



This morning marks the first of four Sundays in the Christian season of Advent. You might be asking yourself why Unitarian Universalists celebrate Christmas in the first place, and why we would then want to explore Advent. For as far away from the trappings of Protestant churches as we sometimes seem, Unitarian Universalists have heartily embraced the celebration of Christmas. While we may chuckle at how we change the words to the traditional carols (this is a hint for carol singing for those celebrating your first Christmas in a Unitarian church,) our churches still love to sing and celebrate. We dress up our typically austere sanctuaries with greenery and decorations.

As spiritual beings, we crave and thrive on ritual—repeated practices that invite us to participate together in creating meaning, lifting up our values and a sense of shared purpose. In a religious tradition with few set rituals and a wide ranging set of spiritual orientations and beliefs, many Unitarian Universalists crave the comfort that the rituals of Christmas bring to our lives. From Yule logs to pageants to candlelight Silent Nights, the familiar rituals of the Unitarian Universalist Christmas season add authentic spiritual depth to an otherwise secular and commercial holiday.

Most of our familiarity with the season might come from the ritual of the Advent calendar. I remember our simple handmade strip of green felt adorned with bells and red ribbons with which my mother would attach bright foil wrapped candies. I would look forward to that candy every night. 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. I had no idea that 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. As adults, exploring Advent gives us a chance to go even deeper into the spiritual meaning of the season and if we are so moved, to share that richness with our children.

That being said, if the Christmas season isn’t your thing or triggers you in some way, and there are many good reasons why that would be true, there is no pressure or obligation to observe Advent. All of the practices we offer in our services are meant to be tools for your own spiritual tool box. Some will work for you, and others won’t. But we want you to keep adding tools to the spiritual tool box—to help you be the most grounded, resilient, joyful people you can be. During the holiday season, I think we need more spiritual tools than usual to navigate what can be an overwhelming and challenging time for many of us. Whether it’s the pressure to be holly jolly when we are struggling or just not into the holiday season, the pileup of week after week of heartbreaking humanitarian crises and crushing natural disasters, or the constant commercial bombardment, many of us wander through the holiday season feeling hopeless and overwhelmed.

Host of the longtime Minnesota Public Radio program first known as “Speaking of Faith,” and now “On Being,” Krista Tippett echoes this sentiment in her piece “[Why I don’t Do Christmas](#)”:

Why do I dislike Christmas now? Let me count the ways. I don’t like — don’t approve, refuse to throw myself into — the spirit of obligatory gift-giving. In my lifetime, this has become existentially linked to a commercial orgy that has now even co-opted the ritual angle. We have Good Friday and Maundy Thursday; we have Black Friday and Cyber Monday. Unlike Good Friday and Maundy Thursday, however (though like “fiscal cliff”) these terms are repeated and reported by the most serious of journalists. Like all mantras of ritual, they work on us from the inside.

They are an economic event by which we measure a certain kind of cultural health. This form of cultural health is not health at all. It is overwhelmingly an exercise in excess and trivia.

On Friday night, we screened a documentary directed by our own Rob VanAlkemade, which followed the performance art of Bill Talen, known as Reverend Billy, and his “church of stop shopping.” When I lived in New York, Reverend Billy was a holiday staple, staging campy shopping interventions in Times Square. “What would Jesus buy?” he would ask, begging people to turn back from big box stores and turn back to the spiritual meaning of the season.

For a lot of us, our holidays are so wrapped up (hee hee) in the consumer frenzy we become completely spiritually depleted. Advent can be a balm to holiday stress and overwhelm, a time that invites us to put your cynicism aside and insist that there must be more meaning to our holidays than our culture tells us. There is more hope, more love, more kindness and generosity to the season for us to discover. Episcopal Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori once said “Advent is the season when we are called to live with more hope than the world thinks is reasonable.”

Author Madeline L’Engle calls it “the Irrational Season.”

This is the irrational season
When love blooms bright and wild.
Had Mary been filled with reason There’d have been no room for the child.

I invite you to think about what you need to make this holiday season more hopeful, joyous and generous. I invite you to think about, as the poet said, to decide what kind of person of Advent you will be.

Perhaps for you it is about being mindful about the practice of gifting itself. 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? Maybe you forgo all gifts this year and shop instead for a family who lost their home, a migrant family, or a homeless family? Maybe you decide to start your holiday with the Alternative Gift market next week, spreading love to the worthy justice organizations putting love into action. When we are not compelled by an obligation, 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.

One of my favorite Advent texts is from the book of Mark: *“Be constantly on the watch! Stay awake! You do not know when the appointed time will come.”* (Mark 13:33) In the coming weeks, keep watch for opportunities to be of service and spread kindness and compassion—to build the beloved community here on earth. Could you start a new practice of service in this time, reach out to your neighbor, or give back to your community? It’s the time for us to be more hopeful about how we can help.

“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.”

There is always another chance to give, or to help, to forgive or to change. It is the season to live by your heart, to transform the close fists of scarcity into the open handedness of generosity. This is the time for you to say yes, and let your heart lead.

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.

Amen, and blessed be.