**“The Advent of Hope”**

**© 2015 Rev. Wendy L. Bell**

**First Parish in Malden**

**November 29, 2015**

This morning marks the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of the new liturgical year in the Christian tradition. Advent is the season during which we prepare ourselves for the arrival of the baby Jesus. It is a season of waiting.

We wait at this time of year, too, for the return of the sun and the lengthening of the days that will come with the arrival of the winter solstice.

Next week, the sanctuary will be decorated with greens for the holiday season, which for many is part of their Christian tradition, but which is rooted in pre-pagan yuletide customs.

I understand that part of the tradition in this particular church is to put out the crèche – everything from the Christmas manger scene except for the baby Jesus – along with the wreaths and the bows, as another explicit symbol of Advent. And I imagine that for some of you, that is a meaningful custom, and for others, it is less so.

For many of us, even those of us who celebrate Christmas, Advent is not that well understood. So this morning, I’d like to take spend a few minutes talking about Advent – what it is and why it might matter to us as Unitarian Universalists – whether we are Christians or not, whether we are theists, or atheists, or agnostics, or anything in between.

I believe there can be deeper meaning found in Advent, but to find it we must look beyond the greens and the crèches, beyond gift-buying, list-making and cookie-baking. Advent doesn’t make much sense at all unless we reflect on the kind of world into which Jesus was said to have been born. Unless we ask, for what or for whom were the people in that part of the world at that time in history waiting?

Our reading this morning spoke of how difficult it can be to wait, particularly when we are afraid. In Jesus’ time the Jewish people had much cause to fear. This was the time of the so-called Pax Romana, the Roman Peace. The land in which Jesus was born – the place where he lived and taught and where he was later executed – was part of the Roman Empire. The Pax Romana was a so-called peace established through military might and victory, not through justice or mercy. To those in power it felt like peace, but to those who were oppressed it felt like tyranny.

Historical evidence suggests that Jesus was born just before Herod the Great’s death in 4 BCE. Herod was the provincial ruler in Israel. When he died, there were uprisings all over the Jewish homeland. The Jews wanted to be able to live free of the yoke of oppression. Roman troops were sent in to put down the rebellions and to punish those who rebelled.

One major rebellion happened in a city in Galilee just a few miles north of Nazareth where Jesus was said to have been born. In response, Rome sent about 18,000 elite troops, plus 2000 cavalry, plus 1500 infantry. That may seem like overkill, but they clearly wanted to send a message. According to historical record, the troops captured the city, burned it down, and enslaved those who were living there.

Of course the Jewish people were afraid. What could they do? How could they respond? They could try to run away, to flee for the hills, and some did. Or they could stay and fight, resist – and some, such as the so-called Zealots did – but that always led to further violence.

Many in that day were waiting for a messiah, for someone who would come and deliver them from oppression. Many imagined that the messiah would be a kind of military hero who would lead the people to victory.

But there were also those who waited expectantly, we are told, for a different kind of messiah. There were those who believed that there might be a third way forward, a way beyond fleeing or fighting. There were those who believed in the possibility of a kind of peace that would come not through military might, but through justice, through fairness, through compassion and mercy. That is what they believed had been foretold by the prophets. They had a vision of swords beaten into plowshares, of lions lying down next to lambs, and a young child leading them, and no one any longer afraid.

And what was unique about Jesus, we are told, is that he said don’t run and don’t fight. He did offer to his followers a kind of “third way,” a way of active, but peaceful resistance. “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” If someone sues you for your outer garment, give him your inner garment as well. If a soldier asks you to carry his pack for one mile, carry it for two. He taught his own disciples to put away their weapons, and that those who live by the sword will die by the sword.

Today…our world is still a broken place in many ways. There is evidence of injustice and oppression nearly everywhere we turn. There are still those who go to bed hungry at night, not because of a lack of food, but because of a failure to share. There are still too many who are unjustly imprisoned. And we are surrounded by war and weapons and all manner of violence, in this country and abroad.

And in the midst of all of that, there are many who identify as “Christians” who are aligned with empire, and the idea of a Pax Americana – so-called peace through military might and victory. They believe that Jesus will return again one day soon as precisely the kind of messiah that he refused to be before – a militant, king-like leader who will bring victory through might and through the wielding of the sword.

People of many religious traditions – and none – continue to put their faith in arms, weapons, guns, drones, and bombs. Many of us do, too. We continue to believe that in military might lies our best hope. We see no other way forward.

And there are still those us who’d rather just run for the hills, or build walls and stay safe behind them. The world is increasingly fearful, and flight and fight still seem to most of us like the only two solutions.

But there are still some of us who hope for, who long for – who wait and wish and work for – another way. There are still those of us who struggle to keep faith in a vision of peace not through military might, but through justice. They call us dreamers. They call us unrealistic. They call us naïve.

And it is oh, so easy in this season – and at any time of year – to succumb to the fear that what we want and wait for will never come. As UU minister, Steve Edington has written,

It is easy to be cynical, if not despairing, about the promise of the arrival of a reign of peace, love, hope, and joy - as the four themes of the Christian Advent proclaim. It is easy to despair of ever seeing the arrival of the full manifestation of justice, equity and compassion in human relations; and of our reaching the level of respect for the interdependent web of life that will actually give us a safe and protected planet to live on. I know it is easy to lose any sense of expectation that such things as these will ever come to be.

I also know [he goes on to say] that sitting beside a road, so to speak, awaiting the arrival of all these great and wonderful things will not bring them into being - not even in any small or measured way. Whatever there is to be gained, when it comes to all of these hopes and expectations, is that their arrival - to whatever extent that arrival is ever to happen - remains in our hands and in our hearts.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Edington reminds us that we have great responsibility to help bring about that for which we wait. Obviously, it’s not entirely in our control. But as UU’s we are not waiting passively for a savior to come and make it all better for us. We are called to prepare for what we want by reflecting on it, by practicing it, and by manifesting it in our own lives.

Ours in an active form of waiting. And as it has been said,

Something about waiting is good spiritual practice. Sitting in the tension between what is and what you want to be. Resting with the tinge of uncertainty and trepidation. Being awake and watchful. Doing your part in preparation. Accepting the now in the face of something better to come. Embracing the paradox of accepting Now while working to bring about a Future.[[2]](#footnote-2)

It reminds me of the story of the two wolves, often attributed – somewhat questionably – to Cherokee tradition. A grandfather teaches his grandson that each of us has two wolves within us. But in this case, let’s say there is a wolf within us who when struck is tempted to strike back, or perhaps even tempted to strike before he is stricken. And there is a second wolf, the one who would lie down with the lamb.

Both of those possibilities lie within each of our hearts. Advent is a time of deep reflection, a time of sitting in our fear and with our fear, and asking ourselves which wolf we want to have growing inside of us. In which will we put our faith? Where do we believe our ultimate hope lies? Which will we feed? For which will we prepare a place in our hearts as one year draws to a close and a new year begins?

1. Stephen Edington, “Expectations lost and gained,” December 3, 2006 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://crossimpact.net/archives/2006/12/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)