What Are We Waiting For?
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The word, “Advent”, from the Latin, means coming-towards. In this season of the year, it means a time of expectancy and waiting. What is it that’s coming towards us? What are we waiting for?

Long before the time of Jesus, time before history, people waited for the coming of the light. As the nights grew longer, people looked forward to the turning of the year, the lengthening of days that would herald the coming of spring. In the heart of mid-winter they came together, they built fires against the darkness, and they celebrated the return of the sun, unconquered by the night.

It should be no surprise that the birth of Jesus is celebrated this same time of year. Like the return of the sun, this event culminates a time of expectancy and hope. To honor the coming of Jesus in no way obscures the original meaning of the ancient feast days, rooted as they are in the Earth and her rhythms. Christ and creation are not easily separated, nor should they be separated.

In the centuries before Jesus, in Palestine, the people waited for the fulfillment of prophecies. They looked forward to the coming of a Messiah – one anointed by God – who would put an end to their subjugation, and restore their inheritance of the land God had promised them. Over the centuries, they had lived under the rule of one nation after another: Assyria; Babylon; Persia. And the nations just kept coming: Egypt; Syria; Rome.

And with them came the growing conviction that this cycle of domination must not continue – that this cycle would one day be broken, once and for all. The hope grew
stronger, even as conditions grew worse.

In the years leading up to Jesus’ birth, life had become desperate for the children of Israel. The fruits of their labor were taxed heavily to pay tribute to Rome, to support the ruling class, and to pay for the temple and its priests. Priests and local leaders were bound in an unholy alliance with their Roman overseers. For everyone else, the downward pressure was relentless. Peasants who could not pay their taxes lost their land and had to live as sharecroppers. Then, if they could not pay their rent, they were evicted from the land. The remaining option was to work as a day laborer for a malnutrition wage. Once you fell to this level, your life expectancy was a few years at most. You were expendable.

Under these desperate conditions, the people’s hope for a Messiah grew stronger. He would be born in the lineage of David and Solomon, the greatest of their kings. He would drive out the Roman occupier and usher in a new world of everlasting peace. This new world would be like a mirror image of the one in which they were suffering. Now, the people were deprived of their lands. Then, each person would have a place in the sun and enjoy the fruits of his labor. Now, life was brutish and short; then, the power of death would be broken.

To the average person, the enemy was Rome. But the problem went much deeper than Rome. The people, the priests and the rulers were bound together in a system that was held together by the corrosive forces of fear and hypocrisy. It deprecated the value of human life, undermined hope, and obscured the sacred dimension of existence.

It was this system which Jesus came to overcome, and not by the force of violence, but by the power of love. He was not the messiah the people had expected. They had expected a king; what they got was a teacher. He brought not an army, but a message. It was a message that subverted authority, cutting across ethnic and national boundaries
like a hot knife cuts through butter.

In conventional terms, the movement Jesus started was barely successful. It produced small communities, house churches and underground cells. For many years, his followers were persecuted. When they were finally accepted, their message hit its first true obstacle, being encapsulated in dogma, and enshrined in a state sponsored institution. But the word, once said, could never be unsaid. It continues to live and to find new forms of expression.

The message is carried in human lives and human language. To talk about it, we need our words and our symbols. But these can be limiting, if we hold onto them so closely as to obscure our vision.

People often confronted Jesus with questions about his identity, his purpose, and his relationship to God. They still do. In the Gospels, Jesus often answers these questions indirectly or symbolically. John’s gospel is full of such images: Jesus is the light of the world; he is the bread of life; he is the vine that gives life to its branches. These images are helpful to the extent that they speak to us now. But we are free to create new images, or find them in ancient sources. Let me give you an example.

Not long ago, I was reading Doctor Zhivago, the novel by Boris Pasternak. A passage in the middle of the book spoke strongly to me. It is set at the onset of winter, in the middle of the Siberian forest, where Zhivago has been taken against his will to serve in a partisan army. The author writes,

The forest was autumnally bare, so that you could see into it as through an open gate; here a splendid, solitary, rust-colored rowan tree had alone kept its leaves. Growing on a mound that rose above the low, squelchy, hummocky marsh, it reached into the sky holding up the flat round shields of its hard crimson berries against the leaden, late-autumn sky. Small birds with feathers
as bright as forsty dawns ... settled on the rowan tree and picked the largest berries, stretching out their necks and throwing back their heads to swallow them. There seemed to be a living intimacy between the birds and the tree, as if it had watched them for a long time refusing to do anything, but in the end had pity on them and given in, and fed them like a nurse ... gives breast to a baby.

Now the rowan tree is an old pagan symbol: it has long represented strength and healing and an entry point to the sacred realm. But I can also see it, vividly, as a Christ-symbol. Like the rowan tree, Jesus puts down his roots in the most inhospitable places. He embodies strength but not violence. He gives deeply of himself. He protects those who are most tender and vulnerable. Like the tree, he is embedded in creation, rooted in the earth, branches opening out towards the heavens.

Many people recognize Jesus as the Messiah; many have also called him God. Jesus never claims this for himself, although he does speak of God with the intimacy of a son for his father. Statements about “the Word made flesh” can be a stumbling block if we take the idea literally, or try to solve it as a metaphysical problem. But it is not really so far from everyday experience.

At seminary I had a very good teacher in the field of religious education. He taught the only course in pedagogy that most of us would take. But if we were to choose only one course, it was the right choice. Why was this teacher so effective? I could say it was because he demonstrated the principles he was trying to teach. In teaching us, he used the very principles that he wished to impart. But what I just said isn’t quite right, because it suggests a distinction between ideas and actions, and between actions and the actor. It would be more accurate to say that our teacher embodied his teaching. He was his teaching. And from this place of authenticity, he called out the teacher in each one of us.
In like manner, we can say that Jesus was the word of God, in action. His life enacted the new world which he insisted was coming. To borrow a phrase from Gandhi: he was the change that he and his followers hoped to see in the world.

Like Jesus, this promised world cannot be captured in words. The name “Kingdom of God” is troublesome for liberal Christians as well as UUs because it conjures up an image that many of us would like to get rid of: an emperor in the sky. Many of us are stuck with this image, whether we’re Christians or not – holding onto it tightly, or rejecting it outright. We’ve all seen the stained glass window, depicting an old bearded figure on a throne, and on his right hand, a much younger bearded figure, and below them, a host of angels. And perhaps, way below them, some human beings.

But we need not be stuck with this picture. Our descriptions can evolve, along with our understanding. Some liberal Christians have substituted the more benign sounding phrase, “the reign of God”. But this still suggests a top-down authority – unless by “rain” they mean water, falling from the sky and nourishing all of life. I think we could live with that.

What many of us hope for, I think, is not a powerful king to make things right. We hope for a world in which people treat one another with dignity and compassion. Martin Luther King, Jr. and many others, coming from a theistic perspective, have described the promised world as the Blessed Community. We may translate further, from Blessed Community to Beloved Community. Many UUs embrace this expression. And if love is at the center of it, nothing has been lost in the translation.

When speaking of the world to come, a dose of humility is in order. For now, at least, we see “through a glass darkly”. We must not confuse the real thing with our descriptions. That is why Jesus never defined the Kingdom of God directly. He described
it, instead, through parables.

He compares it to a banquet, to which all are invited, even the poor and the outcast, whereas the respectable people balked at the invitation.1 He compares it to a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds, which grows to become the greatest of shrubs, its branches sheltering the birds of the sky.2 He compares it to a little bit of yeast, or leaven, which a woman has hidden in a vast quantity of dough, to produce many loaves of bread.3

So the kingdom has a quality of abundance. It protects the small and the weak. Like yeast, or leaven, it is impure - a kind of contamination. It is not neat, but very messy: its colors refuse to stay within the lines. It is radically inclusive: just the opposite of a royal court or a closed, sacred society. Everyone is to be included: not just the people like us, or the people who confirm our self-image as this or that, or the people we find easy to get along with. Everybody is invited. Nobody is expendable.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of the Beloved Community is its quality of paradox. It is here already, but not yet fulfilled. And to see it happening, we need the eyes of faith. Consider this passage from the gospel of Luke, chapter 17, verses 20-21:

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."

That final phrase, “the kingdom of God is among you”, has been translated from the original Greek in two ways. You may have first heard it as “the kingdom of God is within you”. The Greek word, ‘entos’ can mean ‘among’, or it can mean ‘within’. We
don’t know the words Jesus used – they would have been Aramaic, not Greek. But he may have deliberately chosen an ambiguous phrase, so that we would not settle too comfortably on one meaning or the other.

The quest for salvation often begins on the inside. But to seek only within yourself may limit you to a world of private experience. A person cannot live out the promise of the Blessed Community alone. As Unitarian Universalists we have shifted, over many years, from a focus on the individual to a focus on both the dignity of the individual and the need for interdependence. Our first and seventh principles stand in tension with one another and they are equally important. To seek the Beloved Community among us, as well as within us, is to pay attention to the quality of our fellowship, our relationships with others, and the work we are called to do in the world.

The vision continues to be born, as each new generation takes it up and seeks to live it into being. The fullness of this vision may exceed the power of our thought to grasp it. Yet we may see it happening right before our eyes, if our eyes are open.

Jesus gave the world a taste of the Beloved Community not only through his words but through his life. We have the opportunity to seek it in this world, this life. We must not postpone it to some celestial realm or some distant future time. What are we waiting for?

As we enter into the spirit of this season of ancient festivals, may we tap into its quality of expectancy and hope. May we attune ourselves to the sacred dimension of our lives together, which the celebration of Christmas calls to our attention. May we open our eyes to the traces of heaven that grace our homes, our sacred spaces, and our dealings with our fellow human beings, who are, after all, our brothers and our sisters.

In this way shall the sacred be born, yet again, into this world.

So may it be.