

INVITING THE MYSTERY

© REV. DANA WORSNOP
ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH
2 DECEMBER 2007

READINGS

We offer two readings this morning. The first from Sufi Mystical Poet Hafiz

You're It

God
Disguised
As a myriad things and
Playing a game
Of tag
Has kissed you and said,
"You're it—
I mean you're Really It!"
Now
It does not matter
What you believe or feel
For something wonderful,
Major-league Wonderful
Is someday going
To
Happen.

And this from Madeleine L'Engle

First Coming

He did not wait till the world was ready
Till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
And prisoners cried out for release.

He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
Turned water into wine. He did not wait

Till hearts were pure. In joy he came
To a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
He came, and his Light would not go out.

He came to a world which did not mesh,
To heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
The Maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane
To raise our songs with joyful voice,
For to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

SERMON

Kay Bates sent me one of my very favorite Christmas cards ever a couple of years back. It read, All I want for Christmas is Peace on Earth and a pair of really cute shoes.

That about sums up Christmas for me – a season of so many high expectations. There are so many things at odds with the meaning and mystery of this season. The clanging and banging. The incessantly cheerful Christmas tunes playing everywhere. The crazy, compulsive, even competitive gift buying. Have you noticed that some stores somehow manage to pipe in a cinnamon scent? There is a concerted assault on all our senses.

Advent is the season of the Christian liturgical year when the people prepare themselves for the birth of the messiah, for the incarnation, for the Holy to be born again, to take on human form in new and unexpected ways. Advent spans the four Sundays preceding Christmas, for it is considered that it can and should take time to prepare for the birth of the Holy among us. For love and truth and light and hope to dwell within once again. Four Sundays to rejoice that such mystery is possible in our mixed up, chaotic lives.

This time of Advent always calls to me, although I yet find it difficult to answer the call. I love Advent, ironically, because of all the holidays and Holy Days we celebrate, I like Christmas the very least. Yet that statement is less ironic than it seems.

I roundly dislike the secular side of Christmas. All that clanging and banging.

But I also dislike Christmas for all the expectations, for all its promises, the ones that seem so rarely delivered. The near-impossible promise of *really* cute shoes, the promise of Peace on Earth. The promise of entering directly into the mystery and wonder of life. Now part of problem is just all that busy-ness and noise, relentlessly drowning out any sense of mystery. Yet part of the problem lies within as well. The mystery is also drowned out by my very desire for it and my own unwillingness to believe in its possibility.

This time of Advent calls to me, yet I find it difficult to answer.

As Unitarian Universalists, good children of the Enlightenment that we are, we often approach Christmas kinda sideways. We most assuredly reject the miraculous birth story. There were no angels, and the baby in the stable is a neat metaphor that works on many levels. We approach Christmas kinda sideways, intellectually distancing ourselves from the mystery, holding ourselves apart from it by parsing it.

I think this is why I am also drawn to Christmas cards with snow-scapes and star-scapes. They whisper to me of the possibility of peace, mystery and wonder being real, manifesting before me in ways that just might circumvent my powerfully rational mind.

Advent calls to me, even as I sometimes don't hear its call distinctly enough to answer fully.

Another irony not lost on me in such moments appears in what is listed as the first source of our faith – *direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.*

So fitting for the season of Advent – as we wait for the mystery to be born again. For the Holy Possibility that a new birth brings. What a renewal of the spirit, of the forces that create and uphold life.

Yet the promise of Advent is not just that something new will be born into the world, but that it will be born again within each of us. Emmanuel – God With Us – shall come within as Love to dwell. Which recalls for me the first principle of our faith as well as the first source. Our affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of every person. That Holy thing born anew, which inheres within each of us, is that which gives us worth and dignity.

God
Disguised
As a myriad things and
Playing a game
Of tag
Has kissed you and said,
"You're it—
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Advent calls to me, an offering of time to consider mystery and wonder in the world. The mystery and wonder of all that it is to be human. The mystery and wonder that for all my humanity, I have worth and dignity. I need pretty regular reminders of this truth, for I often don't feel particularly worthy. The idea that Love and Truth and Light and Hope are indwelling, that the Holy dwells with us and within us is a powerful mystery which my mind – so well schooled in Western Linear Sequential Thought – wants to reject as irrational. But oh how desperately necessary it feels.

Advent invites us to do what Susan says she did when she was pregnant – exchange our ability to think (for just a while) for a sense that we are a walking miracle, filled with mystery and wonder.

We have a hard time with mystery and wonder. Yet we are so needful of it.

Advent calls to us, though it can be hard to hear that call, hard to answer.

In times such as these, times that are fraught and anxious, we look for explanations and fixes. As good children of the Enlightenment, we want everything to make sense and we try to make sense of everything. Yet even at our very best, we only get a partial view.

We are believers in the predominance and efficacy of Western Linear Sequential Thought. Yet we need to see that such rational thought is a powerful – but limited – tool. It is a way that we try to control and manipulate the world around us.

Sensing that so much is off-kilter, we fear that if we let go of our expectations of the world making sense, then nothing but chaos would reign. Everything would become random and arbitrary. Nihilism and cynicism would be the only reasonable response. Western Linear Sequential Thought is in fact, an attempt to control things by rational thought, a willing of things to be as we think they should be.

And it works, but only to a point.

We need, too, a sense of mystery and possibility outside the utterly rational. We need a sense of the Holy that dwells with our exiled souls. We need a joy that never yields to might. A vision that can see the whole. A wisdom that may render every act a prayer.

What better time than the weeks before Christmas to set aside Western Linear Sequential Thought and let the mystery arise.

What better time than now, when the world seems on the brink of disaster?

For neither did Jesus “wait till the world was ready
Till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
And prisoners cried out for release.”

We cannot control the world or the people in it. We can sometimes, and only partially, control ourselves. The world is at times most certainly random and arbitrary. And yet Advent calls us to be joyful – now, not only when we finally make sense of it all and can possibly even do something about it.

We cannot wait till the world is sane
To raise our songs with joyful voice,
For to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

No, it is not especially rational to rejoice in such perilous times, but ultimately what else can we do? We cannot wait till the world is sane – it never will be. We must do what we can to heal what is broken, and we must cry out in joy in the midst of the brokenness.

Mystery exists, joy and love and wonder are real. They manifest directly in our lives and as constant and real possibilities ready to break out at any time.

I wish I had some wonderful story of touching the mystery of this season, but I am generally such a grumpus and humbug about Christmas, I don't have one. Advent calls to my heart, but I still have trouble letting it in. But then again, I do. I love the candlelight shining in the darkness. The trouble with mystery is that it rarely comes out into the open and announces itself, rarely offers itself to be quantified and accounted for. At best, it flickers and glimmers on the periphery.

Yet ultimately in some way we all ultimately feel like exiles, our hearts break, we despair at greed and war. Take comfort in the mystery that all that is holy also lives fully within you as love, as Truth, as Light, as Hope. We may indeed at times be driven by self-serving, selfish motivations, but we also exist as transcendent beings of Light. That is indeed a great mystery, a great truth.

Advent comes to tell us finally, that just as an awaited baby will be born,

In the end,
It does not matter
What you believe or feel.
Something wonderful,
Major-league Wonderful
Is someday going
To
Happen.

I know that many of you are more adept than I at entering the mystery at this time of year. Yet we all need it. Perhaps the final irony for me is that as much as I dislike Christmas, I need it. That is why Advent calls to me so strongly, resist as I may. Advent can become almost a discipline, pushing me past all my humbug inclinations to remember the powerful mystery that lies at the center of all that is, at the center of our capacious hearts.

May you get cute shoes this Christmas, or whatever your equivalent might be.

And yet, may you yet heed the call of Advent, and set aside for sometime the need to explain and know, understand and control.

May you heed the call of Advent and let the mystery grow in you, let the mystery be born in you, help the mystery and joy be born into a needful world.

May you heed the call of Advent and rejoice.

Amen.

Blessed be.