



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

### The Risk of Birth

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“If there were no advent,” writes John Taylor, “we would need to invent it. We human creatures, in spite of all that has happened to us and been done by us, are still hopeful. Something new, something vital, something promising is always coming, and we are always expecting. Thus in Advent candles are lit to mark the time of preparation, and with each new light our anticipation grows—as it should. We are, after all, a hopeful people.”

This morning marks the third of four Sundays in the Christian season of Advent, a time of preparation for the celebrations of the Christmastide, the birth of Jesus. The word Advent derives from the Latin *Adventus*, meaning coming. This translation signifies the coming of Christmas, arriving each year on the liturgical calendar, a time to celebrate and worship. It also signifies the time that is to come, the Christian belief that Christ will return to usher in the reign of peace and unity.

In Greek, Advent is translated as the word *parousia*, meaning presence, arrival, or visitation. The term *parousia*, is most often used in Christian theology to describe Jesus’ return to the earth, or “second coming.” Advent, for Christians, is both a time to celebrate Jesus as their messiah, and to yearn for his return as redeemer, liberator and savior. Each Sunday, texts are read from the Hebrew bible that foretell the coming of such a messiah in future days alongside New Testament stories of Jesus’ birth and ministry, understood by Christians as a fulfillment of these prophecies.

One of the texts from the first Sunday in Advent illustrates this well. This, from the Prophet Jeremiah:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.

Texts like this one are not only the foreshadowing of a future age of what is to come they are also mandate to pay attention to what is already in our midst. There is a sense that the coming of the savior is not somewhere far off in the future, but close at hand.

Listen to Isaiah 12, “Shout and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One.” And Philippians 4, “Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.”

The Advent texts reveal a paradoxical sense of time—the days of the coming of the messiah seem both close at hand and impossibly distant in the future. The Advent texts point to the need for a messiah who can at once be present for the urgent needs of the world and ensure future deliverance.

As Unitarian Universalists, we have always been inspired by the story of Jesus. We embrace the Christmas season and celebrate it with familiar carols and Advent scriptures. The birth of Jesus, named son of God, indicates to us the divine spark within each of us, born a child of God. We also embrace the concept of Jesus as messiah, or savior, not the messiah, but a messiah nonetheless. Like Jesus to Christianity, we believe that each child is born with the power to change the world in every time and place. We believe that each child has the potential to bring more beauty, truth and justice into the world. As we blessed these new lives today, we are reminded of the vast possibilities inherent in every human life, and our responsibility to nurture and protect that life to help each life reach its potential. Saviors are everywhere in our midst, and desperately needed.

We join the Jewish tradition in affirming that it is the responsibility of people of faith not only to empower and keep watch for these saviors, but for each of us to take up the task of ushering in the vision of peace, justice and unity foretold by the prophets. In Judaism, this is called *tikkun olam*, or the repair of the world. In the days of early Rabbinic Judaism in the first century Common Era, Greek Rabbi Tarfon elaborated:

It is not your responsibility to finish the work of perfecting the world, but you are not free to desist from it either. Do not be arrogant; do not think that you alone can finish the job. Trust in your children and generations yet unborn to take up the task. Know that you are part of the living chain of people who have dreamed, worked for a better world and carried on this mission for four thousand years in an unbroken covenant.

From age to age, we look to those courageous people throughout history of all faith and belief who model what it means to redeem the world. This week, educator and author bell hooks reflected on this with author George Yancy in the New York Times. As a Black Buddhist, she said "Rather than saying, 'What would Jesus do?' I always think, 'What does Martin Luther King want me to do today?' Then I decide what Martin Luther King wants me to do today is to go out into the world and in every way that I can, small and large, build a beloved community."

Small and large, each of us has a role to play in building that beloved community the Jewish and Christian scriptures describe. There are saviors in our midst, and we don't have to look far to see them. This week, the Muslim Student Association of the Vernon Hills, Illinois high school put on an event called "Walk a Mile in My Hijab," where students were invited to wear the hijab headscarf for the day, to learn about the tradition and to denounce negative stereotypes Muslims have been experiencing so intensely. This simple action brought more understanding and empathy to the high school campus.

Another savior in our midst is Cristal Logothetis, a local Glendale mother of a toddler. Ms. Logothetis felt the need to act after seeing the image of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi, the child who drowned as his family fled Syria. "When I saw that picture, I didn't just see a little boy face-down on the sand. I saw what could have been my son. It compelled me into action."

When the photo of the young child and others like it surfaced in the media, Logothetis could not look away. She began to see images of families walking great distances to seek safe passage to Europe. The more she began to pay attention to the images she was seeing, the more she noticed something—parents carrying their infants and small children awkwardly in their arms, wrapped in blankets and makeshift clothing. She began to wonder if one small thing that made a difference in her life would make a difference in the lives of these refugee parents—the modern baby carrier.

In her Glendale community, she began reaching out to local parents to donate 100 carriers, not knowing exactly what would happen. She reached out to her husband's family in Greece to see if they could help. The word travelled fast to other parents eager to contribute. Since the project started in October, Cristal and her volunteers have personally delivered over 2,500 baby carriers to refugee families throughout Greece. Along with the carriers came donations of care packages with messages of hope and strength for their journeys. Cristal named her project "Carry the Future." She believes "People out there really care. They just need the right opportunity to get involved."

In her poem *The Risk of Birth, An Advent Poem*, Madeleine L'Engle writes:

This is no time for a child to be born,  
With the earth betrayed by war & hate  
And a comet slashing the sky to warn  
That time runs out & the sun burns late.

That was no time for a child to be born,  
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;  
Honour & truth were trampled by scorn-  
Yet here did the Saviour make his home.

When is the time for love to be born?  
The inn is full on the planet earth,  
And by a comet the sky is torn-  
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.

The world has always been in need of the coming of such a savior as Jesus. This time is no different. The birth of the child is a visible symbol of the world's insistence on hopeful regeneration regardless of age or circumstance. Rev. Howard Thurman echoes this in his essay *the Mood of Christmas*. He writes:

The stirring of the child in the womb is the perennial sign of man's attack on bigotry, blindness, prejudice, greed, hate, and all the host of diseases that make of man's life a nightmare and a holocaust. The Birth of the Child... all over the world is the breathless moment like the stillness of absolute motion, when something new, fresh, whole, may be ushered into the nations. (The birth) will be the rallying point for the

whole human race to move in solid phalanx into the city of God, into the Kingdom of Heaven on the earth.

To prepare for Christmas is to prepare a way for the risk of birth, vulnerability and tenderness against the calcified crust of a cynical world. Against the backdrop of hate, fear and intolerance, we must raise our voices in joyful choruses of carols. Against the crushing grip of injustice, we must bless the world with acts of generosity and compassion. Against the backdrop of a broken world, we must raise children we name as redeemers all. We must become the saviors we have been waiting for, that our world so desperately needs. In our going this Advent season, may we open to the risk of love being born in our hearts. Amen.