

“Embracing Christmas Together”

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Unity Church-Unitarian

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CALL TO WORSHIP:

The festival of Christmas offers a winter thaw, an opportunity to ponder new birth when the landscape around us, and perhaps within us, seems lifeless. The celebration of Christ’s birth beckons us to consider what has lain dormant in our own lives, and what new life lies waiting beneath the surface. During this season we share with Mary and Joseph in giving birth to the holy when we create with our hands, offer hospitality, work for justice, or teach a child. We share in giving birth whenever we freely offer ourselves for healing, for delight, for transformation, for peace. And we become, as Meister Eckhart wrote, “mothers of God, for God is always needing to be born.”

Even as we share in the joy of giving birth, we remember that birthing is a difficult and often dangerous undertaking. The hope or the dream that we carry may not come to term. It may die, or it may require more labor in the birthing or more care in the living than ever we imagined, leaving us exhausted and drained. This is why it is so important to have midwives in the process. We need companions who will breathe with us, groan with us, hold us in the struggle, and celebrate with us even when the birthing does not go as planned, so that we may be strengthened to encourage and labor with others when the occasion arises. In so doing, we not only give birth but are ourselves born anew.

SERMON:

“Let me flower, help me flower, watch me flower, ...and I will find harmony.”

– quoting from the hymn “Find A Stillness”

When I first proposed the title of this message, Becoming Still, I was thinking of a gentle retreat from the frenzied times around Christmas - a time set apart for stillness out of the hubbub. But as I continued to ponder the phrase, I realized that it also carries the meaning of STILL BECOMING. And that concept so intrigued me that it took this message into a bit of a different focus.

Like the Flowering we sang about - such a gentle concept. So full of potential and beauty - visions of ripening, opening, welcoming the light - with a mellow sense of availability - a poignant readiness for the next phase - whatever that next phase of life might be. It’s easy for us to think of flowering when we think of children and, especially, babies - and, of course, this Christmas season - this day particularly - is so very much about our young ones and the hope we find in their delightful laughter and the uninhibited way that they embrace life.

But this morning, I’m thinking about our adults - you and me. Does the word “flowering” have anything to do with your current life experience? Or does that seem like it might be something from your past? How about the word “BECOMING” - do you know that you are becoming - right now - today and always -whether with intention and purpose or just by virtue of the passage of time?

None of us can escape change. As Anne Morrow Lindbergh has said, “There is no sin punished more implacably by nature than the sin of resistance to change.” Change just happens - Nature simply does not allow us to avoid changing. None of us gets to stay stagnant (even if it sometimes feels like that). We talk that way when we feel stuck or when we lose hope that we can effect the transformations we want to have in our

lives. But, the truth is that as long as we are alive, we are changing. The question is not **will** I change - but **how much** will I change and in what **ways** will I change?

As we look around us and see what's happening in this season, we see that this is a time of transition, of transformation. And I wonder if perhaps there's some way you'd wish to flower - some "becoming" you're postponing ...for lack of faith? Or fearing you're too old or just uncertain about which direction to turn? The whole point of this holiday is a story of a God who's desired passionately to join fully humans and together to bring transformation in the world - to create new possibilities where possibilities did not seem available – promises of things yet unseen and hope for new tomorrows.

I can't tell you the number of adults that have said to me, "I admire so much what you're doing." (They're meaning that I left my business career to start over at this stage of life to pursue my call to ministry.) Some of them are wistful, indicating that they may have a dream of "flowering" in some particular way but have let it go because it seems just too far away or impossible. Sometimes, when we get a chance to really talk about it, it becomes clear to both of us that they've forgotten that they're still becoming. No matter how many years have passed in their life, becoming is still theirs to do! And we don't have to wait to start our flowering. We don't have to regret what we have failed to become - there is still today - waiting for us to "get it" and live fully - this day. There are no "do overs" in life - what we do and say, what we dream and live, is ours to claim for all of our days.

To expand my point, Craig and I have selected three readings that are a bit lengthier than usual, but they were so good, I just didn't want to edit them down.

The first is from Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska. She writes about this one precious opportunity we get - even when it feels a bit bumbling and off kilter - it is our one precious life. She captures so well that feeling... when we wish so much that there were a reverse button we could push or a delete key that could take us back to something we did or said so we could give it another try - maybe we'd do a better job of it the second time around... but Szymborska grinningly tells us that no such option is available...

*Life while you wait.
Performance without rehearsal.
Body without alterations.
Head without premeditation.*

*I know nothing of the role I play.
I only know it's mine, I can't exchange it.*

*I have to guess on the spot
just what this play's all about.*

*Ill-prepared for the privilege of living,
I can barely keep up with the pace that the action demands.
I improvise, although I loathe improvisation.
I trip at every step over my own ignorance.
I can't conceal my hayseed manners.
My instincts are for hammy histrionics.
Stage fright makes excuses for me, which humiliate me more.
Extenuating circumstances strike me as cruel.*

*Words and impulses you can't take back,
Stars you'll never get counted,
Your character like a raincoat you button on the run -
The pitiful results of all this unexpectedness.*

*If I could just rehearse one Wednesday in advance,
Or repeat a single Thursday that has passed!
But here comes Friday with a script I haven't seen.
Is it fair, I ask
(my voice a little hoarse,
Since I couldn't even clear my throat offstage).*

*You'd be wrong to think that it's just a slapdash quiz
Taken in makeshift accommodations. Oh no.
I'm standing on the set and I see how strong it is.
The props are surprisingly precise.
The machine rotating the stage has been around even longer.
The farthest galaxies have been turned on.
Oh no, there's no question, this must be the premiere.
And whatever I do
Will become forever what I've done.*

So, knowing that this is our one and only dear life - and that the changing and becoming is happening even without our notice, the question moves into what is it we want to become. This holiday is one that is all about the hope of change - possibilities for incarnation - of new manifestations - of better tomorrows - through faith and openness and willingness. Process theologian, John Cobb, talks about God as "the Call Forward" - I think that's a beautiful use of language - seeing God as that impulse in the Universe that draws us up and on - the life force that moves us onward. Can you hear your own call forward? Who is it that you are becoming? I hear so many people speak of feeling disoriented in life - of knowing that in fact they DO want something more - a step toward greater fulfillment and a more authentic life - but having no idea where to begin. Transformation is tricky and frightening. There's risk - often before we can grab ahold of the thing we are to become, we have to let go of the thing that is currently ours but does not quite seem to fit any longer. How do we know where to go with our hopes for a new way of being in the world? Parker Palmer is a great writer and teacher who grappled mightily with this - he shares his struggles without embarrassment even though they were arduous times for him.... He longed to merge his authentic inner self with the outward expressions of his life. Feeling out of sync in those things caused him to descend into a deep depression and he writes very frankly about those experiences. He was looking here and there and everywhere for THE door to open for him - the way that would show him where he ought to take his next steps and seek his next phase of becoming. Feeling frustrated and thwarted in all that, he went looking for some guidance from the spiritual companions he respected in his life:

If I were ever to discover a new direction, it would be at Pendle Hill, a community rooted in prayer, study, and a vision of human possibility. But when I started sharing my vocational quandary, people there responded with a traditional Quaker counsel that left me even more discouraged. "Have faith," they said, "and way will open."

"I have faith," I thought to myself. "What I don't have is time to wait for 'way' to open. I'm approaching middle age at warp speed, and I have yet to find a vocational path that feels right."

After a few months of deepening frustration, I took my troubles to an older Quaker woman. "Ruth," I said, "people keep telling me that 'way will open.' Well, I sit in the silence, I pray, I listen for my calling, but way is not opening. I've been trying to find my vocation for a longtime, and I still don't have the foggiest idea of what I'm meant to do."

"I'm a birthright Friend," she said somberly, "and in sixty-plus years of living, way has never opened in front of me." She paused, and I started sinking into despair. Was this wise woman telling me that the Quaker concept of God's guidance was a hoax?

Then she spoke again with a grin. "But a lot of way has closed behind me, and that's had the same guiding effect."

I laughed loud and long, the kind of laughter that comes when a simple truth exposes your heart for the needlessly neurotic mess it has become. Ruth's honesty gave me a new way to look at my vocational journey: there is as much guidance in what does not and cannot happen in my life as there is in what can and does.

Can you imagine Palmer's laugh there? Have you experienced that kind of depth of joy when the truth of something explodes above you and you know that you'll never look at things quite the same way again. His wise friend made him realize that sometimes we know the direction in which we are to become by what's no longer available to us. Life sometimes shuts off possibilities - relationships end, the position we thought we wanted so much is given to someone else, we experience financial reverses, our health changes - there are lots of ways for doors to close behind us. And when we recognize and can trust enough to appreciate that, we begin to walk into that Forward Call, with confidence and a deep, deep inner knowing. Our last reading is a poem by Marge Piercy where she describes the delicious feeling of embodying that confidence when striding forward to your own flowering future - even when it's an act of faith because you have no precise picture of your exact destination - sometimes we're lucky enough to have a sense within our bones that we're on the right path....that heading in this direction **IS our** becoming. Piercy writes:

*How do we know where we are going?
How do we know where we are headed
till we in fact or hope or hunch
arrive? You can only criticize,
the comfortable say, you don't know
what you want. Ah, but we do.*

*We have swung in the green verandas
of the jungle trees. We have squatted
on cloud-grey granite hillsides where
every leaf drips. We have crossed
badlands where the sun is sharp as flint.
We have paddled into the tall dark sea
in canoes. We always knew.*

*Peace, plenty, the gentle wallow
of intimacy, a bit of Saturday night
and not too much Monday morning,
a chance to choose, a chance to grow,
the power to say no and yes, pretties
and dignity, an occasional jolt of truth.*

*The human brain, wrinkled slug, knows
like a computer, like a violinist, like
a bloodhound, like a frog. We remember
backwards a little and sometimes forwards,
but mostly we think in the ebbing circles
a rock makes on the water.*

*The salmon hurtling upstream seeks
the taste of the waters of its birth
but the seabird on its four-thousand-mile
trek follows charts mapped on its genes.*

*The brightness, the angle, the sighting
of the stars shines in the brain luring
till inner constellation matches outer.*

*The stark black rocks, the island beaches
of waveworn pebbles where it will winter
look right to it. Months after it set
forth it says, home at last, and settles.
Even the pigeon beating its short whistling
wings knows the magnetic tug of arrival.*

*In my spine a tidal clock tilts and drips
and the moon pulls blood from my womb.
Driven as a migrating falcon, I can be blown
off course yet if I turn back it feels
wrong. Navigating by chart and chance
and passion I will know the shape
of the mountains of freedom, I will know.*

So, today is Christmas Day. Soon we'll be entering 2006. What do you answer when I ask, "Who is it that you're becoming today?" No matter what your age, I wonder about the dreams and desires you hold for yourself? Are we mindful that we have one, and only one precious life and if we don't live our lives fully, no one else will? Szyborska reminds us that as much as we'd like them, we get no rehearsals - what we do is forever what we have done. Palmer reminds us to look equally to the closed doors as well as the open ones to see where life might be beckoning us onward. Piercy reminds us to nurture and rejoice in the self-knowledge, the inner voice that knows the "shape of the mountains of OUR freedom."

If I have a wish for us in this holiday season, I would wish that we would take time to BECOME STILL within ourselves - take time to rest, to commune with our own spirit, to listen to our own dreams and desires. To answer for ourselves "Who is it that I wish to become?" For each of us is STILL BECOMING - one way or another - we may as well make it a "becoming" toward the person we truly WANT to be!

May it be so, and Amen.