



## Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church

## A Hopeful People: Contemplative Advent Worship

Rev. Lissa Anne Gundlach, Senior Minister  
Rev. Christina Shu, Affiliated Community Minister

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301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 [information@neighborhooduu.org](mailto:information@neighborhooduu.org)

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### Rev. Lissa's homily:

Christmas is a funny time of year for us Unitarian Universalists. Are we Christian? No, as Unitarians we do not affirm the trinity nor do we claim Jesus as our savior.

Do we celebrate Christmas? Yes! As Unitarian Universalists, we remember the Christmas story of Jesus' birth into the world as teacher, peacemaker and justice-seeker. The message of hope in the Christmas story is beloved to us. We celebrate the sense of wonder at the birth of each child as one more redeemer.

And, we love to sing Christmas carols, though we often change the words to make them more Unitarian-friendly, much to the dismay of some of our members!

This morning we are lifting up the meaning of the Christian season of Advent, a contemplative time that spans the four weeks before Christmas. It is traditionally the quieter, somewhat somber side of the Christmas season, not a holiday in itself, but a sacred time of waiting and preparation. The word "Advent" is Latin for "coming," not as in "Santa Claus is coming to town," as in the coming of the birth of Jesus. Our Christian religious ancestors may have spent this time preparing to commemorate Christmas by decorating their houses with greenery as we do, but also by doing daily devotionals and a weekly lighting of the advent wreath.

As a child, I didn't observe Advent from a religious perspective, unless if you count candy worship as a religion. Like many of you might have, we had an Advent calendar, a simple handmade strip of green felt adorned with bells and red ribbons with which my mother would attach bright foil wrapped candies. I definitely thought that Advent was a countdown to wait for Santa. My Advent preparations included making sure my wish list was complete and helping my mother to prepare a plate of cookies for the elves and carrots for the reindeer. Today, my mother and I still do an incredulous and somewhat dramatic Advent countdown without the requisite felt calendar.

Can you believe there's only "x" days before Christmas? We say to one another over the phone with a sigh. Even though we can't see one another, each of us knows we are shaking our heads, with a combination of disbelief, anticipation and a tiny tinge of terror.

If I were to have this conversation today, the number would be 14-- can you believe there are only 13 days before Christmas? Ha.

In these few weeks between Thanksgiving and New Year's, time seems to speed up, doesn't it? With all of the parties, obligations, shopping, cards, gifts and preparations, every minute can feel occupied with a holiday task, leaving many of us feeling spread thin and burned out.

For many of us, this Advent season before Christmas is anything but contemplative. There is simply too much to do in too short a period of time and too many expectations.

But the spirit of Advent is about slowing down to mark time, taking us off of Christmas autopilot to give each day and each task of the season our attention. The Psalms say "Teach us to number our days so we may gain a heart of wisdom."

Advent invites you to number the days before Christmas not with the dread of lists and obligations but with the delights and gifts of the season.

Advent gives us permission to enjoy the preparations before the celebrations, to make space for the magic and stay out of the madness.

So my Advent wish for us is that we bring more mindfulness into the days before Christmas.

What would a mindful Advent look like for you?

Perhaps you could say no to a holiday obligation or shopping day and use the time instead to spend quiet time by yourself in nature, with your family or friends, or to simply appreciate the beauty of your own home, lit by a fire or a tree. If you have children or grandchildren, simply spending time sharing a meal, telling stories of what you love the most about Christmas or singing carols together.

Perhaps you want to bring a mindfulness to your consumption this season, thinking about all of the opportunities to eat and drink, and taking this time to enjoy the goodies of the season while taking care of your body and your health.

Perhaps you might want bring more mindfulness about the practice of gifting itself. Cultural materialism is rampant this time of year, with pressures to find the perfect gift for everyone in your life. It's not too late to have a conversation with your family or loved ones about the kind of gift giving you'd like to do this season. Might you ask for or offer handmade gifts or experiences that value time with loved ones over material goods? On this human rights day weekend, could you shift some of the funds you would spend on year-end gift giving to help others through charities, causes or organizations that you and your family choose together?

And if you are buying gifts, might you find a way to consume more responsibly and intentionally? Are there ways to shop within your community to invest locally?

This is also a time to contemplate the New Year ahead. Many people are glad to see 2016 go, but approach 2017 with some trepidation. While we are counting down the days to Christmas, we are also counting down the days till the New Year. Could you give yourself the gift of this time before Christmas to think about how you want to live more authentically in the New

Year? Is there a project or a purpose that is calling you, or a change you'd like to make in your life? Use this time to go within and prepare for the New Year.

"If there were no advent," writes author 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... Thus in Advent candles are lighted to mark the time of preparation, and with each new light our anticipation grows — as it should. We are, after all, a hopeful people."

Bringing mindfulness to this Advent time helps us to bring more joy and hopefulness into our Christmas celebrations. When we are not compelled by an obligation to give, we give out of the natural goodness and generosity which are our nature. When we are more mindful about our preparations, we can feel the true joy in the delights of the season.

Christmas comes in the way it always does. It rushes by just as fast as it came. If we blink, we might miss it. Behind the cultural trappings of Christmas there is a story of a larger hope that claims us and touches our hearts.

If we are mindful, we can use this time to acknowledge the simple gifts that already grace our lives: the gift of this faith community that keeps us connected to our deepest values and aspirations, the gift of hope for a better future grounded in the goodness of today and the love that we can give and receive freely, each and every day of the year.

In the coming days, may we ready ourselves for the holidays, may we allow ourselves to be fully present to the gifts that await our discovery.

Amen, and blessed be.

**Rev. Christina's homily:**

May we know the hope that is not made of wishes, but of substance, hope that has breath and a beating heart, hope, not for someday, but for here and now.

This is my prayer, this season of Advent. That I build my capacity for hopefulness. And not an insubstantial, blindly optimistic hope, but an active hope with muscles and strength to dig in deep and speak out loudly when needed. This kind of hope does not come pre-packaged nor can it be bought at a discount, but requires care, attention, and time to build. Indeed, how can we feel hopeful, in a time of fear, violence, and darkness? How can we feel hopeful, when some of us feel exhausted and spent physically, emotionally and spiritually, at the events of 2016? I'd like to share three lessons for building hope that I'm trying to practice this Advent.

When I was growing up, my thoroughly UU family had an Advent calendar. This calendar, with little doors for each day leading up to Christmas, was a way to build anticipation (to the

day I could open presents). Each door opened up to images of the traditional Christmas story, with different travelers heading to Bethlehem, pregnant Mary and Joseph, shepherds, and wise men. My favorite were the non-human characters, the sheep and the camels. The calendar made the lead up to Jesus' birth seem one, inevitable, two, magical, and three, exciting.

What it did not cover was what I can now imagine as an adult, the fear, the vulnerability, the difficult path of a poor, unmarried pregnant teenager, who had to travel to a faraway town to be registered in a census under an oppressive ruler. A new family that literally had to flee and become refugees after their baby's birth because the same ruler orders a massacre of children out of fear. There might have been times that this new family wondered if they would even survive. These hidden elements of the Christmas narrative, are deeply relevant to me in our current times.

The first lesson of Advent, is that the story of the birth of Jesus is a deeply subversive story that tells us that hope appears in the actions of everyday, oppressed and vulnerable people, in people who were living their ordinary lives with courage, generosity, and faith. Whether it is Mary meeting the angel, or Joseph loving his pregnant wife, or the warmth and comfort of a sanctuary found for a baby to be born in—hope did not arrive from on high via star or angel, but was found here below, in the midst of a painful reality, within people who had built hope and resilience into their lives.

Historian Howard Zinn wrote in an essay adapted for the collection, *The Impossible Will Take a Little While*:

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places – and there are so many – where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.

Advent remembers the story of one such hopeful and courageous family, and we have many sacred stories about people such as these. We too, like Mary, are fragile and vulnerable. Yet we also have the capacity to give birth to new life, new ideas, new relationships, new dreams. We too hold each present moment, as an opportunity to live as we think human beings should live.

Advent embraces the vulnerability of life and its ordinary courage—how are vulnerability and courage showing up in your life?

Lesson 2. As the Advent calendar demonstrated, this is a time of anticipation and waiting, of allowing oneself to be in a state of preparation to receive hope. We live in a culture that does

not value waiting, or taking the long view. Our individualism, our consumerism, our addiction to “fast” everything. Just when I thought two-day delivery was pretty quick there was one day delivery, and now, next hour delivery. I remember the Dalai Lama once joked that Americans always want to know, what is the easiest, the fastest, and the cheapest way to enlightenment.

Our desire for instant gratification will not serve us in the hard work for justice and peace. Advent reminds us that waiting can be a fruitful time, not a passive one, but a gathering of energy.

This is not the silencing and oppressive, “Wait,” told to the activist, but rather the internal preparation of holding stillness and building strength before action. If we need to wait, let it be the waiting of a farmer who knows that deep below the earth, her seeds are sprouting their roots. Let it be the waiting of a musician, who knows to count to just the right moment to strike the bell. Let it be the waiting of self-care, knowing that one’s body and spirit needs times of activity, and times of rest, in order to be effective. In what areas of your life, do you need to give yourself time to wait, to prepare, to rest?

The last lesson of Advent for me is the importance of the creative arts. More than theology, Advent is a time in the Christian calendar marked by the arts, by song, by story-telling, by the smells of the fir tree. We build capacity for hope day by day, not necessarily through thinking or analysis, but creating space for beauty, poetry, and magic—these are crucial acts of resistance in a violent world. We do this through practices like decorating our homes, singing beloved songs, making meals with our friends and family, and lighting lights. The sounds, smells, tastes and sights of Advent ready us to nurture creativity, hospitality, and community.

Advent stories are full of signs, dreams, and angels. Magic and mystery are good antidotes to fear, which closes our hearts, instead, opening our hearts to imagination, to curiosity, and to wonder. And through the imagination, we can build hope for fresh possibilities and a vision of the world and humanity worth working towards. What creative practices do you need to engage in to bring more wonder and beauty into your life?

This year, and especially these past few weeks, there have been many times when I struggle to feel hopeful, and I imagine that there are some of you that feel the same way.

However, I’m finding that the idea of building capacity for hope, of creating space within myself to nurture hope, space for that rose of hope to grow—this is an achievable task. Through embracing courage in vulnerability, through allowing for rest and patience, and through use of song and story and good food, I know that I’m planting the seeds of hope within myself, and I believe that we can all do this together. For building the capacity of hope is not a task to be undertaken alone, but a task for our whole community.

May we know the hope that is not made of wishes, but of substance, hope that has breath and a beating heart, hope, not for someday, but for here and now. May it be so. Amen.