

ADVENT SERVICE
Unitarian Universalist Community Church, Augusta, Maine
November 27, 2005

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

PRELUDE

ANNOUNCEMENTS

THE LIGHTING OF THE CHALICE

WELCOME

HYMN #225 "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"

UNISON AFFIRMATION

Between holidays let us pause, Thanksgiving has given us cause
On faith, hope, love, joy, patience to call, As Advent does upon us fall.
Caring for details great and small, We stop to reflect and to recall
The deeper focus of the season, That sharing gives us reason.
Signs of the season are all around, Lights, ads, songs and sounds abound,
But in our hearts, our spirits soar, Knowing love is the season's core.

TIME FOR ALL AGES "The Advent Wreath Named Patience"

Children leave for General Activities

OFFERING

OLD HUNDRETH

From all who dwell below the skies,
Let Faith and Hope and Love arise,
Let Beauty, Truth and Good be sung
Through every land by every tongue.

SHARING JOYS AND SORROWS

RESPONSIVE READING: "The Candles of the Advent Wreath"

[Leader names the candle, and the congregation responds, with the last part in unison.]

FAITH. The candle for the First Week is for FAITH. What is faith?

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. By faith we acknowledge a heritage from many traditions, which call us on our own search for truth and meaning.

Faith is knowing that our existence makes a difference, that we are important, that we are integral parts of the human experience.

HOPE The candle for the second week is for HOPE. What is hope?

Hope is the ideals and aspirations that have given light to people in times of darkness, and strength and courage to people in times of trouble and defeat.

Hope is the understanding that we have choices, choices in how we react to situations, to others and to our own thoughts. Hope is saying "YES!" to life.

JOY. The candle for the third week is for JOY. What is joy?

Joy is the enthusiasm for life, the celebration of a child's discovery, the liberation in a religious tradition that challenges us with questions rather than with creeds.

Joy is the celebration of the creation and of life.

LOVE The candle for the fourth week is for LOVE. What is love?

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not

insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

Love is kindling our compassion, and receiving the love of others. Allowing ourselves to receive love acknowledges that we are beings worthy of the attention of others.

PATIENCE The wreath itself symbolizes eternity by its shape and life from the evergreens. PATIENCE is the virtue attributed to it. What is patience?

Patience is the ability to recognize and live with the cycles of life, from energy to renewal, from actions to resting, from pushing to letting go.

Patience is realizing that time is a resource, and patience is its keeper. Take time, in the rush for a deep breath, time to listen to the small voice inside

Faith, hope, love, joy and patience are ours throughout this Advent season.

READING From *The Old Story of Salvation*, Sophia Lyons Fahs, Starr King Press, Beacon Press, Second edition 1957, p. 118-119.

The Bible is seen as a source of the story of Salvation.

Is this “the story of the Bible,” as some people say? The answer is both “yes” and “no.” It is the story the Bible tells if one thinks of the Bible in the old way, as “the Holy Book” in which God has revealed his plan of salvation or his story of man’s history, destiny, and hope. It is the story that millions of people *have thought* and *still think* the Bible tells.

It is not the story the Bible tells for those who search this collection of sixty-six ancient books, as they would search the writings of other men, to find out what may have been the historical experiences behind the records. It is not the story the Bible tells for those who study it in order to find the words of men, rather than “the word of God.”

It is, however, the story that *has come out of the Bible*. In fact, it has come out of two Bibles now joined into one. The first of these is the Jewish Bible, which is the one Jesus studied in the synagogue. Christians now call this the *Old Testament*, meaning the *Old Covenant with God*, or *God’s Old Plan of Salvation*.....

During the latter part of the first century and on into the second century, [the] ardent believers in the Savior God began collecting everything that had been written about him [Jesus] and all they could find that told of the beginnings of this new sect called Christians. Finally, sometime in the fourth century after Christ, a committee chose twenty-seven of these documents which they judged to be the best. These were gathered together in one book and given the name *New Testament*, or the *New Covenant*, or *God’s New Plan of Salvation*.

MEDITATION “The Lord's Prayer (One Possible New Translation from the Aramaic”

"Prayers of the Cosmos: Meditations on the Aramaic Words of Jesus", Neil Douglas-Klotz., HarperSanFrancisco 1990, p.41

O Birther! Father-Mother of the Cosmos,
Focus your light within us -- make it useful:
Create your reign of unity now --
Your one desire then acts with ours,
as in all light, so in all forms.
Grant what we need each day in bread and insight.
Loose the cords of mistakes binding us,
as we release the strands we hold of others guilt.
Don't let surface things delude us,
But free us from what holds us back.

From you is born all ruling will,
the power and the life to do,
the song that beautifies all,
from age to age it renews.
Truly -- power to these statements --
May they be the ground
from which all of my actions grow: Amen."

SPECIAL MUSIC

HYMN # 228 "Once in Royal David's City"

SERMON "What Are You Waiting For?"

As I was growing up, Christmas was the celebration of the birth of a savior who would intervene so that we would be found worthy of heaven. The focus was on the hereafter. That was my mother's religion. But in collage I rejected the focus on the afterlife and was concerned with how the life and teachings of Jesus applied to life now. And salvation was based on the premise that people were basically evil, that only intervention from God, such as through his son Jesus, would be adequate, which I did not believe. So where did that leave the whole message of Christmas? In discussion with my father, who was a liberal Baptist minister, I discovered that he did not believe that Jesus was God, but a man who had developed a special relationship with God, and the trinity was a way to try to describe the indescribable. *Salvation, then, was right relation with God rather than being saved from sin.*

I don't remember observing Advent, except for the Advent Calendars. Advent is to Christmas as Lent is to Easter. Each Christmas, and indeed each Easter, I have to face the person of Jesus. What do his life and death, and or rather his living and dying, have to do with my spiritual journey? And the answer may be that Jesus is not relevant to me. But these times of preparation challenge me to intentionally consider how I fit into Christianity. In reality, it has been in preparing Advent services over the years that has challenged me.

This year my search took me back to a book that I had read when I first became a Unitarian Universalist, *The Old Story of Salvation* by Sophia Lyon Fahs, first published in 1955. She gives the biblical stories of the Seven Great Ages of time, from creation through Revelation. The theme of the Bible is the god-human relations. This story of God's interactions with humans to keep them working toward good. The need to be redeemed from evil is a story that comes out of the Bible when people approach the Bible *looking for it.*

Now is this relationship generated from the view of God or from the view of humanity? What I gleaned from rereading this book is that God's search for connection with humanity is to keep man from being insular, or only concerned with the self. We need to reach out and connect to something beyond ourselves. I was struck anew with the element of free will was always there. God provided the opportunities, and that there were definitely consequences to decisions—just as there are consequences to all of our actions. Is the old salvation story basically saving us from ourselves through eternal love?

Another way of explaining the need for God in our lives is found in the writings of Carl Jung. The concept and description and relationship with god started as a projection of people's minds, a way to explain the events that were indefinable, like the changing of the seasons, day and night, etc. Jung had an entire evolution of the concept of God throughout civilization. Even with this human-to-god approach, there is a sense of something beyond ourselves.

And when we get to the New Testament, or Christian Scriptures, we do not clearly have the faith of *Jesus*, but rather what the early Christian Church came to believe about Jesus. For about two

centuries, these were generally taken to be –well, gospel, or the truth. And the awareness of writings that were not included in the Bible show that what is commonly held as ‘truth’ is not complete, but rather the choices of the compilers. The writings that were not included in The Bible came to be considered as heretical. Are there many? Just look at collections such as *The Other Bible* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1984), which is over 700 pages, double-columned, single-spaced. And there have been more writings and interpretations since.

Early in my readings of the gospels, I was left with the distinct impression that Jesus was speaking of each person as being of value and worth. The stories of his interactions with various peoples and various types of people reinforced that. Of course that would be my finding. I started with a personal premise or belief, and read to find proof of my hypothesis. I approach the gospels the same way that the compilers of the Bible did – looking for things that support my expectations.

Religion arises from the culture. Jewish and Christian heritage from patriarchal. But culture changes, and the relationship with god changes. In 1947, for example, findings of manuscripts in caves and the Dead Sea Scrolls brought new texts to the forefront. Two thousand years ago, the Jews lived under the control of the Romans. Between 250 BCE and 100 AD, there was a sect of Jews numbering about 4000, called the Essenes. They lived in a communal fashion, with a focus on simplicity and purity, the remnant of an older tradition about a Teacher of Righteousness. A contemporary group has taken up that tradition since the discovery of Essene writings as part of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the 1947. The ancient Essenes were planning for the coming of the Messiah -- not a person, but an energy field, an "awareness" that they believe entered human existence every 2000 years. The energy that entered human existence 2000 years ago was love of one human being for another simply because he or she is worthy of love and a valued part of the human family. There is some speculation that Jesus was familiar with and may have been part of the Essenes, a messenger for the love-energy. For this millennium, the group expands the message to, "You and I are not only brothers and sisters, we are One. There really is no 'other'. The 'other' is an illusion, reflected in the infinite rainbow of seeming difference. Behind the illusion, we are One. Everyone. No one is excluded." (*1999 Essene Book of Days*, Earthstewards Networks)

And scholars have brought forth new interpretations of early writings. An example is the Lord’s Prayer that I used for meditation. This version has come from reinterpretation of original Aramaic texts by Neil Douglas-Klotz. Many of the English translations are from the Greek text, but the language of Jesus was Aramaic. There are some thoughts that the Greek text was used for the translation to English as a way of discrediting the early Jewish Christians. The Jewish Christians had moved away from the need for sacrifice implied in the salvation story. And then there were the councils of Nicea in the fourth century that determined that Jesus was God, and other theological positions by vote of bishops. Oh, the implications of early Christianity and the ecclesiastical politics that shaped the Christian story that is prevalent today!

I have found myself saying more and more that I cannot claim to be a Christian because of the connotation in this time. This actually makes me sad and angry. This is my heritage. Why do I have to give up my identity because it differs from the predominant story?

If I believe that the message for this time is “we are one,” then the discovery of new texts—well, old texts and new translations—provides an opportunity to understand that there is more than one approach to the message of Jesus. Indeed, the message itself is more universal than the parameters placed by our western interpretation.

So, is the story of salvation that is implied in the birth of Jesus still true? Absolutely! But the salvation is in the divine working through just relations.

And is Jesus my savior? No, Jesus is my spiritual guide, showing the way to live in relation with the divine that is within and without, resulting in respect and dignity and worth of every person.

So is the message of Christmas still relevant? Absolutely! The concept of birth is stretching for something new, new understanding, new ways of being in the world, new ways of living. But I am glad that Christmas comes only once a year.this searching for the “new” is hard work.

Advent is a time of preparation, not just a time of waiting. So what I am going to do to move toward making the gifts of Christmas a reality.

First, there is Faith that is evident in the heritage of our Living Tradition Sources:

Mystery and wonder

Challenges to confront evil with justice and compassion

Wisdom for spiritual life

Love as a universal force

Science and reason

Connectedness of all creation

For the first week, I am going to commit to spending some time – notice I am not saying how much time –to exploring various texts. In fact, as a result of working on this sermon, I acquired a new book, *The Hidden Gospel* (Neil Douglas-Klotz, Quest Books, 1999). And I would suggest that we all begin to engage the *Old Story of Salvation*.

And for the second week, there is Hope. Reflect back on our first hymn, “O Come, O Come Emanuel.” Emanuel means “God with us.” Regardless of a concept of God, hope calls us to connect with something beyond ourselves. Everyone must choose how to relate to life. We always have the choice of whether we will be defeated by or will embrace life. Hope is knowing that there is that choice. But – and there is a condition here – for hope to be realized we must be willing to engage in the options, to try new things, to expand our own views. So, for the second week, I am going to commit to looking at my view of life, and how I reach out – to what, to whom, and when. Hope is saying “yes!” to life.

And for the third week, there is Joy. For me, one of the greatest pieces of music is ‘Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee’, the marriage of words by Henry Van Dyke and music by Beethoven. This is the joy of the day, the triumph of life that comes from a oneness with the universal force of love –here personified as God. Or in the words of a traditional carol,

"O thou joyful day, O though blessed day,

Gladsome, peaceful Christmastide"

Earth's hope awaken, Love life has taken.

Joy, O, joy to all at Christmastide."

[“O Though Joyful Day,” *Singing the Living Tradition*, p.236]

Joy is what asks, “How can I keep from singing?”

And for the fourth week, there is Love. Pursued by love. I had the privilege of reading from “The Hound of Heaven” at the memorial service for Louise Koral yesterday. The poem, by Francis Thompson, published in 1893, is the pursuit of the Hound of Heaven, God, of the writer, with the focus on obtaining his love. This is the love of god reaching to man, the option that man has of rejecting the love, but the power of that love that overcomes this rejection. But going back to the gospels, I find the love of Jesus is a love of respect, or expectation, of challenge. So, for this week of Advent, I am going to look at the messages of love in the hymns and readings in the hymnal, in meditation manuals, and I am going to name and honor the love in my life.

This year there is a week between the lighting of the candles and Christmas, a perfect time for Patience. This is the hard one. Patience with myself, with the universe, with others who do not see things 'way' as I do. No, I don't really want everyone to see the world as I do, because then I would not be able to learn other ways, other innuendos. But patience is a matter of time. Actually, patience will keep me focused on the respective jobs for each week of Advent.

I have focused on my personal reflections as I approach Advent and Christmas. Selfish, I suppose. I don't know any other way to explain why I am actually ready to engage in new discoveries on my spiritual journey. I am more excited about the coming of Christmas than I have been for years. And I am really ready to participate in Advent.

So I would ask you to consider this year,

What do you expect from Christmas? What do you want to find on Christmas morning?

How are you going to prepare for the gifts during Advent?

Regardless of your answers, may Faith, Hope, Joy, Love, and Patience be your guides.

Amen and Blessed Be.

HYMN # 248 "O We Believe in Christmas"

CLOSING WORDS "Let Christmas Come" #224

Let Christmas come, its story told,
When days are short and winds are cold;
Let Christmas come, its lovely song
When evening's soon and night is long.
Let Christmas come, its great star glow,
On quiet city, parks of snow.
Let Christmas come, its table gleam,
Love born again, the truth of dream.

POSTLUDE