truth – his belief in one God – refusing to recant despite torture and burning and death.

“Though you have been warned And given plenty of explanations Reasons to do otherwise You have persisted” wrote Gretchen Haley in homage to Elizabeth Warren.

But I think it works also for Michael Servetus. He persisted with his truth that the trinity could not be found in the bible. Servetus was burned at the stake by John Calvin for it. But perhaps the story of Sebastian Costellio is more to the point.
Costellio wrote a treatise called Concerning Heretics following the execution of Servetus. Costellio claimed to never having read Servetus’ work—he didn’t claim that Servetus was right, just that:

“To kill a man is not to protect a doctrine, but it is to kill a man. When the Genevans killed Servetus, they did not defend a doctrine, but they killed a man. To protest a doctrine is not the Magistrate’s affair (what has the sword to do with doctrine?) but the teacher’s… When Servetus fought with reasons and writings, he should have been repulsed by reasons and writings.”[i] (page 46 Howe)

That statement of tolerance and respect is truly the center of our faith for me—this non-creedal faith that does not demand you adhere to a church doctrine, or my belief system as the minister of this church. We expect, rather, that you believe what you must. Dan’s belief that he is not who he was, but rather who he is becoming. “when we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within” That you examine your own beliefs and challenge them and refine them...

Doing so, I contend, can help you hang on through times of uncertainty or great injustice.

I always come back to Thoreau—again I’m jumping forward three hundred years from Servetus and Costellio—back to Lucy Stone’s era. But the words of Henry David Thoreau come back to me again and again, “I wish to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life. Nor do I wish to practice resignation, unless it is quite necessary. I wish to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life”

Living deep, I think, requires perseverance. Times where change may seem imperceptible, and it may be hard to focus on a larger goal—times where we may feel out of season, like the bamboo in my back yard, with everything around us. Times when everyone else has let go, but we’re hanging on for some barely imperceptible, underground reason that, with time and effort, with perseverance, may yet become clear again.

“You may shoot me with your words,

You may cut me with your eyes,

You may kill me with your hatefulness,

But still, like air, I’ll rise.”

wrote Maya Angelou

We may be rising slowly. We may be moving imperceptibly. But we have persisted. Sometimes the movement is underground and looks like survival, endurance and perseverance. Coping, persisting, changing under the deep soil. Living deep.

But each week “we gather That we might Offer one another courage, strength Healing, hope And this promise to Persist in kindness, Persevere in compassion And Prevail in a life that is for more than ourselves”

Persevering through great uncertainty and ambiguity—surviving the winter—hanging on to others and to the truth as I know it. “ Guiding hands and hearts and spirits into faith set free from fear”
Persevering like Elizabeth Warren, Maya Angelou, Lucy Stone and Henry David Thoreau – or persisting like Miguel Servetus and Sebastian Costellio. Some of them worked hard and fast – I think of Servetus kind of like the flame he was engulfed in – living a short life, but full of energy and influence – and some of them were slow and steady, like Lucy Stone – saving for years to go to college and fighting steadily for not only the abolition of slavery and women’s suffrage, but simply to speak about those issues in public.

There’s so much suffering and injustice still to remedy in this world and in our lives. But the fire of our commitment demands a deeper justice. I persevere with the hope that much can yet be done, is being done, and that working together is a simple but important beginning, a way to “prevail in a life that is for more than ourselves.

_Benediction_

Though you have been warned And given plenty of explanations Reasons to do otherwise You have persisted. As we have paused this morning from the chaos of the world, be carried through your week with the determination to persevere.

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* Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.