

Over the past couple of weeks I have gotten some interesting questions about today's sermon - with a title "Expecting the unexpected" people wondered if I would be doing something totally crazy - a song and dance perhaps - I think not - movie and popcorn - 20 minutes of silent meditation - an impromptu question and answer period. Alas I must say none of those are likely to happen this morning.

We are however seemingly experiencing the unexpected right now. Look outside - that is not the December we expect in CNY. Last year at this time we were buried under snow. We haven't had a winter this warm since the 1970s we might even break a record for warmth.

I keep hearing people say "I'm not going to complain but - it is a little weird, disquieting unexpected. We are very used to dealing with snow and cold and more snow.

This mid-winter time - north of the equator it happens in December - can be

a tough time of year. The more north you are the shorter the days the longer the nights, the colder the temperatures. Nowadays we have central heat, electric lights and fresh food that is shipped in so it is not as hard as it used to be but the shortening of days is still something that we cannot do much about. It is apparent to all of us when at 5 pm it is dark outside.

Many cultures and faiths have stories and celebrations for this time of year. Something to break up the monotony of cold and grey. -

"In many [Celtic](#)-based traditions of neo-paganism, there is the enduring legend of the battle between the Oak King and the Holly King. These two mighty rulers fight for supremacy as the [Wheel of the Year](#) turns each season. At the [Winter Solstice, or Yule](#), (the shortest day, the longest night) the Oak King conquers the Holly King, and then reigns until [Midsummer, or Litha](#). Once the [Summer Solstice](#) arrives, the Holly King returns to do battle with the old king,

and defeats him. ...

Often, these two are portrayed in familiar ways - the Holly King frequently appears as a [woosy version of Santa Claus](#). [or perhaps Santa is a cleaned up version of the Holly King] He dresses in red, wears a sprig of holly in his tangled hair, and is sometimes depicted driving a team of eight stags. The Oak King is portrayed as a fertility god, and occasionally appears as the [Green Man or other lord of the forest](#).

Ultimately, while these two beings do battle all year long, they are two essential parts of a whole.

Despite being enemies, without one, the other would no longer exist.” http://paganwiccan.about.com/od/yulethelongestnight/p/Holly_King_Yule.htm

Winter Solstice (December 21st) : the rebirth of the Sun or the Oak King. On this day the light is reborn and we celebrate the renewal of the light of the year. Oops! But we cannot forget the Holly King Why do we deck the halls with boughs of Holly? [The Holly King may have lost the midwinter struggle but he is not gone) He is the god of transformation and one who brings us to birth new ways. Why do you think we make “New Year’s Resolutions”? We want to shed our old ways and give way to the new! ... Astrologically, Saturn rules this time. Saturn rules Capricorn, which is the sign that starts at the Winter solstice and where celebrations with food, gift exchanges happened during the Roman celebration of Saturnalia. The masters would serve the servants in a celebration of role reversals. Nevertheless, this was a celebration of abundance and renewal.

Somewhere somehow in the middle of winter when snow covers the ground, when warmth has gone and the cold has sunk in, when even the sun seems to be hiding most days - there is the rebirth of the sun king. At the moment of that rebirth we cannot fully see that the wheel has turned but there is a hope that once again what has happened before will happen again, once again life will come from death, once again light will spring from dark, once again we will have another chance.

Each year , for me at least, here in CNY the turning of the Wheel, the return of the light is still just a little unexpected, or at least if not unexpected an immense relief. We still have the worst part of winter to experience, there will be snow and cold and ice no matter what it looks like outside right now - but there will be more light with that snow - it will dance and shimmer off the snow and assure me

that the warmth of spring is not too far away.

many of us grew up being told the Christmas story of the birth of Jesus and maybe even believing it. We are in that mite of Advent the time of preparation for Christmas. Most UUs I talk to have an easier time with Christmas than Easter - for one Christmas rarely fall on a Sunday and rarely takes over the Sunday service. But also it is about a baby, joy and hope, about loving ones fellow humans.

But it is more than that. At the time when the story of Jesus birth says that he was born the Jews were living in an occupied country. Judea was a Jewish country occupied by Romans. Most Jews were not Roman citizens and although they had some special dispensations from the Romans they were living in an occupied country where it was dangerous to be Jewish. There were

prophesies of a messiah who would come and deliver them from their oppressors. This messiah would come in power and strength enough power to vanquish the colonial oppressors. The christian story that is told says Jesus is the messiah come to deliver the Jews, and all humankind for that matter, but instead of a powerful world leader we are presented with a baby, just a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes nursing at his mother's breast, dependent on other humans for its safety, born poor and destitute from Nazareth the backwater of backwaters.

And imagine yourself Mary or Joseph they had had their time of expectation, nine months of it. And it was not easy expectation - should Joseph send Mary off, do they hide the pregnancy, squelch the rumors, pick up move to a new town and start over. And then there was that angel - really Mary carrying the messiah. And yet

they did wait, they did open their hearts to this unorthodox pregnancy,, unorthodox birth, unorthodox setup. AS an aside I have to say that the birth of each of my children were magical and special and amazing but I am clear there were not heavenly choruses, and if there were I am pretty sure I would have asked to have my head examined. But as the story goes Mary and Joseph went with the flow they accepted the unexpected and did their very best with it.

But midwinter miracles are not limited to Christians or Pagans. Our Jewish brethren celebrate Hanukkah. I told the story during our times for all ages. Hanukkah is not seven days but eight days - why eight why not seven.

A week is seven days long and many cultures came to a seven day

week independently from one another. A lunar month is about 28 days long and often the phases of the moon break that up into 4 seven days segments. "The number seven had a mystical significance to Babylonians. It was associated with the seven heavenly bodies; the Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus and Saturn. For this reason, some believe, marking rituals every seventh-day became important. A seven-day week based on these same celestial bodies was adopted as far away as Japan and ancient china." Seven days a week is the expected so why eight days in Hanukah?

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/0/20394641> The Beatles wrote a song "Eight Days a Week" not about Hanukah but about love. The phrase did not even get invented about love - even though the song was about love. It was written at a time when the Beatles felt like they were working eight days a week - they were so busy they seemed to be creating more time. There

was a vastness and an infinity to their work that seemed like eight days a week.

Perhaps the story of Hanukah is not just about the victory of the Macabees over the Greeks perhaps it is also about how sometimes when we are in the midst of the unexpected time stand stills, we seem to stand outside of time, we can see the infinity of time or at least get a glimpse of it. Maybe the eight days of Hanukah speaks to how the love of this world lives on outside of the mundane of this world.

But this is a tough year to hold up hope and expectation in the face of all we hear and know.

I'd like to read you an extended quote from "The millennial pastor, a blog I sometimes read." In it you might hear the word Advent and God, feel free to translate those into time of preparation, and Love - or whatever translation works for you. You might also hear a few cuss words - if there

ever was a time that called for a little cussing from the pulpit that might be now -

"this year, Advent has not felt so hopeful.

This year I feel like I am being dragged into Advent, and the hope and anticipation just isn't there.

Instead, all the messy, crappy, broken stories of God's people that we hear in Advent are hitting too close to home.

Terrorism, shootings, bombs, political leaders vowing revenge feels all too close to world of the seeking crowds, the oppressive world of tyrant kings, the violent world of occupied Israel.

Violence being condoned towards women and their bodies simply because they bear the child of a man, sounds too much like the

possible stoning that Mary could have endured had Joseph chosen to dismiss her. A pregnant and unmarried woman was basically worthless and damaged goods... a sentiment that too many entitled white men still feel about women.

Syrian refugees fleeing the exact part of the world that the holy family was forced to flee because of violent rulers being fearful of young boys growing into terrorists just feels eerie. Somehow this year, we became all the innkeepers who turned the holy family away because they were too different and unsafe.

The callous brutality of Herod and the Romans feels like the unwillingness of American politicians to consider the smallest modicum of gun control. Royal death squads sent to murder infant boys are the price Herod paid for power and money. Daily mass shootings are the price to pay for an unregulated gun industry.

Advent stories are coming at us in the news as often as they are coming from the bible this year.

Advent has always beautifully shown us the interweaving of incarnation and reality. But this year, the stories we read, preach and hear in the church are reality in the world. We have become a people waiting for and in need of a Messiah.

Advent is our reality.

We are living out Advent in real time.

And maybe that is why we need Advent more than ever.

Without Advent, our current troubles would make celebrating Christmas a farce.

Without Advent, our current troubles would be all there is in the world.

Without Advent, our current troubles would eclipse any glimpse God at work among us.

Advent is sucking this year because the world is sucking this year. Somewhere between racist political campaigns in [America], ISIS, Paris, US Gun Violence, Climate Change realities and all the other stuff our world is suffering from... the illusory veneer of the "Christmas season" was stripped from us.

And maybe that is the point." <http://millennialpastor.net/2015/12/05/why-advent-sucks-this-year-why-we-need-advent/>

The stories of our faith, the stories of other faiths let us know that when it is darkest out the sun still rises, when all the world around us seems engulfed in violence, bigotry and oppression there is a love so strong, so vibrant, so earthshakingly steadfast that even a baby living in that love can change the world, when we are down to our last resource and can count the hours until we have no more there is more, there is more love somewhere, there is more hope within ourselves, and within our communities, there is a saving message that we can bring to this world at this time and remind them that it is love and only love that transforms not the power of principalities. Let us prepare ourselves to take that completely unexpected message out into the world.

In a world without end may it be so.

