

# Outward Darkness, Inward Hope

A Sermon by John Parker Manwell  
The Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church  
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## Call to Worship

*For our call to worship, I share with you these words of colleague  
Francis Anderson:*

December dedicates/Its gentle snow  
To the hurried ways/its people go. . .  
And asks each day/a bit of silence  
On the Christmas way  
    A star to follow/Through the neon night  
    A touch of love to reaffirm/the pricelessness of right  
    A mistletoe of merriment/To deck the dawn. . .  
And a stable . . . softly . . . in my heart  
Where I may pause to be reborn.

## Reading

*In an anthology of stories from NPR's National Story Project, Kristine Lundquist writes about her grandmother's china. In moving across the country in 1949, Lundquist's parents had somehow lost a carton of china, which her grandmother had painted by hand in a unique forget-me-not pattern. In all of Lundquist's growing-up years, whenever the family would gather on special occasions, her mother would apologize that all the cups and saucers had been lost. Inheriting the china after her mother's death, Lundquist wondered whatever could*

*have happened to them. She writes:*

I love to prowl antique shops and flea markets, hunting for treasures. It's great fun to walk up and down the aisles early in the morning, watching as the vendors spread their wares on the ground.

I hadn't been to a flea market in over a year when, one Sunday in 1993, I got the itch to go. So I crawled out of bed at 5 a.m. and drove an hour in the predawn darkness to the giant Rose Bowl Flea Market in Pasadena. I walked up and down the outdoor aisles, and after a couple of hours I was thinking about leaving. I rounded the last corner and took a few steps down the row when I noticed some china strewn on the macadam. I saw that it was hand-painted china . . . with forget-me-nots!

I . . . gingerly picked up a cup and saucer . . . forget-me-nots! Exactly like Grandmother's china, with the same delicate strokes and the same thin gold bands around the rims. I looked at the rest of the items – there were the cups! The saucers! The bowls! It was Grandmother's china!

The dealer had noticed my excitement, and when she came over I told her the story of the missing box. She said the china had come from an estate sale in Pasadena – the next town over from Arcadia, where we had lived when I was a child. When she was going through the contents of the estate, she had found an

old unopened carton stored in the garden shed, and the china was in it. She questioned the heirs about the china and they said that they knew nothing about it, that the box had been in the shed "forever."

I left the Rose Bowl Flea Market that day laden with my amazing treasure. Even now, six years later, I am filled with wonder that "all the pieces in the universe" tumbled together to let me find the missing china. What would have happened if I had slept in? What gave me the itch to go to the Rose Bowl on that particular day? What if I hadn't turned that last corner, choosing instead to leave and rest my aching feet?

Last week I had a dinner party for fifteen friends. We used Grandmother's china. And at the end of the meal, I proudly served coffee in those beautiful cups and saucers that had been missing for so long.

### **Sermon**

Have you ever felt that something was missing in your life? Or found something you then realized had been missing without your realizing it?

Have you ever felt devastated by the loss of a loved one, or the breaking off of a relationship, then in some unexpected way, perhaps the kindness of a stranger, felt once again reunited with yourself and with the world?

For Lundquist it was part of her grandmother's china. For you and me, it may be something we need to make us whole. Something once there which we've lost, or something that has just been missing from our lives, a vague feeling that there must be something more to life. It might be a deeper connection with the universe, with life. It might be love, or the chance to love. It might be something we can't even name, but vaguely long for. For many of us, it's longings like this that bring us to church, week after week, when really, it would be more comfortable to stay at home and sleep in, or make pancakes and read the Washington Post.

Traditional western theology assures us that we are made in the image of God. Humanism locates the divine within us. Either way, the image of the divine is our way of describing what *we* could be, if we could perfectly fulfill the potential that is within us.

We stand here at the beginning of the Advent season. Advent is a season of spiritual preparation – for what? For recognizing that something new, something that has been latent within us, is waiting, within us, to be born, something Unitarian Universalists, whether or not they are Christian, see symbolized in human birth. Every night a child is born, UU educator Sophia Fahs once wrote in words we call to mind so often, every night a child is born is a holy night. Indeed, every night something new is born within us, something that makes us more whole, is a holy night.

In a broad sense, this is a lifelong journey, as we pursue together the challenge of spiritual growth. We cannot force it to happen. But we can

prepare. We can recognize the places where we are stuck, understand and let go of whatever it is that holds us back. We can study, we can reach out, we can open our hearts – and we can wait.

We can do this all year long, but the season of Advent brings a sense of immediacy. For Christmas is coming, and Christmas is one of those “thin” seasons of the year, which more than others encourage us to let go of the old and give birth to the new.

Christmas means many things to many people. But to us, as Unitarian Universalists, we know that it doesn't have to be about the historical truth of the gospel stories, any more than it has to be about Santa Claus, Rudolph or Saint Nick. The real Christmas is about what can happen in the human heart, if we will let it. It's about finding our way to wholeness: to connect again with the world around us, after we've experienced loss; to connect with gifts we didn't know we had, which for years have lain fallow in our hearts; to connect with the love of others and the love we have to give, after times of loneliness and alienation. It's about tasting the world, however briefly, not just as it is, but as it could be.

The stories of the Christmas season are most often about the softening of hearts hardened by loss, or hurt or fear. None of us is Scrooge, but there's a little of Scrooge, at least, in my heart and perhaps even yours. Yet there's also an inner child in each of us, waiting to be born. There's love somewhere deep within us, waiting to be given to the world. And we long to be made whole, healed, released from whatever it is that separates us from these parts of ourselves, from each other, from the fullness of life as it could

be, some would say from God. That's what Christmas is about. Getting to Christmas is what Advent is about. But it needs to be a slow and prayerful journey.

*Christmas has no right/to burst upon us [wrote Francis Anderson in another place]*

*Suddenly/and loudly/from afar*

*Lighting up/Right where we are*

*With nylon trees/and a long-life/Plastic/Star.*

*It is a lonely/Road/to Bethlehem*

*That must be walked/Slowly/and untalked. . .*

*Where no bright/Light/Or angel song*

*Intrudes/Ahead of cue/To wrongly claim/Arrival of the dawn*

*Before the night/Is walked/By each of us/On through.*

You don't have to be a Christian or a Jew or a Wiccan to make the journey. Christmas, and its Advent journey, can be for everyone.

I recall the story of a couple who were expecting another grandchild. The husband said to his wife, I'm just not feeling ready yet to be a grandparent again. His wife replied simply, "Make a cradle." Make a cradle. And so he spend many hours in his shop, making a cradle. When he was done, he finally felt ready to be a grandparent again.

Getting ready for Christmas needs preparation, as well, not in the shop but in our hearts. For Christmas, too, is about birth. Not just Jesus's birth, but ours.

How to find time for this, when we're already swamped with Christmas shopping, parties, preparing to host our families or to travel? How to find energy for it, in this season of growing darkness all around us? How to do so this year especially, when we're more than anxious about our jobs and our savings, our children and our mortgages?

It begins with giving ourselves permission, even an invitation, to approach Christmas not as work, not even just as a time for family gathering, but as a season in which the "main thing" is spiritual renewal. This need not be limited to time we can set aside, much as that can help. We can also prepare ourselves by approaching all these tasks we've set for ourselves in a different spirit, with different eyes. We can remind ourselves why we're doing them. We're doing them out of love. It's amazing what a difference it can make to reframe these things no longer as burdensome tasks but as labors of love. Love for family, or our church family, caring for our colleagues at work or our neighbors. Care even for ourselves.

And one more thing, perhaps: The eyes we bring to what we do. A man named Joey recalls this story from his childhood:

He was ten years old, and it was a week before Christmas. Fresh snow had fallen, and it was a perfect day for sledding. But before he could get outside, the phone rang and he heard his mother say, "Joey will be right over."

“It’s Mrs. Bergensen,” she said, “and she wants you to shovel her sidewalk.” Joey argued, but his mother was firm. Resentfully, he went over to Mrs. Bergensen’s house, and started shoveling.

He thought about Mrs. Bergensen, how she was very old, how her husband had died and she lived alone. But he also thought about himself – would she pay him anything? “She likes me,” he thought. “Maybe she’ll give me \$2.50, plus a tip.” He shoveled faster. After an hour, he knocked on the door again. Now she asked if he’d shovel a path to her trash cans. Another hour. Finally, he returned, and Mrs. Bergensen thanked him -- and gave him \$1.50.

Joey thanked her, but went home grumbling. What a skinflint, he thought to himself. Too tired now to go sledding, he settled down in front of the TV, still muttering.

Later in the week, Mrs. Bergensen came to his house, and told his mother what a good job Joey had done. She asked if he would shovel her walk every time it snowed. And she handed him a can, filled with homemade cookies.

Munching on the cookies, Joey cheered up a little, and began to accept that though she hadn’t paid him much, he had been able to give a poor widow a gift of his work. Maybe that wasn’t so bad.

Years later, cleaning out the attic after his parents died, he came across the old tin can. It brought back memories. He turned it upside down. Out fell layers of paper that had separated the cookies. And, Joey says, it was then that he saw the envelope taped to the inside of the can. It said, “Dear Joe, thank you and have a Merry Christmas!” He opened it – and out fell a twenty-dollar bill – “a gift to me,” he writes, “with love, from Mrs. Bergensen . . . the cheapskate.”

It may be harder than ever this year to get past our anxieties, which are so very real. But in times like this, even as we face hardship, we need the spirit of Christmas more than ever, and others need us. It is at times like this that we most need to open our hearts to each other, and share of whatever we have.

In another story from the NPR Story project, Sylvia Seymour Akin recalls a Christmas morning in 1949 when her family had left their house, with its just opened presents spread about the tree, to go to her grandparents’ home for Christmas dinner. Along the way they passed a gas station, which was closed, where a forlorn looking family, with three small children, were standing. A moment later, her father did a U-turn. “I can’t stand it,” he said, “those people standing in the rain. They’ve got children. It’s Christmas. I can’t stand it.”

They went back, and learned that the man was out of work, and they were waiting for the bus which would take them to Birmingham, where he had heard there might be work. His brother had sent them tickets

Sylvia's father persuaded the family to accept a ride to the next town, where there would be a warm, sheltered bus station. They piled in. They had no luggage. Then he explained that Santa had been unable to find them, so he had asked if he could leave their presents at Sylvia's house. He took them there, and they gave each child one of Sylvia's and Jill's toys from under the tree, and a sweater for one of the girls who had only a short-sleeved dress. Then her father took his last two dollars, and gave it to the man to buy food for the children when they reached Birmingham. The man tried to give it back, but Sylvia's father said, "Take it. I've been broke before, and I know what it's like when you can't feed your family."

As they parted at the bus station, Sylvia recalls looking back at the little girl hugging her new doll. It was a happy memory.

Christmas is about letting our hearts and our eyes be opened. Christmas is about letting ourselves reach out to others. Christmas is a time for reaching across the barriers of busyness and self-absorption that so often keep us separate, and hearing the message of the angels.

UU author Peter Fleck writes of times like these when people can be angelic, because, like angels, they carried a message about "how things could be." All of us, he says, have had such experiences. All of us have the capacity to carry such messages to others, to be what Fleck calls "angels unawares."

The season of Advent is about preparing ourselves to see these messages, about preparing ourselves to carry such messages, as the missing pieces of

our lives, which have been dormant within us, come to birth, and we are born, and reborn, again and again. May it be so for each of us.

## **Benediction**

We close our service as we opened it, with the words of colleague Francis Anderson:

*Will I have time to walk a bit/Alone/Along a winding desert road?  
Or shall I, bent beneath my Christmas load,/Never think of it?*

*Will I have time to turn toward a star/Silently watching from afar  
Sending me (with no price tag)/Its rays of hope/Unendingly.*

*Will I find a moment, in the first faint flush/Of dawn  
To kneel outside a stable door/And find myself/Reborn?*