

Nativity

In the dark, a child might ask, What is the world?
just to hear his sister
promise, An unfinished wing of heaven,
just to hear his brother say,
A house inside a house,
but most of all to hear his mother answer,
One more song, then you go to sleep.

How could anyone in that bed guess
the question finds its beginning
in the answer long growing
inside the one who asked, that restless boy,
the night's darling?

Later, a man lying awake,
he might ask it again,
just to hear the silence
charge him, This night
arching over your sleepless wondering,

this night, the near ground
every reaching-out-to overreaches,

just to remind himself
out of what little earth and duration,
out of what immense good-bye,

each must make a safe place of his heart,
before so strange and wild a guest
as God approaches.

Li-Young Lee

Magnificat – W. Frederick Wooden

My soul magnifies God
We are enlarged.

*And my spirit breaks out,
Rejoicing in the face of freedom,*

That God (something now within, yet not mine) has glanced at this daughter of hope.

And behold, henceforth, time will know and regard me.

For that great mystery is a beam
Drawn through this lens,

*Comforting me and all people,
The shadows now dispersed.*

There is strength here
Like the sinew of a mother's arm.

It shatters the brittle pride of wealth;

It levels the clay-foot thrones of tyrants;

It upholds the forgotten, the scarred.

Hunger, both body and soul, will be filled.

Riches will no more be rewarded.

The holy one cleaves to those who keep faith; it will endure in those who serve mercy.

And the promise made to legend ancestors will be kept.

“Love, the Guest”

December 2nd, 2007

Unity Church

Thank you for waiting. Thank you for staying awake in the night. Thank you for teaching me the limits of my strength by meeting my strength with your own. Thank you for remembering that hospitality is at its best, a sacrament. Once again the seasons circle ‘round. Once again the time has come for waiting. Not just the glad anticipation of the tinsel and the gifts but also the kind of waiting that turns, with time into contemplative prayer.

Waiting is not our long suit. In the great debate between faith and works we stand squarely in the camp of our Protestant forbearers. Life’s satisfactions, as close to an analogy for salvation most of us can stomach, seem to us to come largely out of good, hard work and not from faith in God. Advent, when practiced as a discipline, provides much-needed respite from all our doing. It is a necessary counterpoint to the exercising of our will. “Not my will but Thine be done” Matthew, Mark and Luke all say that Jesus said that long ago night in the garden when he knew for certain he was bound to die. “Not my will but Thine be done.” Only those who learn to balance will and resignation can summon their full strength and “and

make a safe place in his (or her) heart before so strange and wild as guest as God approaches.”

Our colleague Bill Schulz who has served as president of both the Unitarian Universalist Association and of Amnesty International, a doer if ever there was one, reminds us that “the mission of our faith” is in part “to teach the fragile art of hospitality.” There is a way of being in the world, a way of welcoming the day and yes, the stranger, a way of being hospitable, which invites the same quality of attention, the same way of waiting that, we’ve called contemplative prayer. Hospitality, when understood this way, becomes more than simply being a good host. In theory this kind of hospitality becomes a theology and in practice it becomes a sacrament.

The mission of the season, “the charge in the silence” is, prepare not just your homes but also do prepare your hearts, a strange and wild guest approaches, a Holy Child is always about to be born. We know a lot more about cleaning our houses than we do about opening our hearts.

I think the greatest gift the church can offer us in this or any season is a clear invitation into depth and transformation. I want my church to tell me, “If you do these things they will help you to become the person who you long to be. They will help you live a life of integrity and service and joy.” With my own longing for such clarity in mind let me offer you three kinds of spiritual practice, which, taken together promise a more effective, more loving and

more satisfying life. Each one can be understood within the context of a theology of hospitality. Each is a way to strengthen our minds and prepare our hearts as we wait for the spirit of life to take hold.

The first of the three is personal spiritual practice. You may choose, yoga, martial arts, poetry or meditation. You may walk or run or stretch or even sing. If you do it regularly and bring to it that quality of attention that feels a lot like contemplative prayer it will nourish and sustain you. A theology of hospitality might posit that in taking time to still and to empty your mind, you hollow out a place for god to dwell. “For that great mystery is a beam drawn through this lens.” Don’t worry. This need not be difficult. Many of you have already found your way to daily practice. Those of you who sigh and say, “Not now I just can’t find the time,” may well find you can bring the quality of attention inherent in spiritual practice, to something you’re already doing. Just find a place to start. Slow down for just a moment. Stretch and breathe to make a little space. I promise you it will feel so good you’ll want to make a habit of it. And when you do you will have fulfilled the first requirement. Congratulations.

(Step out of pulpit and teach, “Embracing the World.)

Thank you for waiting. James Luther Adams, the great Unitarian theologian of the last century shed light on an aphorism

from Jesus saying, “by their groups shall you know them.” The second set of practices the church quite rightly asks of us leads us to develop the capacity to engage honestly, quickly and deeply with other people in small groups. Intimacy is, in its essence a spiritual practice.

You may recall the wonderful Hasidic story of the arrogant young seeker who wandered from village to city to town challenging every Rabbi that he met. “I will convert to Judaism from this moment on if you can recite the heart of Jewish teachings while standing on one foot.” He was, to put it mildly not well received. He was thrown out of a hundred synagogues before he finally put his question to Hillel the Elder. Born in Babylon, Hillel returned from exile to study at the feet of the great Talmudic scholars of first century Jerusalem. Such was his scholarship and wisdom that he became the great Jewish teacher of his day. Given the years in which he lived he may well have helped to shape the teachings of the young Rabbi Jesus.

After years of searching our cynical young drifter stood before the venerable Rabbi Hillel. “I’ll convert on the spot if you can recite the law while standing on one foot.” Hillel lifted one foot off the ground and balanced there he calmly said, “What is hateful to thee do not do unto thy neighbor; this is the whole of the law; the rest is mere commentary.” Or as Jesus put it, “This is the great

commandment, that you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself.”

What we call “small group ministry” is how we learn to be together in nourishing, creative ways. We learn the art of honesty, of clear and kind communication. We learn when to speak and when to listen. A theology of hospitality would teach us that when we engage one another in such conscious, loving ways we prepare a place when God can dwell among us. Process theologian, Henry Nelson Wieman, used the phrase “creative interchange” as a way to point toward the reality of God. Just as personal practice hollows out a place for God to dwell, communal practice, by creative interchange, invites the Holy in to occupy the intersection where soul meets soul in true communion.

(Take a moment now. Circle around into groups of three or four and quietly, in just a few words, tell your close-by neighbors, the name and one or two personal attributes of a loved one, living or dead for whom you’re waiting now)

Thank you for making me wait. You’ve now had a taste of what the church offers through covenant groups and community outreach teams and classes for spiritual deepening. We teach it to our children and expect of ourselves. Poet Marge Piercy in “This is a Poem for You” reminds us:

“Remember that we were most beautiful not by twos,
never in formless plenaries or mumbly caterpillar meetings
but in small high holy groups shifting like starfish.

The third of the three essential practices the church expects of us is leadership. It grows out of and is informed by the first two. Strengthened by personal practice, chastened and blessed by the lessons of intimate engagement we become unable to remain complacent in the face of other people’s pain. We become aware that we are surrounded by beauty and we come to understand we have an obligation both to see the beauty of the world and to try to preserve it. Broken open by compassion we rise to the occasion.

If the promise made to Mary, when Gabriel gave her the good and terrifying news, is to be kept then we must be among the ones who keep it.

In the dark, a child might ask, What is the world?
Just to hear his sister
Promise, An unfinished wing of heaven,
Just to hear his brother say,
A house inside a house,
But most of all to hear his mother answer,
One more song, then you go to sleep.

Thank you for waiting, may the darkness teach us how to pray. Now,
“one more song, then you go to sleep.”

May it be so and amen.