

## A Different Kind of December

Homily for Advent by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones  
Online Sunday service, December 6, 2020  
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

**Hymns:** [We Are Gathered](#) (text by Amanda Udis-Kessler, tune “Nettleton”); [O Come, O Come, Emmanuel](#) (#225 in *Singing the Living Tradition*); [There Is a Love Holding Us](#) (text by Rebecca Parker, tune by Elizabeth Norton); click to see!



### Homily Part 1

The topic of today’s service was posted on our website. I had written that today would be the Second Sunday of the season of Advent. I got a few questions: What is Advent, and what is it about? As you heard in Larry’s reflection, it comes from the Christian tradition. Advent’s themes are waiting, hoping and anticipating.

The observance of Advent is an ancient practice. It started about five centuries after the time of Jesus. The Christian movement was still forming and organizing, with ongoing disputes over doctrines and forms of worship. The various early churches did not agree on the calendar of the church year. For example, how long should Advent last? Those early disagreements are why Eastern Orthodox churches have Advent for six weeks, but the Roman Catholic church settled on four weeks—the four Sundays before Christmas. After the Reformation, the Protestant faiths that observed Advent also followed four weeks.

For traditional Christians, the holiday season starts with Advent, a time of anticipation for the arrival of the Baby Jesus. Then comes Christmas Day, which is only the first of 12 days to celebrate

the nativity of Jesus. Those twelve days of Christmas end on Epiphany, which marks the arrival of the Wise Men (or Magi) to Bethlehem. Here’s a quick way to remember the schedule: four weeks of anticipation, then shepherds come to see the new baby on Christmas; twelve days later, the Wise Men arrive, with gifts from afar.

You may have heard that Jesus was not born on December 25, actually not in December at all. The early Christian church set the date in December because people of Pagan religions and nature-based spiritual practices were already used to celebrating the winter solstice then. In human history, no matter how old a tradition may be, it’s likely that it was piled on top of an earlier tradition in the same geographical location or at the same time of year.

The practice of anticipating Jesus’ arrival does have Roman Pagan origins, or at least the *word* Advent does. The members of the congregations of the early church were subjects of the Roman Empire. In those days, the Emperor declared himself a God. He was to be revered as a divine presence as well as a political ruler. So when an Emperor would make an official visit to one of the walled cities of his realm, he wanted to make... *an entrance*. You know, fancy toga and crown, with a military escort. The elders of the city would go wait outside the main gate of the city to greet him. The Emperor’s arrival was known as his *adventus*, his coming. This is where Christians got the idea of waiting on Jesus. In contradiction of Rome’s blasphemous politics and its idolatrous religion, they saw Jesus as the real divine king, the true presence of God in human form. Hence they were waiting for God’s arrival, the Advent of Jesus Christ.

You don’t have to believe this particular theology if you want to celebrate the spiritual essence of Advent. An enjoyable way for families to do so is an Advent calendar, which counts down the days to Christmas, with a song, a picture, or a treat for each day; some of our families have Advent calendars.

Another way to observe it is to have an Advent wreath and candles. It was a Protestant pastor in Germany in the middle-1800s who created the popular modern practice of lighting candles to count down to Christmas. Nowadays, the design of

the wreath has four candles standing amid evergreen branches. Three candles are purple and one is rose. On this slide is a graphic of the wreath. Whether at home or in church, or both, on the first Sunday of Advent, a candle is lit for hope. The next Sunday, it's joined by a candle for peace; both of them are lit. On the third Sunday, those two are joined by a candle for joy; which is what the pink one represents. And on the final Sunday all four are lit; and the fourth candle stands for love. Hope, peace, joy and love—the virtues of Advent. As millions of Americans demonstrate every December, you don't have to be Christian to celebrate Christmas. The same goes for Advent. That's because these virtues don't belong to Christianity alone. These qualities are a blessing to everyone: hope, peace, joy and love. I'll say more about the spiritual essence of Advent later.

Given its theme of anticipation, I want to tell you that I've been waiting all week to introduce you to a guest. Amanda McCarthy is the Executive Director of the River City Food Bank. It is our Community Partner for December; half of all offerings received this month will go to the food bank. [Greetings and thanks from Amanda.]

## Homily Part 2

In this country's dominant culture, December is a time of eating, shopping, visiting others, waiting in line, attending concerts or shows, having people over, writing cards, and giving gifts. Of course, we do all this in the spirit of good cheer and celebration. The shared warmth of other people can keep the chill at bay. Staying busy and active can brighten the long nights. In other words, December is a time for *overdoing it*. This year, it is a different kind of December. This time, for too many people, it will be a month of *under-doing it*.

Our congregation has been using materials from a UU program called Soul Matters, which has a different theme every month. Our December theme is *stillness*. In the northern hemisphere, the declining daylight and chilly nights are nature's reminders of the gift of stillness. I haven't asked the UU ministers who produce the Soul Matters program if they chose this theme before it seemed likely that many of us would be *sitting still* at home this December a lot more than usual. I don't know.

Or perhaps they chose it because the agonies of this pandemic time and the frustrations of our political moment would put us all in greater *need* of the blessing of stillness.

In any case, it seems to be suited for this particular year, and for this season of Advent. The spiritual essence of Advent is about waiting and hoping and longing. *Does that feel familiar these days?* Spiritual teachers have said Advent is a four-week journey through the wilderness. In a wilderness, there's a need for being still enough to pay attention. It calls for patience to make it through a wilderness. This December, Advent feels to me less like a *journey through* the wilderness than a *banishment to it*. We're in a wilderness of uncertainty... and we can't even hold hands for comfort! Public health guidance is intended to make us safe at home. Yet depending on your personal situation, *safe* at home can seem like "*stuck* at home." Then it seems like "*stressed* at home." Safe at home, stuck at home, stressed at home—all three can be true.

This year I would give anything to be overcommitted, over scheduled, and over celebrated for the holiday season. I imagine that many essential workers would prefer being overscheduled with celebrations instead of overscheduled with jobs wearing them down or putting them in harm's way. In most years, the pace of December can be exhausting. This year, we have brought exhaustion into December with us, along with frustration, worry, grief and sadness.

The bleakness and chill of this time of Advent matches my mood of brooding in December. The author and minister Richard Lischer has written: "Before Advent is a *word*, it is a sigh. A voice crying. A mood."<sup>i</sup>

Yet because it is looking to the future, looking to better days, the direction of Advent is toward hope. In the Advent wreath, the purple candle to be lit on the first Sunday of the season is the candle of *hope*. I like the definition of hope given by visionary social activists and spiritual teachers. They have explained that hope is not a feeling that you have or a feeling you lose. Hope is an *approach to life* by which you affirm what is most valuable to you. Hope is not a sense of certainty, but a choice we make in the midst of

*uncertainty*. It is a discipline—of acting when we can, acting when we feel the call of our conscience. And it is a discipline of waiting when it is waiting which affirms what and who are most valuable to us.

In the language of the Jewish Bible, the same word in Hebrew means both *wait* and *hope*. This is true in Spanish also: the verb *esperar* means to wait and to hope; *esperanza* is the noun. Yet there are many ways to wait—patiently or impatiently, with a desperate anxiety or a peaceful presence. The way to *hope* is to affirm and embody the vision of what we are hoping for.

Consider the disciplines of exercise and meditating in silence. They involve giving time and attention in hope of a good result, in hope that our discipline will bear fruit. Right now, our common disciplines include keeping our distance from others to whom we normally would show our care by close conversation, sharing a meal, giving a hug. We deprive ourselves now in a mutual discipline of hope.

The Advent candle for hope is the one that goes first because the whole season is about hoping and waiting for Christmas to arrive. But hope comes first also because it will depend on the qualities of all the other candles to make hoping worthwhile. Cultivating hope depends on living by the virtues of the other Advent candles: peace, joy and love. Hope is counting on the others.

Let's start with peace. Christmas carols promise peace on earth, as do prophetic people in religious history and brave activists in our own day. Yet Advent is an invitation to personal peace. To be sure, inner peace is an ingredient for peace among people and nations. Our December theme of stillness addresses this kind of peace, peace inside, and peace with those who are nearest to you. My new favorite story about this kind of peace is the delightful children's book, *Remy the Rhino Learns Patience*.<sup>ii</sup>

In this book, an easily angered rhinoceros gets all worked up and goes raging after an aardvark. The chase ends with Remy's big sharp horn stuck deep in the trunk of a tree. Remy pulls and pulls, twists and bends, but that makes his horn wedge more deeply. He groans and moans, the way I want to moan sometimes when I'm feeling stuck

and alone. Hearing all this racket, the aardvark comes back and offers to help Remy out! The aardvark proposes to attract a parade of termites to the trunk of the tree. They will eat the wood around the hole made by the Rhino's horn, chewing away enough wood for Remy to get free. What Remy needs to do is to trust the process and wait. However, patience is not familiar to Remy. There's no guarantee how long his confinement will continue, and he's upset. The termite eats, and Remy twists and pulls and wiggles. *Calm down, Remy! Relax*, the aardvark says. *You're not helping your situation, only making it worse*. The aardvark is a spiritual coach. It says: *Take a deep inhale breath and hold it, and then exhale it out of those big rhinoceros nostrils of yours*. Remy breathes and relaxes. Now and then, he gets restless, and the aardvark is reassuring: *Remy, relax, and have patience. We'll get there. It will happen*. After some time, the termites eat enough of the wood around the hole. One more breath, and Remy relaxes one more time. The horn slips out of the hole, and Remy is free.

Off he goes, grateful for the kindness of the aardvark and the help of the termites. He goes away with a new lesson about the connection between patience and peace, a lesson offered in love by an aardvark and some termites

I can imagine it has given them joy to help out. Joy is a topic that deserves a whole service to itself, so I hope you'll tune in next Sunday, December 13. Rev. Lucy is planning a *joyful* one. Last Sunday, our guest preacher Matt Meyer brought several instruments from his home in Boston into our Zoom space and taught us a few new songs. Judging from the comments we received, this brought some joy to many people. In an email this week, Matt has written about his joy in the wake of a year of much loss. He says: "I'm doing Christmas this year early and often. I'm in some extra need of decorations, greenery in the house, and lights all over the place." He's also participating in an annual carol sing-along in Boston, even though this year it will be online. Many concerts and sing-a-longs are taking place virtually this year, in shared efforts to cultivate some joy.

Another friend of mine lives in northern Vermont. Up there in December, she says, the sunlight begins to wane at 2:30 in the afternoon. Soon it will be dark there by 4:30. People are used to it there. But having to stay at home—and to be separate—makes this December more lonely. My friend says, “This year my neighbors have put up their Christmas lights up earlier than before.” People may be doing this to lift their own spirits, to bring festive joy to themselves. But in doing so, they are also offering some joy to all those who pass by on the road or sidewalk. This year in particular, decorations and lights provide signs of encouragement for us all. They shine with hope for better days to come.

This past week, the first holiday cards began arriving in the mail. In this hard year, such gifts provide extra joy and reassurance to the recipients—well, to *this* recipient, at least. And I bet the practice of preparing and mailing the cards brings joy to the people who do it. Any gesture that brings joy to both giver and receiver has a lot to do with love. Love is the fourth candle in an Advent wreath.

We can renew our sense of love by reaching out, no matter what kind of December we are living through. I have two nephews living in Colorado, one in his late 30s, the other in his late 40s. Though we are close, you wouldn’t know this if you looked at the infrequency of our communications. One year in May I called one on his birthday and left a message. He called me back, three months later. We had a wonderful conversation. The other one sends me text messages out of the blue, which are thoughtful and affectionate. We have a nice exchange for a few minutes. This happened one night a week ago. After a few texts, I said, “Let’s plan to catch up on the phone sometime.” *Sure*, he

said. I texted some dates and then I said, “How about now?” He said yes, and we had a good visit, voice to voice. This pandemic has given cause for many of us to reach out to other people. After long stretches of silence or absence, relatives and friends are trying to connect from around the country or the world. In this different kind of December, the chances are that if we reach out, other people will be home!

When we deepen the connections that sustain us, we add more love to the world. In addition to reaching out, there are so many ways to practice love—by expressing appreciation, showing patience, giving generously, providing encouragement and praise. Showing love is not only good for the world, it’s good for us. It can remind us that we are connected by love, we are held by love, that we are loved. We are loved.

As we hope for a better world, we can practice hope and share it by cultivating peace, joy and love. As we wait for better days, we can *make each day better now* by looking for these blessings—and adding to them.

In the days ahead, may you practice hope and find ways to share it. May you find peace and relax into it. May you experience moments of joy and call on the memory of those moments to remind you of the beauty of life and the beauty of this world. May you show love in as many ways as possible. And may you be assured that love is holding you. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Richard Lischer, “Advent Is a Season of Sighs, Especially this Year,” *Christian Century*, Nov. 24, 2020. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/reflection/advent-season-sighs-especially-year>

<sup>ii</sup> Andy McGuire, *Remy the Rhino Learns Patience* (Eugene Oregon, 2010: Harvest House Publishers). See it read aloud: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cO3rVYDahow>