

Advent Sermon Dec. 15, 2022 by Janet Shortall

Opening Words

If there were no Advent, we would need to invent it. We human creatures, in spite of all that has happened to us and been done by us, are still hopeful. Something new, something vital, something promising is always coming, and we are always expecting. Thus in Advent, candles are lighted to mark the time of preparation, and with each new light, our anticipation grows—as it should, We are, after all, a hopeful people, and that hopefulness deserves a festival. Advent is a time of anticipation and as long as we expect, as long as we hope, someone will light a candle against the prevailing darkness and neither the winds of hate nor the gales of evil will extinguish it. Come let us share fellowship in this season of Advent. (John A. Taylor) (UU minister emeritus, First Unitarian)

Reading : A Mood of Expectancy by Richard Gilbert

The earth has turned once more in its accustomed way,
And again our footsteps quicken
Our voices are raised in familiar chorus
The sights and sounds of Christmas coming,
Greeting our ears and eyes
Almost as if we had never seen or heard them before.
There is a mood of expectancy.
What we are to expect, we do not know.
The least surprises are hidden beneath bright paper and graceful ribbon;
The great surprises are the magic that happens
Whether we will it or not.
There is a mood of expectancy in these days of anticipation
And the beauty is -- we do not know what to expect!

Tomorrow is an open door,
An untraveled journey,
An untouched feast.
Advent is like that -- it is a mood of expectancy
For out of the birth of the humblest babe
May come one of the great prophets of the human spirit,
And out of each of us, proud or humble,
May yet come truth and beauty and goodness we cannot now imagine.
advent is a mood of expectancy

Sermon: Hearing the Invitation of this Season of Advent

When my son was five years old, he came home from kindergarten one day so excited to share with us this amazing story he had heard about at school. We were barely home when he burst with excitement telling us, his dad and I this story about a baby born, and there were animals and kings who brought gifts...

Not meaning to interrupt, I remember just saying, "you mean the baby Jesus?"

The wonder gone in a flash as he said (with a twisted look of dismay) "well you probably then know the rest of the story!"

Nothing I could say would return him to his wonder of this remarkable story new to him. A baby in a stable held in care, given gifts, surrounded by kind animals, He hadn't heard the story yet of why they were in a manger He just had the wondrous romantic story that could only elicit awe. At 5, he knew what it felt like to be small in the world, And that story where everything and everyone was bringing comfort and safety to this new baby. He couldn't wait to tell us of this story that had delighted him.

Awe and wonder are deliciously contagious, but children seem so much more ready for it. I have so many memories of hustling my sons when they were young to get here or there only to be stopped in my tracks when one of them would pause to look up at the stars or point out a tiny frog or a salamander on our path.

As a child myself, I loved the part of the midnight Christmas Eve service, where light would fill the sanctuary from our lit candles and at the right moment, a child would process to the front of the church to lay the baby Jesus statue in the manger and we would all sing. And it was awesome.

My family would then travel home, almost always in the freezing cold, snow/ice—when I was in high school, my family moved to a small, isolated town where we lived on the top of a very impressive hill, the last mile or so of the road, well, often icy and only rarely plowed well. If memory serves me well, I recall that nearly all of the years when heading home from Christmas Eve services when living there, our car would only make it to the bottom of that last hill and we would need to park the car off to the side and off we would go on foot. It was enough of an occurrence that in later years, we loaded up the car up ahead of time with snow pants and extra hats to wear over our Sunday best Church clothes when returning home. Why did we insist on repeating this annual ritual when we knew we would be more likely as not be hiking home in the ice and snow and cold? Our judgment defied logic, looking back, I suppose we just couldn't resist that annual ritual of candles, the music, and wonder.

Once home it was time for a full meal and presents. There had been a time in which we would instead head to bed to experience the full glory of Christmas-on-Christmas morning, but you see I grew up with 6 siblings, close in age and as we (by “we” I mean my four brothers) in an attempt to scout out the presents under the tree, managed to knock over the tree, ornaments flying/several years running. So, my parents created the

new plan, with us all heading to bed closer to 2 am with full bellies and gifts unwrapped, ensuring my parents would then be able to safely sleep through the night.

The problem with this plan is though is that, that anticipatory joy, waking up on Christmas morning... it was gone, no wonder, no magic. Sure, there were toys still waiting but as most adults know, so often it is the anticipation of something wonderful that delights the spirit.

In the Christian calendar, we are in the third week of Advent. A contemplative time of anticipation of Christmas. I understand the Advent wreath that accompanies this time of year in Christian churches was the idea of a smart Lutheran minister who understood that children needed a way to meaningfully measure time in anticipation of Christmas.

As a child I loved the quietness of Advent services that ritualized anticipation/longing for the arrival of Christmas, especially the music—the hymn we sang earlier was always sung on the last Sunday before Christmas. “Music has the tremendous ability to impact how we feel: it is a language of its own and expresses and conveys ideas almost intuitively.” (see: <https://parish.holytrinitysp.org/news/sacred-music-three-events-to-tell-of>) I must confess, I am one of those people who rarely hears or recalls lyrics, it’s all about the melody for me and I love how this hymn echoes the longing many of us feel this time of the year when the daylight barely appears. This seasonal longing has a certain ache and the minor key of this hymn strikes that tone magnificently. There is also a discernable trace of vulnerability in this time of year, requiring greater care to stay warm and safe.

Ah, but like the experience of my son when he heard the Baby Jesus story for the first time, the culmination of this hymn offers this reassuring resolution, the reminder that we are each of held in care. Emmanuel, God with us, in whatever way we each understand

or name, that which hugs us close to one another, and feeling more settled within ourselves.

In our busy often preoccupied lives, are we adults not even more in need of ritual, practices that help us to savor this seasonal mood of expectancy. How lucky our faith tradition invites us all to partake and appreciate the rich diversity of religious and cultural celebrations of how light, hope spring forth from the sacredness of the Dark, (including our new one Emily shared with us last week, “Chalica—an 8 week ritual that began last Monday of celebrating our UU spiritual principles with lighting rainbow candles. Consider the merits of celebrating Advent, much like Chalica, it is about creating space within one’s heart to commune with the expectancy mood of the Christmas spirit, that when embraced and savored gives rise to a generosity of spirit that is so needed in our shared world.

This time right now, invites us to welcome this seasonal mood of expectancy.

To be on the look out

For out of the birth of the humblest babe

May come one of the great prophets of the human spirit

And out of each of us, proud or humble,

May yet, come truth and beauty and goodness

we can not imagine,

I beg of you, welcome in this mood of expectancy and may it bless us all

Helping us to be bearers of hope, peace, Joy and Love.

Blessed be.