



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“In the Waiting,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on December 4, 2011

The other day someone asked me, “Are you ready for Christmas?” My answer was one word, “No.” I’m not exactly sure what she was asking. If it was, “Do you have your shopping done?” or “Have you even started?” the answer would be “No, and no.” If she was asking, “Are you ready for the full-on commercial celebration--decorations, advertising, Christmas carols everywhere, my answer would be “No, I’m not ready for that.” If she was asking, “Have you even gotten a tree or put up any decorations?” the answer would be “No, not yet.”

Before you think this is a “Bah humbug” kind of sermon, let me assure you that I love Christmas. Before long I’ll start listening to Handel’s Messiah in the car, and singing along, and thinking about presents and decorating and a tree. But there’s time, because it’s not Christmas yet. That could be my litany these days. Anyone want to join me? It’s not Christmas yet.

It’s Advent, the season that leads up to Christmas. But Advent is not Christmas. It’s like the difference in baseball between the regular season and the World Series. You have to go through the regular season before you get to the World Series. Advent is a time for preparation, for waiting, for wondering: what might come to pass in these darkening days?

But we live in a culture that doesn’t like to wait. We want it now, whether that is good for us or not. Edwin Friedman, the rabbi I quoted a couple of weeks ago, says we live in the age of the quick fix. Advent calls us to resist this pressure to have it all right now. Advent invites us to be present, where we are, rather than running off to somewhere else.

That’s why I picked the reading from Frederick Buechner for today. He knows what it’s like to be in a dead-end place or time of life, and how tempting it is to run away. But, he says, “by examining (it) as closely and candidly as I could ..., I discovered that it really wasn’t that at all. I discovered that if you really keep your eye peeled to it and your ears open, if you really pay attention to it, even such a limited and limiting life as the one I was living opened up onto extraordinary vistas. Taking your children to school and kissing your wife good-bye. Eating lunch with a friend. Trying to do a decent day’s work.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Now and Then* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 86-87.

Advent says, “Be here now.” Like Buechner, Advent says, “Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness.”

This past Wednesday was the first of four Advent vespers services. About 20 of us gathered here, in this dark sanctuary. Afterwards we ate together, a lovely meal prepared by members of the Welcoming Congregation Committee, in observance of World AIDS Day. I’m as pleased about Vespers as anything we’re doing here. And it isn’t much doing at all--it’s simple! We gather in the dark. We slow down, we listen for what may come. It’s liberating to have some time to just be--without anything to do or anywhere to go.

That’s what this season is for--holding open a space to wait and watch, to pay attention to our lives, to the beauty, yes, but also to the boredom and pain. Christmas is a time of feasting--of eating, gift giving and celebrating. It only makes sense that you prepare for this time by not-feasting. But we have almost forgotten how to do this--how to be hungry, or empty, how to wait.

It makes me sad that we live in a world that never stops. When I was a kid, at some point around midnight, TV stations would stop broadcasting. Remember that? A test pattern would come up on the screen. You knew it was time to go to bed! But now we have hundreds of channels available 24/7, to say nothing of the internet. Many of us carry a device so we’re never out of touch. We’re always connected. Stores are open 7 days a week. Youth sports have shamelessly taken over Sunday morning.

I don’t know about you, but I need a break from all this. I’ve gotten pretty good at not checking e-mail on my day off. It’s a relief to turn off my computer for a whole day. I wonder, do you take any Sabbath time? Do you ever disconnect, so you can rest, and be present to your friends or family and do things that restore your soul?

I’m not saying this is always easy. I find it hard to sit still. But it’s good for me. For the past month or so my sermons have been about being active, being adventurous, doing something. I’m not saying now that you should be passive, or check out. No, this season invites us to be awake, to pay attention to what is real. This can be hard to do. It’s what our reading from a couple of weeks ago was talking about, when it said

I want to know  
if you can sit with pain  
mine or your own  
without moving to hide it  
or fade it  
or fix it.<sup>2</sup>

The great teacher and theologian Henri Nouwen observed that waiting is not very popular; that most people think of waiting as a waste of time, an “awful desert between where they are and where they want to be.”

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<sup>2</sup> “The Invitation,” by Oriah Mountain Dreamer, available online at <http://www.oriamountaindreamer.com/>

If you have ever tried to get pregnant, or adopt a child, you know something about waiting. If you have ever been the parent of a teenager who was out a night, especially if they had the car, you know something about waiting. If you have ever been out of work, or stuck in an airport or bus station or traffic jam, or in church when you thought would never end, you know something about waiting.

The temptation is to check out, to numb yourself, so the time passes. That's why they have those big TVs in airports and hospital waiting rooms--to pacify people while they wait. But what if you saw waiting as an invitation and an opportunity?

William Bridges is the author of a book called *Transitions*, about how to deal with the changes in life. He says the most important part of any transition is the time between when one thing ends and a new thing begins, and he calls this the neutral zone. Bridges says we want to hurry through the neutral zone as quickly as we can, because it's an uncomfortable place to be. But it is also the place of possibility. If you can increase your capacity to be in that neutral zone, then you will be better prepared for what may come. By staying in the neutral zone, you might grow and change and find opportunities that you would have missed had you hurried through that part of the transition.

Advent is a kind of neutral zone, an invitation to not rush off into Christmas just yet. We began Vespers this week with these words from T.S. Eliot:

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope  
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,  
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.<sup>3</sup>

I love this assertion, that the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting. Not out there somewhere we need to run off too, but here, all around us, if we will be still and wait. In my better moments, that's how I understand the holy spirit. Not as something I can coerce or control, but a presence I can bring myself in to, not by effort but by openness; not by striving, but by surrendering.

Advent is an antidote to the craziness of these days. It invites us to question whether buying things will make us happy or the best way to show someone we love them. There's an effort called Advent Conspiracy that was started by three pastors who were troubled by the way our culture does Christmas. They wanted to bring a deeper meaning to Christmas by encouraging folks to spend less and give more to the poor. Advent Conspiracy is based on four principles: Worship Fully, Spend Less, Give More, Love All. They've made a two and a half minute video that expresses what I'm trying to say (available at [bit.ly/t04xO1](http://bit.ly/t04xO1) ). I've put a link to it on the front page of our church website, and I hope you'll check it out.

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<sup>3</sup> T.S. Eliot, "Four Quartets" (East Coker, III).

There's plenty of time to get ready for Christmas. But the way to prepare for a rebirth of wonder,<sup>4</sup> the way to get ready for the presence of the holy in our midst, is not by moving faster. No, it's by waiting and watching and wondering, the way an expectant mother waits for her child to be born, pondering all these things in her heart.<sup>5</sup>

Advent invites us into this darkening season, this time to worship fully and to give ourselves to love. It's a time, as Frederick Buechner says, to "listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace."

I may not be ready for Christmas, but I'm ready for that.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> This phrase comes from the poem, "I Am Waiting," by Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

<sup>5</sup> "Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart," Luke 2:19.