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“Advent – Preparation for the Coming”

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Gospel of Luke 21: 25-28

²⁵ “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶ People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

In all my years of working at Christian churches, I always found two things to be true about the beginning of the Christmas season: Families of all ages love the preparation of and ritual lighting of the advent wreath... the smell of fresh greens, the excitement of a new candle each week, getting closer and closer to that one special candle in the middle...

The other thing I found to be true was that no one seemed to have any idea what greens and candles had to do with the baby in the manger, or Santa Claus, or how any of these different symbols fit together religiously. Nor did anyone seem to question these incongruous rituals.

When I first began working at an episcopal church, I realized I needed a better understanding of the season. Flipping through books in my office from the previous “families ministries” professionals, consulting Google... I tried to find answers that made sense - and could be explained to a 5 year old. I very quickly realized (not for the first time) that this test of me as a possible “Christian” was one I would fail. I had no idea what those candles were all about – though I certainly had fond memories of lighting the wreath I had made with my mother and brother at a church craft event as a young child.

To be perfectly honest – and I know this is not something a minister is supposed to admit – I had always really disliked Christmas. I would sneak away with my Jewish friends and watch their beautiful little candles burn night after night, as they recited prayers in a foreign and magical tongue. The older I got, the more a large man in a red suit just felt a bit... awkward and unappealing. I was hungry for ritual that spoke to the incoming winter – and the mystery of light in the darkness, maybe even to my own brokenness...

The definitions of advent left a bit to be desired: A season of expectation and anticipation of the birth of the Christ child. Hhhmmm... I mean, I can understand

getting excited about the anticipation of the birth of your own child, or a little sister or brother... But - the birth of a baby in a manger more than 2000 years ago? And why were we preparing for the “coming” of any of that? It was all such a strange way to end a year. Was advent – this season of anticipation – anything more than tiny cardboard doors hiding chocolates?

The four Advent wreath candles are labeled: Hope, Love, Joy, and Peace. While I’m sure that going to church once a week and hearing a sermon on these lofty goals might be really grounding for some people as they work through their shopping lists – I wanted something more.

In typical UU fashion, I went searching for someone who could explain this season of advent in a way that spoke to my brain and my heart, that stood up to all my questions, and that possibly had a few off-color jokes (or at least glitter references). And, leave it to a gay UCC minister to provide exactly what I was looking for. 2 years ago I stumbled upon exactly what I’d been seeking – a book titled All I Really Want – by Quinn Caldwell. A grown up advent calendar – with a Bible reading, reflection and prayer for each morning and each evening, through December and into the new year.

Now, I *am* a Millennial – a seeker by definition – and so I tend to be a bit of a sponge to new and exciting ideas given to me in my own language. This book, this idea of advent as a daily spiritual practice, brought out my most spongey-est tendencies. Oh my goodness – every day there was a new thought for me to think about, a new chance to look at the year I was leaving behind and ask myself: what was really awesome about this past year? What am I most thankful to have learned or to have gained?

But it also invited me into a more Jewish concept of the New Year – as I was also prodded to think about all those items I had been sweeping into my basement. Instead of taking a bag of misdeeds down to the ocean, I was invited to learn the lesson that Gershon learned – to feel sorrow and heartache and even regret at the places I had failed to be my best self. I was invited to think about how I might do better next year.

I was invited to ask for forgiveness.

Sometimes this actually meant asking other people for forgiveness – an act that generally lead to some very informative and loving conversations:

“I can’t believe you would think I was upset about that!”

“that wasn’t how I experienced that at all!”

“I wanted to apologize to you for that day!”

“I hear what you’re saying, but I’m still really hurt and I need more time to work through some of this.”

My relationships grew closer, deeper, more honest. I learned I could have harder conversations than I had known I could handle.

But the forgiveness I worked through didn't stop there. You see... For me, I am most often seeking forgiveness from myself – for failing the impossibly high standards that I've been raised to feel I must attain. The reflections this book led me through were not always easy, but there was some pretty powerful healing in the process. What was most eye-opening was the simple invitation to engage in a daily practice of reflection, focusing every day for a month on preparing myself for the new year to come. Advent was something I had to “do”.

Let me go back to the quote from the Gospel of Luke – it states that there will be roaring of the sea and waves – it will be magnificent – for the Son of Man is coming. The son of Man. Not the “son of God”. Not the “savior” or “angel” or “holy spirit”. Not a celestial body. What is coming is a human child. The birth of a new human life. The magic that will change the world as we currently know it is – a tiny, vulnerable, needy little human – just like you and me.

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. The word Emmanuel actually is Hebrew for “God is with us” We rejoice at a new world where the sacred and the holy is right here among us. We rejoice at the invitation to see grace in the daily moments around us.

Now, before any of you think this has all just gotten way too Christian – give me just a couple more minutes. Let's not throw the baby out with the bath water. Let us, just for a few more minutes, think about the *metaphor*. The magic of this season is that something unexpected might be born. Something tiny and new, something glowing ever so slightly. Something born out of own humanness... something that needs our attention if it is to grow into LOVE in the coming year. The hope, peace, love, joy are *here* in our daily human lives, we've just forgotten how to focus on them.

As Gershon taught us: all people have frailties and, simultaneously, all people have the ability to change. So in preparation for the coming, we need to cleanse out the monsters from our basements. We need to clear out the cobwebs around the manger. Scour away the soot and find Emmanuel. We need to **practice** Advent.

Whether it is ten days leading to the Jewish New Year, or the month of Advent – our spiritual forefathers practiced a prolonged and methodical ritual of assessing the past year as a way of preparation for the new year, the new growth, the new life that can blossom only after the end of the previous year.

Today is the first day of Advent: light candles, say prayers, ask forgiveness, decorate your house. Through your holiday preparations, embrace your inner seeker and look for a deeper meaning to the rituals and tasks. Look for ways to reflect on the past year, and your hopes for the coming year. There is Grace hiding between the red bows and menorahs of this season.

We are invited to name the gremlins and dispose of them properly. We are invited to choose to first believe in the hope of our own goodness. We are invited to share the joy of shining our light into the dark. We are invited to make space for the hush of peace... And each and every day this month, we are invited to actively choose love, a

new little delicate baby of love, tender and vulnerable **and** powerful enough to shake the heavens and confuse the nations.

And if you're looking for help in how to wake up your senses to that Grace, to a deeper meaning of the tasks of this holiday season: find an advent calendar that speaks to you (I highly recommend this book), or promise yourself that once a week you will light a candle and take time for silence or song, or... maybe even... simply try a daily prayer. This year, as the holidays loom toward us, as the to-do lists run off the end of the page... let us help each other find ways to **practice** Advent, the preparation for the coming.