



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Watching and Waiting”

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A Christmas Eve homily

Our waiting for Christmas to come is almost over. No more waiting for Santa Claus to come, for he comes tonight. Mary and Joseph have no more waiting for the birth of the child, for he comes tonight, too.

Advent (meaning ‘to come’) marks the four weeks of Sundays before Christmas. If you follow Advent traditions, perhaps you’ve opened tiny doors or windows on an Advent calendar, each opening taking you closer to Christmas Day. Or maybe you’ve simply crossed off the days on a standard calendar to visibly show Christmas getting closer.

Maybe, you’re anticipating the presents you might receive. Maybe, you’re waiting for the arrival of family members traveling from a great distance to be with you. Maybe, you’re enjoying the time ahead of Christmas and New Year’s Day by planning traditional holiday foods, wearing special clothes, or attending festive parties.

Maybe, instead of happy waiting, you’ve crossed off the days in fear. Fear that you wouldn’t find the right gift in time or that you might not be able to afford what you’d really like to give. Fear that Christmas would be lonely, disappointing, or sad, particularly if loved ones are no longer living. Fear that your Christmas wouldn’t look like all the Christmas’s in the over-the-top advertisements we’re bombarded with all season.

Watching and waiting for Christmas to come can be a challenge for the young, the old, and even those of us in-between.

I remember one particular Christmas when I was young I couldn’t wait for Christmas morning. Maybe you’ve done this too, but late that Christmas Eve while everyone else slept, with flashlight in hand I quietly went downstairs to peek under the tree to see what Santa had brought me. Santa would always deliver presents unwrapped to my house, so I could see my presents without tearing any paper or making any noise. I remember seeing a child’s toy loom for weaving with my name on it. I’m sure I made a silent squeal of delight.

After eyeing all the presents, I returned to bed. But when I woke up the next morning and joined my family around the tree, I didn’t feel my usual excitement. I’d spoiled the surprise for myself. Not only did I already know what Santa had brought me, I also knew I had done

something I shouldn't. Christmas wasn't especially merry that year and I never repeated that pre-Christmas morning adventure. I wanted the full surprise and joy of Christmas morning with family.

Imagine the full surprise of the shepherds when the heavenly host of angels appeared, as the story is told in the gospel of Luke. The shepherds were just out in the fields as they were every night, watching their sheep, protecting them from wolves and other dangers. They weren't waiting for glorious angels to appear with sounding trumpets heralding the news of a newborn messiah. They weren't anticipating a midnight walk to Bethlehem to see some infant child.

But in that awesome moment, they were awakened to the possibility of new hope. These Jewish shepherds had been waiting for an earthly savior to rescue them from their oppression by the Roman Empire. They were waiting for someone to arrive who would bring peace to their world. And so they left their defenseless sheep in the fields to see for themselves if what the angels said was true.

Whatever we may think about the theological truth of Jesus or the historical truth of this story, the myth contains truth and meaning for us today. It alerts us to pay attention, to be ready, to watch for that moment when we will be awakened to new possibility, to new promise. And especially, to be ready to drop everything and follow that hope.

But truthfully, that promise and possibility is with us each and every day. Each one of us can be both messengers of peace, like the angels, and bringers of peace and love, like Jesus. We don't have to wait any longer to be more kind, more loving, more generous, more welcoming, more just, or more compassionate. We don't have to wait to be surprised by the glory of the natural world, the glory of the starry heavens, the glory of a newborn babe, or the glory of God, however we understand God. Awe and wonder, surprise and joy, can be ours each and every day.

Let this Christmas give birth to new-found joy, peace and love in your heart. And may you share that good news in all you do and say in the coming days and years. Wait no longer.