

“Waiting”
Rev. Lyn Cox
December 3, 2017

We have reached the time of Advent, a period of reflection leading up to Christmas. In our community, we have varying experiences of and attitudes toward the holiday season. For many UU's, the place of common ground is to acknowledge the hope that comes with each new life.

Whether a baby is human or divine, they will turn someone's world upside down. Babies change everything. The best parts of the Christian scriptures are about turning things upside down: overcoming oppression, finding hope where there was none, valuing spiritual truths more than wealth or outward appearances, re-ordering society, respecting women, and honoring children. All of those themes were in the Hebrew Bible and were reinforced by early Christianity. Right from the start, when you have either angels mingling with shepherds (in Luke) or courtiers paying homage to a child (in Matthew), there are reversals in expectations. The things people were waiting for show up, but in almost the opposite way from what they were expecting. There is a lot of potential for transformation.

The birth of Jesus can be viewed from many different perspectives. In this season of Advent, these different versions of the story can illuminate different ways of waiting. We might be waiting for a prophecy to be fulfilled, or the right moment in history, or for someone or something to grow in their own time.

Waiting for History

Sometimes what we're waiting for is a moment in time. The Nativity story starts with long list of “begats” in Matthew, and a slightly different list in Luke. The struggle for transformation is put into context as part of a larger narrative. Roots give the listeners a sense of unity and history. Values are passed down through generations, like a flame is passed from one candle to another.

The writers of the Book of Matthew connected their stories with the big picture by placing Jesus in the context of Jewish prophetic writings. They traced the lineage of

Joseph all the way back to Abraham in a way that suggested that a great transformation of the Jewish people was due, like clockwork, every fourteen generations. Let's think about what the authors were working toward in the first century: the Jewish people were looking for hope that they could survive Roman oppression and the destruction of the second Temple. The Jesus movement thought they had the answer to that, and they tried to prove it by text.

The nativity in Matthew is the story of a born leader, a baby who turned everything upside down with symbols in his childhood and with prophetic work as an adult. The major players in this nativity story are politicians: royal astrologers viewing the big picture of history, King Herod with his violent response to change, even Joseph thinks in political terms as he strategizes to protect his family's reputation and safety.

I mentioned in another sermon recently that modern scholars approach Hebrew Bible prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel as political and religious commentary aimed at people who were around at the time of their writing. For instance, we read in Isaiah 10:1-2, "Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!"

Given the blatant dishonesty and theft committed by the United States Senate late Friday night in the guise of the so-called tax bill, we can imagine how relevant these verses were in their own era, and yet they are still timely. The news of late may lead you to anger or despair or fear. Let it lead you instead to community, to curiosity, and to action. Join the prophetic response, or redouble your efforts at compassionate care for those most impacted, or increase your support for communities like this one where those weary from injustice and those working for change can be strengthened.

The prophetic tradition is about telling the truth to bring the people back to their moral center, not about fortune-telling regarding events hundreds or thousands of years in the future. We read Isaiah on Christmas Eve because Isaiah inspired Jesus and his followers. Jesus and Isaiah were connected through the generations not by prediction but by unity of message. Both Isaiah and Jesus were working with the questions of how to order society and how leaders should behave. Both answered with justice and mercy.

I find historical unity and relevance to the call that we transform the world with love. As far back as we care to look, there are reminders to act with justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. There have been corrupt and greedy people in and out of power for several millennia, and there have always been people of faith there to limit their ability to oppress people, to speak truth to power, and to organize the people for a better way forward. I am inspired to take part in that ancient movement. It is challenging and worthwhile to live up to that history.

Waiting for a moment to transform the world in the service of justice and kindness does not take fourteen generations. The time is always right. We are not simply waiting, we are actively preparing our minds, hearts, souls, bodies, and communities.

Spark of Wonder

The birth of Jesus can also be seen in another light: the spark of wonder. Between the radiance of the angels heralding to the shepherds and the flickering candles of traditional Christmas celebrations, light and shadow captures our imagination and leaves room for mystery. Sometimes what we are waiting for is inspiration, a way to connect our spiritual lives with our lived experience.

I'm always glad to celebrate with carols and candlelight in a UU congregation on December 24. Darkness in the windows, bright lights on the chancel, and candles with "Silent Night" bring clarity of focus that is hard for me to find otherwise. The shadows in the room take us out of cautious, rational mode and allow us to dwell comfortably with the unknown. When we turn the overhead lights off, the literal words of the song don't matter as much as the experience of being together.

That's part of what I mean by the spark of wonder. The nativity story commands attention and awe, partly because of the imagery within the story and partly because of the way we play with light as we retell it.

I think "spark" is appropriate here, because not only can a flash of light convey the dazzling surprise of transcendence, a direct experience with awe is likely to spark something, to ignite an active response.

When the angels appeared at the beginning of the Book of Luke, the shepherds were terrified, which sounds about right. One doesn't usually expect a multitude of the heavenly host. Then again, the words for awe and fear sometimes get mixed up in Biblical translations. Maybe the shepherds were both. Fear by itself can render someone motionless; one might say petrified.

When someone is awestruck, there's a moment of reverence, of being completely soaked up in the experience of wonder. What follows, though, is inspiration. Transcendence leads people to do something, to talk about their experience, or create, or begin a spiritual practice. In this story, the shepherds were moved to travel to Bethlehem.

Perhaps the nativity story, or any spark of wonder, can do the same for us. An experience of transcendent mystery holds our focus for a short time, maybe as long as it takes for a candle to burn. That brief moment fuels something more. In the darkness, singing carols, I might find the resolve to treat my family with more kindness, or to spend more time with music, or to keep up my connections with those who have passed the flame to me. The spiritual practice is, as we wait, to open ourselves up to the possibility of awe and, when it comes, to move forward.

In this version, the story of the birth of Jesus is a chance to begin again. Angels announce good news for all people, a future of peace and blessing. Transcending mystery and wonder ignites a journey that opens us up to new ideas and a renewed sense of hope. If we're waiting for inspiration, let's make the most of it when it comes. Let us be alert to the presence of a spark of wonder.

Hearth of Community

A third kind of waiting in the Nativity stories has to do with the need for patience during times of growth. Humans need time to mature in mind, body, and spirit. Growth is not always obvious from the outside. Look at any pregnant person or teenager; even when they are sleeping, on a cellular level, they are very busy.

We heard earlier about the ecstatic meeting between Mary and Elizabeth, awaiting the births of Jesus and John. As I read this passage, I'm envisioning two radiant women,

glowing with creation and spirit, making a home together. They are sharing an experience that is both transcendent and extremely common. And it takes time. Pregnancy just takes as long as it takes, even when there's direct Divine intervention. Elizabeth and Mary turn that time of waiting into a deepening of relationship, a chance to be fully present with each other and with the sacred.

For her part, Mary's prophecy boldly proclaimed bringing down monarchs and lifting up the lowly. "He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:32-33, Revised English Bible). Mary was preparing for a revolution. Mary was not waiting for the world to change. She already saw it changing. The rest of us are slow to realize what the Mystery is already doing.

Being able to perceive this world made whole, this world that is manifest in the Divine vision if not yet fully realized in the world we inhabit, is a skill. It helps to be among people who are practicing this form of visionary waiting. That's why I'm going to a meeting about the new Poor People's Campaign this Wednesday afternoon. <https://poorpeoplescampaign.org/> The campaign aims to lead our nation toward a "serious examination of the enmeshed evils of systemic racism, poverty, militarism, and environmental devastation." Perhaps you would like to join me. Change is going to come, and it is encouraging to be with the people whose ability to imagine it coming is magnified through spiritual community.

Elizabeth and Mary understood themselves as active participants in events that would transform heaven and earth, and they wanted to launch that phase of their lives together. Jesus and John the Baptist were both born to mothers who sought human connection as they grew into their world-changing roles. (See Kate Huey's reflection on Mary and Elizabeth: <http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/weekly-seeds/heartbeat-of.html>)

Waiting, by itself, can be a spiritual practice. When we do it intentionally, waiting may help us to clear away noise and clutter and distraction. Waiting may help us honor the growth and transformation that are real, but hard to detect. Waiting may give unheard voices a chance to ring out. Let every heart prepare room.

Conclusion

The nativity stories can be understood from many different perspectives; a multitude of angles, if you will. These perspectives carry over into our experience of the stories. We might even be able to use these perspectives as we consider the stories of our own lives.

The sages in the book of Matthew tried to tell us that now is the time to create justice and kindness. The wisdom of generations points to this very moment. Get ready for the journey, because our cue is imminent.

The angels and the shepherds tell us to open our minds and hearts to inspiration. It may come from surprising places. May we move from inspiration to action.

Elizabeth and Mary waited together, building community as they prepared for a radically transformed future. Give time for growth, the invisible kind as well as the visible kind. Find companionship among people of imagination.

Whatever your perspective on the great stories of this season, may the songs of your heart bring you warmth and hope.

So be it. Blessed be. Amen.