

*The War on Advent and the Spiritual Practice of Waiting*

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Roger D. Jones  
First Sunday of Advent, December 1, 2019  
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Baby/Child Dedication Ceremony for Atlas, Sylvan, Violet, Evelyn, Terra and Sean  
Special Music: “Child of Tomorrow,” vocal duet. “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” cello.  
Hymns: #21, “For the Beauty of the Earth,” #86, “Blessed Spirit of My Life,”  
#1008, “When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place.”  
Reflection by Karen Sparrow (printed at end)

Reading:

Our reading today is a poem entitled “Fresh,”  
written in the early 2000s by Naomi Shihab Nye,  
a Palestinian American poet who lives in San Antonio.

Fresh

To move  
cleanly. Needing to be  
nowhere else.  
Wanting nothing  
from any store.  
To lift something  
you already had  
and set it down in  
a new place.  
Awakened eye,  
seeing freshly.  
What does that do to  
the old blood moving through  
its channels?

Sermon:

The sermon today starts with a rant and ends with an invitation. First that rant. I have had a grudge since 2005, when a right-wing host from the Fox News Channel wrote a book entitled *The War on Christmas*. In his book and on his TV show, John Gibson argued that secular culture in general and American liberals in particular were out to ban Christmas as a sacred and religious holiday. Along with other white and mostly male promoters of outrage on TV, John Gibson focused his attack on various legal challenges to the display of Nativity scenes on town squares, courthouse lawns and other public places. These legal challenges were not really for the defense of the separation of church and state, he said. No, such court cases were liberal attempts to suppress religious expression.

With shrill voices and weak evidence, he and comrades like Bill O’Reilly—the now dethroned but still wealthy Fox News host—blared about the trend of sales clerks at shopping malls and big-box retailers to offer cheers of “Happy Holidays” to their customers instead of saying the age-old “Merry Christmas.” What blasphemy, Happy Holidays! Gibson and company stirred up a lot of anger, which is always good for book sales.

Yet in choosing to bash liberals and atheists, they chose not to lay a hand on the machine of merchandizing around Christmas. Indeed, you need only open the newspaper or log in to the internet for evidence that consumer capitalism does more than anything else to diminish the message of Jesus around Christmas. In the Bible, when he's an adult, Jesus of Nazareth calls people to give up wealth and possessions in order to follow him. What God wants, he says, is for us to care for the weak, hungry, and vulnerable of our world. Perhaps consumerism is the true enemy of keeping Christ in Christmas. I'm confident there is *not* a war on Christmas; it's too profitable to kill off.

Yet I see plenty of evidence of a war on Advent. Covering the four Sundays before Christmas, Advent is a time of anticipating the birth of Jesus every year. The season of Advent goes back at least to the year 567, when Christian monks had to fast in the weeks leading up to Christmas. Yet its current and familiar observance began in Europe the 1800s, when German-speaking peoples began counting down the days till Christmas with an Advent calendar, each day with a different image. They also lighted four candles on an Advent wreath, a new candle added on each of the four Sundays leading up to Christmas. Spiritually speaking, Advent is a season of anticipation and preparation. When it concludes, there's the big feast and the candle-infused celebration of the 12 days of Christmas. These go until the sixth of January, which is Epiphany.

Historians have noted that the holiday of Christmas has always been a hodgepodge celebration in European and American cultures. There's never been one pure way to observe the birth of Jesus. Furthermore, for centuries people have made money around the holiday. Yet Advent could be counted on to provide balance, spiritual balance. It was a time of slowing down, a time of reflection, seeking inner peace, and looking forward.

Advent wasn't meant to be a shopping season, but that's what it's become. Ever since department stores and catalog showrooms came on the scene, the massive engines of merchandizing have stirred North Americans to speed up the pace of shopping and spending earlier and earlier before Christmas. In his book *The War on Christmas*,

Gibson casts the American Civil Liberties Union, or ACLU, as a leader of the anti-Christmas forces. I did a word search. In his book, where the word *Christian* appears 132 times. The initials of his chosen enemy, the *A-C-L-U*, appear as a word 61 times! Yet the words *consumerism* or *capitalism* appear not once. The word *Christmas* appears 168 times, as you might expect. Yet it would be nice to see a mention of Advent, since it lasts four weeks. Yet Advent appears nowhere in the book.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever kind of religion we might identify with—even if it's no religion—if we wish to consider the spiritual invitation of Advent amid the roar of the Christmas machine, we will have to be intentional about it. We will have to choose our own opportunities for slowing down. The culture in which we live will demand only that we speed up, do more, do it all, *and* seem to be happy about it all, no matter what. We will have to choose for ourselves, choose to cultivate a spiritual practice of waiting. Anticipation. Expectation. Getting Ready. Waiting is a spiritual practice.

The late Peter Fleck was a banker who became a UU minister late in life and wrote books on spirituality. He wrote: "The quality of our lives depends on the spiritual mood in which we wait."<sup>2</sup> The quality of our lives depends on the spiritual mood in which we wait.

*There are so many kinds of waiting.* There's waiting for your date for coffee to show up, for your hair stylist or barber to bring you to the chair, for a nurse to call you out of the waiting room. There's waiting in line--to check out of the grocery store, go through the toll booth on the bridge, get into the concert or movie. With a twinkle in her eye, a friend of mine said: "There's an element of waiting that I have in the time between when I place an online order from my bed until it arrives in a smiley-faced Amazon box at my doorstep." To be sure, waiting can be annoying. It can be boring.

Waiting can put us face to face with our impatience. At a table in a restaurant, we're waiting to be served our meal. With growing frustration, we note the large table of happy loud people who came in after us and got served before we even ordered. In the moment it can seem like an outrage. In the grand scheme of things, I don't know. But it is an invitation to practice waiting.

Yet it seems that if we look at the suffering of so many people in waiting situations, we can consider ourselves lucky and privileged to be merely annoyed by having to wait. For example, in contrast to waiting for a traffic jam to clear or a red light to turn green, I am not waiting in line for an immigration official to consider my appeal for asylum. Too many desperate migrant parents and fearful children are waiting for asylum—for months, at the Southern US border. They are waiting for mercy, waiting for safety. Around the globe at border checkpoints, or in refugee camps...migrants are waiting to find out their fate. I not a person who has to do that kind of waiting.

Nor am I a political prisoner at hard labor, waiting for liberation. Nor the parent of a student activist, waiting to find out what happened when their child was disappeared by the police or military of their country. These are kinds of waiting we wouldn't wish on anybody. Given such cruel kinds of waiting that our human kin must endure, we should not wait very long to hear the moral call to help—to extend a hand, send money, write a letter, register voters, speak out, do whatever to raise the alarm that people are suffering from injustice. Let us insist, let us demand, that suffering people not be made to wait any longer for their day of liberation.

Even if we are privileged and lucky not to have to wait in an agonizing situation, we know that waiting can be stressful. Waiting often involves uncertainty, and it can be exhausting. There's waiting for a child's adoption process to be finalized; there's waiting for a baby to be born; there's waiting for conception to happen. There's waiting to grow up and waiting to grow old. Waiting for the kids to move away, waiting for them to come back. Yet waiting can also be full of possibilities for deepening our lives.

When a person is in the last weeks or days of life, or in the last hours of life, there often is a vigil by caregivers, friends or loved ones. Sitting by the bed. A vigil. There may *or may not* be more communication from the person who is dying. They may not always know we're there. Yet the presence we offer makes a difference. This kind of waiting is poignant. We'll remember it for a long time. Usually, the point of this kind of waiting is *not* to look forward to the end of it. The point is the moments we spend in being present, in gently

watching over the person, in showing respect for the person, and in reflecting on their life and ours. In such a vigil, the kind of waiting that we do, is both simple and profound.

Waiting has its own shape and feel. Waiting is its own experience, with its own opportunities and challenges. It need not be seen only as the dues we pay to obtain what comes after waiting. Planting a garden and then tending it, setting out plates and silverware for dinner guests coming later, decorating your apartment or house for any holiday or new season—all these actions of preparation are full experiences on their own.

As the late Peter Fleck wrote, the quality of our lives depends on the spiritual mood in which we wait.

Judging from all the cooking competitions on television and so many recipes on the internet, it's clear that preparing food from scratch is widely popular in this country. For many people who have the time to do it, it seems better to make it yourself than use a mix or buy it already prepared. And much of the time that is required to do so... is time spent in waiting. Especially for those who bake bread. There's actual effort, of course, but also you have to wait for it to rise, and also wait for it to bake. Many folks have spoken about the meditative qualities of the time they take in making breads, jams, soups, sauces or other foods. They work with patience, but also with anticipation. These activities are examples of the spiritual practice of waiting.

Naomi Shihab Nye wrote this poem:

Fresh

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Wanting nothing  
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Awakened eye,  
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What does that do to  
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its channels?

How can we hope that familiar aspects of our days will appear to us a little more freshly? How can we perceive the ordinary traits of our lives in awakened and fresh ways? This is a reason for waiting.

Do we keep our stuff in the same old places or set it down in a new place? Or do we keep our lives in the same old places? How can we tell, if we don't pause, wait, breathe, and reflect?

To lift something  
you already had  
and set it down in/ a new place.  
Awakened eye,  
seeing freshly.

It feels like a long time since I've had that awakened-eye kind of experience, in the sense of a grand, eye-opening new moment of a fresh start. Yet on most days I do take a few minutes *to ask* to see things freshly. I start by noticing the contact of my familiar body on the familiar hard wooden chair as if it were a new sensation, which in that moment of noticing, it is. I try to pause like this to help me remember to see and feel the day's events in an attentive way—and in a fresh way if I'm lucky.

This month here at UUSS we have a few activities to invite you to enjoy the journey of Advent. Not too many things, though—no need to feel overwhelmed. There's the Communion this afternoon and the Holiday Party on Friday evening. On Wednesday, the 11<sup>th</sup> of December, there's a Vesper Service at 6:00 p.m. And our outdoor Labyrinth is open every day, rain or shine.

The new movie, *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, is the perfect movie for Advent. In the film, Tom Hanks plays Mr. Rogers, the children's Public Television host, now departed. Known for the eye contact and careful words with which he addressed his young audience, Fred Rogers showed empathy and kindness. He was an ordained minister and the TV show was his ministry. When I was a teenager I watched it vicariously, as my little nephew sat in front of the TV set. I joked and laughed at Mr. Rogers' deliberate and slow pace of speaking. But it was just right for kids.

The new movie is about his relationship with a cynical reporter who is writing a profile

about him for *Esquire* magazine. At a restaurant, before they eat, Mr. Rogers asks, "Could we *pause for a minute* to think about the people who have loved us into being?" The reporter resists, but Mr. Rogers presses on: "Just one minute of silence," and looks at his watch.

They go silent for a minute. The movie takes the full minute in real time. This means the audience is taking that same full minute too. Viewers are brought in... to reflect on the same question about those who love us into being. The restaurant music stops. The camera pans around the restaurant scene, and the people around them look and then get quiet themselves. This long minute is not merely something to be gotten through before the dialogue begins again. The silence is important. The waiting we do has its own reason for being.

To lift something  
you already had  
and set it down in/ a new place.  
Awakened eye,  
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This is the invitation of Advent for you and for me. There's four Sundays, beginning today. When life seems to be rushing you too much, invite a friend or a loved one to do something with you that could be considered a kind of waiting. Consider your opportunities to take a long, full minute as a simple gift of peace and freshness.

Notice when you are merely waiting. Notice your waiting, and give thanks for it.

So may it be. Blessed be and amen.

My Dad was an amazing and patient “waiter”—not a restaurant server but a person who was able to wait. I am not sure if he was that way by nature or because he was married to my Mother. My Mother loved to shop. Not to buy so much but to just look at everything, and I mean everything, in a store. My Dad would retire to a bench outside the store or in the Mall and wait. Some of my favorite memories are of sitting with him and learning the art of waiting. People watching mostly but waiting. Being in the moment. Not tapping a foot because he wanted to be somewhere else or get something done but just being there, in that moment, waiting. There weren’t mobile phones back then so just being, watching and waiting was the entertainment.

Because of those wonderful lessons at his side I find as I get older, I get better at waiting. On occasion I will now pull out my mobile and scroll through Pinterest looking for a new craft or quilt pattern but rarely, especially if I do not have access to free wi-fi. I love to just sit, quietly, listening to the monkey chatter in my head, or watch the wind blow the clouds around in the sky. To appreciate the moments when, due to whatever circumstance

it may be at the time, I am unable to be going, doing, buying or rushing around. Held, almost, captive in a short space and time to breathe, ponder, rest, rejuvenate and simply just wait.

Toward the end of my Dad’s life I would call him on the phone and ask “Hey Dad, what are you doing?” Being the character that he was, his answer was always “Waiting for God.” I think in a nutshell that pretty much says it all. We are all waiting for God, in one form or another.

As we move into this season of parties, shopping, eating and festivities, I like to take as much time as I can to sit, patiently waiting in those quiet moments for a brief touch and experience of God. I frequently have to stop and remind myself that God is around me all the time. In those moments as brief as seeing a hummingbird pause at a flower to drink the nectar or hearing children laughing as they play. Watching an elderly couple walk hand in hand down the street. I don’t have to wait I have to be aware and mindful all the time that the touch and experience of God surrounds me, envelopes and can comfort me now, in this moment, without any waiting.

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<sup>1</sup> John Gibson, *The War on Christmas: How the Secular Is Worse than You Thought* (New York, 2005: Sentinel Books). My numbers about the appearance of certain words rely on the “Search Inside this Book!” feature of amazon.com. That’s because the book has no index of key works. An index would distinguish a work of scholarship (or at least of reliable analysis and opinion) from a polemical book, which is written to inflame followers and make money for the polemicist. Accessed November 30, 2019.

[https://smile.amazon.com/dp/1595230165/ref=rdr\\_ext\\_tmb](https://smile.amazon.com/dp/1595230165/ref=rdr_ext_tmb)

<sup>2</sup> Peter Fleck, *Come As You Are: Reflections on the Revelations of Everyday Life* (Boston, 1991: Beacon Books), 59.