



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“The Reason for the Season,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on December 7, 2014

I’m particularly aware, these days, of the difference between the world we hope for, and the world as it is. Last Sunday I talked about the epidemic of Black men and boys being killed by police, and the need for us to take on intentional anti-racism work. We’ll begin that in January. This week, the need for this work only became more apparent. It’s clear that something’s broken, that needs to be changed.

And in the midst of all this, here comes Advent, with its invitation to watch and wait, to hope, as our choir sang, for Emmanuel to come and dwell among us. Emmanuel is a Hebrew word that means “God with us.” Advent is about opening our hearts, preparing them, so that we might receive the gifts of this season. But this is not so simple, is it?

For some of us, Advent and Christmas are lovely rituals, but aren’t really relevant to the modern world. We like to sing the carols, and light candles on Christmas Eve, but we are beyond believing there’s power in such things. Maybe we’re put off by the stories we know aren’t literally true; maybe we don’t want to be seen as naive or foolish.

For some of us, aware of how the early Christians incorporated or stole earlier Pagan midwinter rituals, aware of how the church has too often hurt people, we resist the Christian story because we identify it with oppressive power. It’s the dominant religion in our country, and too often the church seems to support the status quo. We can’t stand the hypocrisy, so we don’t want to be associated with it.

For some of us, who have known enough heartbreak and disappointment in our lives, the expectations of this season only make things worse. At this time of year, when we are reminded of those we have loved and lost, the relentless exhortations to be merry and joyful just depress us, and so we want to just get past Christmas, and hope we’ll feel better in the New Year.

And for some of us, the Christmas story still has the power to bless and keep us. The images of this season: of light shining in the darkness, of God coming to earth, being born not in a palace but in a stable of all places, remind us that we meet the Holy in unexpected places--at the edges, in the shadowy places of our lives. And so we enter into this time wondering, “What might come this season? Might I be changed? Might there be peace, in my heart and in my family and on this earth?”

However you approach this season, I'm glad and grateful that you're here. I hope to help you to open your hearts to this season, its stories and its rituals. I hope to show you that we need Advent's call to practice being hopeful. Especially these days.

There's a clerk at the post office I frequent, and this time of year he wears a tie tac with these words on it: "Jesus is the reason for the season." I wonder that a federal employee is allowed to accessorize like this, but I kind of appreciate that he does. It's a fairly gentle way to express your faith.

But is it true? By "the season," he means Christmas, of course, which is now a mash up of a number of different things. It's a religious observance (the birth of Jesus Christ), laid over ancient pagan rituals (bringing greens indoors and lighting fires against the shortest day). All this is overwhelmed by the commercial extravaganza of shopping, buying, gifting and then, returning that stuff-you-don't-want-or-doesn't-fit; this season that's called Christmas but which has nothing to do with life and gospel of Jesus.

For retailers, the reason for the season is sales. For pagan and other earth-centered spirituality folks, it's the winter solstice, the shortest day and the celebration of the return of light. For Jewish folks, the reason for the season is the story of the reclaimed temple, of the sacred not being profaned. For those with a rational, scientific worldview, it's the shift of the earth on its axis, which is what causes these shorter days. For Christians, the reason, of course, is the birth of Jesus.

Behind all these different understandings there are some common themes, of light and dark, hope and fear. And don't we need to tilt toward hope?

That postal worker with the tie tac is trying to remind folks that they don't have to go crazy celebrating the commercial Christmas; that it wasn't meant to be this way. One could hear his claim as excluding other faiths, but you don't have to hear it that way. A Universalist understanding of Jesus the Christ, Jesus the messiah, doesn't assume he was only one. Jesus said to his followers, "You are the light of the world." Wouldn't he say to us, "You are here to do what I did--to love one another and especially the outcasts and downtrodden, to help heal and bless our world, to be so filled with the Spirit, that your light shines and that people see there is light and love and reason for hope, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary."

In the reading this morning,¹ the prophet Isaiah says a different kind of leader is coming, good leader, one with "wisdom and understanding," one who will "give justice to the poor and make fair decisions for the exploited." Isaiah was speaking from his own context, in a time 700 years before Jesus, a time of war between the kingdoms of Judea, Israel and Assyria, and Isaiah is expecting a leader who will bring better days and a gentler, more just world. He's not imagining Jesus, though later generations will do so when they hear Isaiah's words.

Then Isaiah shifts to imagining a time when

¹ Isaiah 11:1-9, New Living Translation.

the wolf and the lamb will live together;
the leopard will lie down with the baby goat.
The calf and the yearling will be safe with the lion,
and a little child will lead them all.

These well-know verses describe what's called the peaceable kingdom; they inspire that saying about lions and lambs lying down together. They describe things that seem impossible, don't they? Carnivores like lions and wolves becoming vegetarians! And who in their right mind would let their baby play near a cobra's den?

This passage is testimony to hope, which happens to be our theme this month. It's an invitation to radical hope. That is what prophets do; they lift up a vision of life as it could be, as it ought to be, though for people like us it may be hard to imagine or hope for. Prophets remind us there is more going on than meets the eye, there is a higher power, whether we apprehend it or not. Prophets have the audacity to assert that injustice can not, will not, last forever. As our Unitarian forebear Theodore Parker put it, "the arc (of the moral universe) is a long one... And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice."

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." That is my prayer these days. This was the hope of Isaiah and the Hebrew people, that a messiah would come and save them. They knew too much of invading armies and unjust kings that oppressed the people; their hope was for a righteous and just leader, for a change from worldly power to divine power, what's called the kingdom of God.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu says that in the awful days of apartheid, when there was violence in the streets and the government showed no signs of relinquishing its oppressive power, he would be preaching about God's authority, and he felt "frequently tempted to whisper in God's ear, 'For goodness sake, why don't You make it more obvious that You are in charge?'"

These days, when Black parents fear for their children's safety, when too often police resort too quickly to violence, when our society is too easily led to a place of fear; too quick to revert to polarization and tribalism, when we are too quick to look out for our own interests and not seek the common good, too easily seduced by mistrust, violence and recrimination; don't we need help? I don't know about you, but these days I am on my knees. God, hear our prayer.

Every generation knows the sad story of power misused, of the weak taken advantage of, of violence that does harm, intentionally and indiscriminately. But that's not the whole story. There's a saying in the Hebrew tradition: "In every generation, a Pharaoh rises up to oppress the people. In every generation, human beings must look upon themselves and see that we, not just our forebears, must go forth from slavery."²

After Jesus was killed, because that's what oppressive powers do to prophets who threaten the status quo, his followers came to believe that he was the messiah, the one they had been waiting for, that he was Emmanuel, "God with us." And they understood they were called to be God's

² Rabbi Ira Waskow, "In Every Generation, Pharaoh," available online at <https://theshalomcenter.org/node/313>

hands and feet in the world. Jesus wasn't the only one. That's what the church made him into, later.

A minister friend of mine, Rev. Robin Bartlett, posted on Facebook the other day, "The way of the Lord is prepared in the midst of empire and execution." In these days I need stories of light shining in the darkness, of wolves living with lambs, of God coming to us in the midst and in the mess and especially in the troubled and in the fearful places where we live. Of Jesus, born in a stable, who grew up to be a prophet, a lover of souls, a warrior for justice. These days, I can't go it alone. I don't have to, and neither do you. We have this faith, that it is in times like these that hope and love are born.³

The reason for the season? To remind us that it is in the midst of darkness, that we will behold the light. That in times of despair and fear, when we most need it, we will seek, and we will find, hope. That in the troubled and broken places, we are called to be bringers and bearers of Love, that Love which will never let us go.

Amen.

³ Madeleine L'Engle, "The Risk of Birth": "When is the time for love to be born?/The inn in full on the planet earth,/And by the comet the sky is torn--/Yet Love still takes the risk of birth."