Of all the classes that I had to take while in seminary, one of the most frustrating was the Introduction to Christian Theology course that was required of all seminary students. It was not that I had any difficulty with any of the learning concepts that were presented in the class. Nor was it that I was against taking part in any of the class discussions—although, admittedly, many of the writings by the “early church fathers” that we were asked to read were incredibly boring. The problem that I ran into was finding a way to translate many of the things that we talked about in such a way that was relevant and spoke to my UU context. One such concept was the topic of salvation. If you do not already know, Christian seminary students love to discuss the topic of salvation. Our class spent the better period of several weeks discussing every single aspect of salvation: what it was, who finds it, where does it come from, how do we earn it, and how is it decided who receives it. During all these discussions, I can clearly remember thinking to myself: Do we have to keep talking about this? Aren’t there more interesting theological topics that we can be talking about?

As UUs, our belief in universal salvation is one of the things that I love most about our faith tradition. I have always been drawn to the hope and the positivity of its message. How can you not love a message that says that everyone wins? How can you not love the message that the Divine—whatever form it may have—thinks that every single person is special and deserves to be close to them? We are unlike our Christian siblings in that we do not have to consume ourselves with the fear and anxiety of whether salvation is something that we will earn or be granted. It is something that is intrinsic to our very nature—it is always with us and is something that will always continue to remain with us throughout our lives and into the hereafter. Simply put, it is something that we have because of who we are as children of the Divine

But if we hold this to be true, then we arrive back at the same question I kept asking myself in that seminary classroom: why do UUs need to concern ourselves with talking about salvation? What is there to say? Is there anything worth saying?

The reality is that our Universalist heritage—those of our fore-bearers who held the belief that everyone is saved and that God would not condemn God’s people to a lifetime of hellfire— goes much deeper than a simple belief that every person is “saved” or regarded as special in the eyes of the Divine. It reminds us that any part of any system of oppression or inequality that is put into place that distances humans from each other and creates division is something that is a completely human construct. We are unique, we are special, but we will never different or less than in the eyes of the Divine. It is only when humanity is acting in its own self-interest that we are fed the false truth of certain people being better or more deserving than others. Our Universalist ancestors framed it in a simple statement: my salvation is bound up in the salvation of others. If we are truly to see that we all have salvation, we are called to remove all barriers and obstacles that block others from seeing and living into the salvation that is our right as special creations of the Divine. The mark of us having true salvation is shown by what we do in the world for others to make sure that no one is in a situation where they are made to feel like they are less than, or where they feel like they have to go without. This calling is our duty as humans, but it is especially our duty as UUs.

As our Living Tradition speak of “words and deeds of prophetic people throughout history,” we are blessed with many examples in our history as a faith tradition that illustrate this. One of the most interesting for me was a gentleman by the name of Thomas Mott Osborne. Now, in the great pantheon of famous Unitarian and Universalist names in history, I’m willing to bet that Thomas Mott Osborne’s name is one that isn’t readily mentioned by many people. In fact, by a show of hands, how many people here today have actually heard of Thomas Mott Osborne? Thomas Mott Osborne—whose picture is one the front of your Order of Service for today—was born in 1859 and died in 1926. He was the grandson of one of the organisers of the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention that fought for the right of women to vote, and he made a name for himself early on as a New York State politician and industrialist. But he is most known for his legacy as the head of two of the most notorious prisons in the United States: Sing Sing Prison in Ossining, New York and Portsmouth Naval Prison in Kittery, Maine. He became famous for his leadership, but also his unconventional administration style. With each of the two prisons that he managed—both of which were considered to be two of the most dangerous in the country—he would periodically incarcerate himself for a week, living as a prisoner in the same conditions in which his prison population was living. He did this so that he could see how humane the prison conditions were and what reforms or improvements needed to be implemented. At a time when those in prison were seen as no longer being worthy of being considered as human, Osborne set up the Mutual Welfare League after his first incarceration at Sing Sing to help advocate for the rights of prisoners to humane treatment and advocate for a system of self-government that involved both prisoners and guards. He would continue to develop this idea during his time at Portsmouth Naval Prison into an organisation that was the precursor to the Osborne Association—a prison reform organisation active to this day whose website speaks of their mission *“to replace punitive systems with community-generated solutions that promote healing, equity, accountability, and justice”* and *“offers individuals most affected by the criminal legal system to heal, repair harm, and thrive.”* When Osborne died in 1926, one of his final requests was to be buried in a Portsmouth prison uniform—an eternal sign of the fact that he felt that he died no better and no different than the prisoners that he oversaw.

Arguably the most famous of all the prophetic Universalists throughout history, whose words and deeds led to a renewal of the spirit was the founder of the American Red Cross, Clara Barton—also pictured on your Order of Service for today. Initially a very timid girl, she started out as a schoolteacher and an advocate for educational reform in the state of New York, eventually rising to become a clerk at the U.S. Patent Office in Washington, DC. The outbreak of the American Civil War would change everything for Clara, and she would become involved in her community to supply food and supplies to the troops. Her experience with taking care of her sick brother in childhood would motivate her to go to the front lines and offer much needed medical attention for both Union and Confederate soldiers—earning her the nicknames “the American Florence Nightingale” and “the Angel of the Battlefield.” Her deeply held Universalist faith called her to provide medical attention to all people regardless of what side of the battlefield that they were on, because they were all equal in the eyes of the Divine and that is how they should be in this life as well. Her work and her achievements would reach the attention of Dr. Louis Appia of the Red Cross movement in Geneva, Switzerland, who would personally invite her to start the American chapter of the Red Cross. She accepted the offer, and the American Red Cross was started in 1881 out of Barton’s country house in Dansville, New York.

My point with these two examples is to illustrate the fact that believing that we are saved and that everyone else is saved is only half of what we are called to do as Unitarian Universalists. It is that deeply held belief that is what compels us to go out and to make a difference in our communities and physically remove those barriers that separate us from each other and the Divine. I know that this congregation in particular has been very active in its support for Family Promise of San Joaquin County and has been an integral part of that organisation’s community-based response to help reduce homelessness and to empower low income families in San Joaquin County to achieve sustainable independence. I was touched to be in attendance at the dedication of the Family Promise Day Centre—which I know many here were instrumental in helping to become a reality—and to have a conversation with their executive director Jory Gwasdoff in which he told me that “your congregation has so much heart and is always willing to do whatever it takes to help.”

The question of what salvation means for us as UUs is the same impetus that reminds me of the work for social justice that we are called to commit ourselves to both in our local and global communities—the same social justice that our Universalist ancestors like Thomas Mott Osborne and Clara Barton worked for and whose legacy carries on to this day and continues to have a lasting effect towards making a positive impact for the future of our society to come. My challenge to you on this day is to imagine together where that heart and that willingness to help can take us as we look to the future and look to our own Stockton community. I know how many of you in this congregation are proud Stocktonians and I know that so many of you have been and continue to be active in our communities. I want us to look at where are there still those physical barriers that separate us from each other. How can we go out and partner with those organisations in our Stockton community to be those people to go out and show our belief in the salvation of this world through our actions. It may not be something that we can do alone or single-handedly. But if we can allow ourselves to be guided by the love that we have for humanity, it can help us to find others that want the same thing as badly as we do. And it is our partnership and our work together towards that same goal that can do amazing things to change the world, and make it as special as we know that it is and that it can be.

May it ever continue to be so. Blessed be. Amen. Shalom. Assalamu Aleikum. Namaste. Thank you all so much.