

WAITING FOR THE BIRTH.....

December 2, 2012

The Rev. Richard Gilbert reminds us of the Nourishing Dark.... That period when seeds are resting, when the sun spends more time in the southern hemisphere than here, when projects and activities move inside, when our bodies remind us that when we were evolving, eating well was necessary to survive the time of scarcity that arrived in late winter and very early spring.

He reminds us that the dark of the year has its own charm, that it contains mystery as well as an opportunity to reflect, to explore our inner selves, to probe the depths of human experience, to learn how to be in loving relationship with family and friends when dark and cold discourage dashing outside for sports and recreation.

Our society has not embraced this idea. Instead of relaxing into the dark, we string lights on trees and houses and flood decorations with illumination. We play music incessantly, often loudly and with a strong beat, we think of ever more seductive caloric treats to share, and we have numerous red-suited obese men, one of whom is the REAL magic elf who distributes presents to good little girls and boys.

Most of all we are encouraged to buy, buy, buy; for only by finding and purchasing the perfect gift for everyone on your list will you fulfill your obligation to enact our capitalist system's yearly culmination.

What has all this to do with Advent, with the season defined by the fathers of the Christian church as waiting for the birth of Jesus, whom they named their God incarnate? And, what has it to do with we who are religious liberals, who know of many myths that have informed humankind, who doubt the facts of the Christmas story, even as we yearn toward stars and innocent babes and songs of welcome and celebration. For what do we wait during the season of Advent? What might be brought to birth for us?

I ask you now to engage in an extended meditation on what we might, with honor and dignity, find if we seek meaning in this long Winter Holiday season.

First, we might find hope. The Rev. John A. Taylor says:

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. ... 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.

In this culture, increasingly diverse, but based on Christianity, hope traditionally centers on a new-born child, Jesus of Nazareth, born of Mary, who was affianced to Joseph. However, in a larger sense, all new-born children are symbols of hope. Parents, family, all who see them, invest these small humans with their dreams. *He might become a great musician; she might become a doctor. Or perhaps a soccer player, or a scientist/astronaut who pilots the first Mars landing.*

We invest these tiny beings with our hopes and dreams, and care for them whether in stable or mansion; whether we wrap them in swaddling clothes or drape them with heirloom baptismal gowns. Few of them will fulfill our initial dreams, for human babies grow into toddlers who rapidly develop a mind of their own. However, we love them still, and, at our best, help them fulfill their own dreams.

However, as a symbol of hope, nothing is better than the small helpless infant, still all potential, still carrying our dreams in their wriggling helpless bodies.

What is our ultimate hope? For what do we yearn when hoping the infant will become a musician, doctor, sports star, scientist/astronaut? What is the core of this waiting for the special baby? I believe it is that something, or someone will save us.

We yearn to be saved. Oh, not the kind of saving that Evangelicals claim is possible and on which they base their faith; not that we will live forever in an ideal location we learned to call Heaven.

We who are religious liberals yearn for the scientist who will develop a way to burn gas or coal that will NOT contribute to greenhouse gases. Or the astronaut who will guide us to another world with its latent power to provide us with materials to give us energy or purify water cheaply, or filter the invasive species out of the Great Lakes without damaging the natives. We want a doctor who will cure cancer, a musician who will inspire us, a soccer player who will—finally—draw sufficient viewers to make a professional soccer league viable in the United States.

We hope for salvation. Most of us hope for the kind of salvation that happens in this world; that makes our earth a better, healthier, happier place. Maybe, just maybe we hope for a clue to one of life's great questions. *What happens to us after we die?* Is there, just maybe, a way in which we live on?

And, might this small human, born in modest circumstances, show us how that is possible?

Hope—one of the reasons to wait with great anticipation during this Advent season.

The second reason is Compassion. You may not have thought of Compassion as part of the Winter Holiday package. I ask you to explore this idea with me now. First, let us hear the words of the Rev. Frank Schulman—his blessings for the Christmastide.

I wish for the dull a little understanding, and for the understanding a little poetry. I wish a heart for the rich and a little bread for the poor. I wish some love for the lonely and some comfort for the grieved. I wish companionship for those who must spend their evenings alone. I wish contentment for the aged, who see the days slipping by too quickly, and I wish dreams for the young.

I wish strength for the weak and courage for those who have lost their faith. And I wish we might all be a little kinder to each other.

Compassion; that is what he is wishing for people. He is wishing that each person be gifted with that which he or she most needs; and his list of gifts are not material. Except, of course for the poor. For them, he uses the symbolic term “little bread” to cover a multitude of material needs.

In the classic Christmas story, the Wise Men bring, along with their classic gold, frankincense and myrrh, compassion. They had heard of King Herod’s order to slay all the boy babies, and they brought pity as well as love with them to the humble stable. Herod was worried over a prophecy that a child was to be born who would overturn his kingdom. Political necessity therefor, demanded that he slay all the male children in the age cohort.

In contemporary terms we could say that compassion demands that pity and love triumph over political necessity. We might note that this virtue appears in short supply among the elected officials who currently control our government in Lansing

Therefore, compassion is needed today as much as it was in the ancient time that gave birth to the myth. Never have I feared so much for the poor and oppressed among us, for political necessity on the national level is demanding that we sacrifice them for the benefit of the richest among us. And, unless compassion is birthed by the end of this month, they, and the newly poor who join them every day, will suffer. Let us wait with hope for the birth of compassion.

The Wise Men traveled from afar. We are told they came from a foreign country to find the Israelite Baby lying in a manger. They were of a different nationality, probably a different faith. Indeed, legend says that one of them was African, and he is depicted as a dark man. They model compassion felt and enacted in an inclusive manner. If we can find compassion birthed at Christmas tide, what might we hope for?

We could hope that we feel pity and love for all people in need; not only those in our faith or class or nation. We could hope that we have compassion for the Egyptian young man with little opportunity for a job, as well as the Spanish family with two children being evicted from their home after they lost it to foreclosure. We could hope that we feel compassion for the Pacific Islander who is losing his home to rising seas as well as the polar bear whose habitat is melting away. We might feel compassion for the wolves in the Upper Peninsula who are being killed because they chased deer, as well as the poor rural family who depend on venison for their protein supply. Let us wait with patience for the birth of compassion during this Holiday Season.

The third and final thing for which we are waiting is Challenge; for if we take seriously hope and compassion, we will be challenged. Unitarian Universalist poet Patrick Murfin puts it this way in his poem, *Let Us Be that Stable*.

Today, let us be that stable,

let us be the place

that welcomes at last

the weary and rejected,

the pilgrim stranger,

the coming life.

Let not the frigid winds that pierce

our inadequate walls,

or our mildewed hay,

or the fetid leavings of our cattle

shame us from our beckoning.

Let our outstretched arms

be a manger

so that the infant hope,

swaddled in love,

may have a place to lie.

Let a cold beacon shine down upon us

*from a solstice sky
to guide to us
the seekers who will come.
Let the lowly shepherd
and all who abide
in the fields of their labors
lay down their crooks
and come to us.
Let the seers, sages, and potentates
of every land
traverse the shifting dunes
the rushing rivers,
and the stony crags
to seek our rude frame.
let herdsmen and high lords
kneel together
under our thatched roof
to lay their gifts
before Wonder.
Today, let us be that stable.*

How can we live up to the expectations, not only of the season itself, but also, and more significantly, of what the season means?

If we take at all seriously the teachings of Jesus, and by extension, the teachings of all the great prophets, how can we meet their challenge? How can we draw from our weary bodies and souls the physical and spiritual energy to extend compassion to all those who need it?

The final and most basic question—how can we extend our compassion to the planet on which we live, the only planet hospitable to humankind thus far discovered in the cosmos?

Although many are enjoying this warm weather at the juncture of November and December, I fear it is a sign of far more extreme weather to come.

I had not yet talked of the other great Holiday that forms this Winter Holiday season. It is, of course the Winter Solstice. It celebrates what the ancients knew as the return of the sun. It marks the time when the days no longer lengthen, but become longer, and the sun warms the earth for spring and summer growth. For millennia the seasons have continued in their pattern with only a few mini ice ages to disturb their reliable cycle. We grew to trust the turning of the seasons. They were reliable markers of our journey.

For those of us who draw our spiritual strength from the natural world, the current situation is very scary.

I draw hope from not only the babe in the manger, and all that he symbolizes, but from some of earth's life forms. The current issue of National Geographic features the mountain sequoia of our northwest. Some of them are over 2000 years old. They have survived snow and ice in their mountain habitat; indeed they thrive there. Fires have swept through their home, and they grew stronger. They are still growing, expanding their already enormous trunks.

Scientists have now found life forms in habitats previously believed to be too harsh for any life to survive. The earth vents that lie deep beneath the ocean, that channel heat from within the very core of Gaia, contain life forms.

I fear not for the future of Earth itself. I fear not that life in some forms will continue. However, I do fear for the future of its most successful species to date—humankind.

The changes that are already occurring due to climate change will make living much more difficult for our species; and they will make comfortable living even more so. We need not wait long for this challenge to call upon our greatest strengths, talents; our utmost hope and compassion, if we are to live our loving faith into the world.

We who wait for the birth of hope, compassion and challenge are filled with anticipation. Let us dedicate this Winter Holiday season to experiencing hope, growing our compassion, and meeting the challenge of living our faith in today's world.

Shalom and Salaam.

Blessed Be and Amen.