

## The Growing Darkness: Lessons of Advent

Rev. Kathleen Owens

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The group was close knit – studying, eating and traveling together. There were maybe eight or ten of us and we were in a sign language class/workshop that met outside of regular college classes. Throughout the week we studied and ate a silent meal, in which we could only sign (the cafeteria food got cold as we conversed) and on the weekends we traveled to churches to lead worship services with plays/dramas in sign language and English. It was a wonderful time and one of the things I remember most were our conversations – in English as dusk fell. I thought we knew one another well but it struck me how much more was shared among us when we talked at night. It was as if the darkness gave us permission to speak more freely – to reveal more of our thoughts, our dreams and hopes. It was in the night that we spoke of deeper things and I felt much closer to this group. But when daylight came, we returned to a more superficial way of talking and being with one another. It was as if the intimacy of connection could only be acknowledged and accepted under the cover of darkness.

We are entering into a season of darkness; the days are growing shorter and the nights longer. It seems as if the night can almost go on forever. There have been too many nights to me that it has felt a lot later than the clock said it was. Surely it must be 9:00 p.m. and yet the clock reads that it's only 6:00 p.m. The night can be rich and deep and at this time, in this season, we seem to chase it away with beautiful little lights. There is something magical about the lights and yet, even more so, can be the magic of the dark.

It is not only a season of darkness we are entering into but a season of waiting. Advent is upon us and for some, maybe even many, it is the hardest season of the year. For little ones who

can look forward to holiday gifts, this time of waiting can feel like forever. Advent calendars help children (and some adults, even) count off the days before the Big Day (known Christmas for many). It is during this season when good behavior is especially emphasized and practiced. It is in this season of waiting that many wishes and hopes are made known...some through lists.

Maybe that's why in this season of waiting and hope we celebrate the Guest at Your Table program. You see, we have these Guest at Your Table boxes (hold up the box) there are pictures of people from various parts of the world who are waiting as well. They too have hopes and wishes...some are hoping for food to eat; some are wishing for clean water in their town (right here in CA) and others are waiting for livable wages and civil liberties. Your loose change...or perhaps even skipping a meal and giving the money to the box instead of the restaurant, will help make their wishes a reality. We encourage people to take a box home, keep it on the table where you eat and when you do, put in some money to help realize a hope. Around the world, people in need are waiting...and this program comes to us from the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee.

So this is part of waiting and how we can help meet needs of others...but what are *we* waiting for? What might be our lesson in this season of waiting?

I love that this season of waiting is tied to the dark, the longer nights because darkness can be such a wonderfully rich metaphor as well as a deep, literal reality. It is both. Metaphorically, what does it mean to be in the dark about something – it is uncertain, unknown; and because it's unknown, the dark has become a thing we fear. So we set up security lights and keep the darkness at bay...do this by street lights, security lights, 24 hour stores and 24 hour a day news and information...and in doing so, creating this distance from darkness, we are the

lesser for it. I'm not advocating that we turn off all the lights or that we do something that will later leave us feeling vulnerable – but we need to use light more efficiently. And we need the rich, dark night to heal, to rest, to dream, to open to another way of seeing nature and life around.

Earlier this year I found a wonderful book by the title Let There Be Night – Testimony on behalf of the dark, edited by Paul Bogard. It is filled with essays about the metaphorical and literal need for night. In the essay “In Praise of Darkness,” the author writes: by day I could walk among [the] trees and note features of bark and foliage and habit that distinguish one species from another...I could call them by their common and sometimes Latin names - ...But there is a blindness in that seeing. My vision catches on the surface of things, gets snagged and tugged about by their multiplicity. As I watched the trees in darkness it was not distinctions I saw but their commonality, not their names I knew them by but their essential namelessness.”<sup>1</sup> Darkness allows for a different way of seeing the world around us; it offers another truth – maybe not a specific truth but a more general one that allows for a deeper connection. In the essay “The Gifts of Darkness” the author writes: I think first of the gift is mystery. ...Mystery is what opens the human spirit to what is beyond it. Encountering that mystery gives a person a sort of 'night vision' of the imagination. Night vision, the ability to see in the dark, is strengthened by darkness and quickly destroyed by light. ..Darkness feeds a sense of wonder,... ”<sup>2</sup>

In the time before understanding the science of the earth, our ancient ancestors experienced fear throughout the night – uncertain that the sun would return again. They waited in fear, uncertain about what to do or what they could do to bring the sun back. Waiting through the

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<sup>1</sup> Page 23.

<sup>2</sup> Page 11-12.

night can seem like forever. Many of us here may be in a waiting time – waiting for...a job, a test result, another chance, waiting to see if she will say yes...if he will finally pop the question, we can just be waiting. The uncertainty of it all can feel metaphorically like we're waiting in the dark.

While it is important to know what I am waiting for, a deeper question for me is how shall I wait? How can I be open to that which is coming? The author Melody Beattie says that waiting is not dead time, not down time. But it can be a form of action – a positive, forceful action on our part. So often in our culture, we are encouraged to DO something, to take action – even if it's an action we're uncomfortable with – well, at least we're not waiting around. Beattie and others suggest that in fact, waiting may be just the thing we need to do. I love the bumper sticker that says, Don't just Do something, Sit there. Sometimes we have a tendency to want resolution not thinking that the action we take may not be in our best interest.<sup>3</sup>

So how do you wait? How do you make it through a time of darkness, metaphorically? It truly depends on how you look at/understand what it means to wait. The Dutch-born Catholic Priest Henri Nouwen uses the story about pregnancy to describe how to wait. He turns to the Christian scriptures, to the story of Mary and Elizabeth. Mary is the soon-to-be mother of Jesus and her cousin Elizabeth, the soon-to-be-mother of John the Baptist. Mary is a young woman, barely married and already pregnant; a fearful situation in her time. Her cousin Elizabeth is described as an older woman who longed to bear a child and now is finally also pregnant – and it can be a fearful time for her as well, given her age. The story is told in the Gospel according to Luke in the first chapter. Mary travels to stay with her cousin Elizabeth for a time. They wait

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<sup>3</sup> The Language of Letting Go, subject Waiting – April

together. “For many people,” as Nouwen writes, “waiting is an awful desert between where they are and where they want to go. ...fearful people have a hard time waiting, because when we are afraid we want to get away from where we are.”<sup>4</sup> And even though both women have reason to be afraid – they are not. And in fact, Nouwen says they wait with a sense of promise...they have received something that is at work in them,” literally and figuratively. “This is very important. We can only really wait if what we are waiting for has already begun for us, in us. So waiting is never a movement from nothing to something. It is always a movement from something to something more. ...those who are waiting are waiting actively. The secret of waiting is the faith that the seed has been planted, that something has begun. Active waiting means to be present fully to the moment, in the conviction that something is happening where you are and that you want to be present to it. ...waiting then involves nurturing the moment. ...waiting,” he writes, “is open-ended. Open-ended waiting is hard for us because we tend to wait for something very concrete, [we wait] for something that we wish to have. Much of our waiting time is filled with wishes...” [wishes are a way of trying to control the future and when it doesn't happened, we are disappointed and even depressed] thus wishes can be connected to fear when seen in this light. “But when waiting is filled not with wishes but hope – there is a very different outcome. Hope is trusting that something will be fulfilled, ...hope is open-ended. ...to wait open-endedly is an enormously radical attitude toward life. So is to trust that something will happen to us that is far beyond our own imaginings.” Mary and Elizabeth helped one another wait in hope, wait open-endedly and Nouwen suggests this way of being, of waiting is a model for community – “a

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<sup>4</sup> Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas, Orbis Books, 2001, Nouwen’s essay Waiting for God, pages 27-37.

community of support, celebration and affirmation in which we can lift up what has already begun in us.”

What has already begun in you? What hopes are in place and growing because of a seed planted earlier, perhaps this year even? How, in the waiting, shall we be in community together? Waiting in the dark, not having all the answers... to wait open-endedly – with expectation of something beyond our imagination to come into our lives and move us in a way never dreamed before – this is a lesson of advent.

I believe we need to wait in the dark, figuratively and literally. There are times in our lives that we need to wait – perhaps, surrounded by nature, sitting near an ocean or under a star-filled sky. Waiting in the presence of nature can put life, our immediate present and situation in some larger perspective; spending time under the sky, out in the dark can bring us into communion with that which is larger than we are, can bring us into deeper communion with the Spirit of Life and Love – if we are open to that.

Winston Abbott’s poem speaks of the night:

Twilight is a time for sharing – and a time for remembering – sharing the fragrance of the cooling earth – the shadows of the gathering dusk – here our two worlds meet and pass – the frantic sounds of man grow dimmer as the light recedes – the unhurried rhythm of the other world swells in volume as the darkness deepens –

It is not strange that discord has no place in this great symphony of sound – it is not strange that a sense of peace descends upon all living things – it is not strange that memories burn more brightly – as the things of substance lose their line and form in the softness of the dark –

Twilight is a time for sharing – and a time for remembering – remembering the things of beauty wasted by our careless hands – our frequent disregard of other living things – the many songs unheard because we would not listen –

Listen tonight with all the wisdom of your spirit – listen too with all the compassion of your heart – lest there come another night – when there is only silence – a great and total silence – <sup>5</sup>

In this community, let us wait open-endedly in communion with one another. Blessed Be.

**Closing words** – Between the dawn and dark of our being, let us be brave and loving. In our little passage through the light [and in our little passage through the dark], let us sustain and forward the human venture – in gentleness, in service, and in thought. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> From Earth Prayers, Blessed be the Night section, pages 368-369.