

## **It Begins: Engaged Waiting**

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

December 3, 2017

### **RESPONSIVE READING**

**We Are Waiting** the Rev. Leslie Takahashi

This is the season of anticipation,  
Of expecting, of hoping, of wanting.

This is the time of expecting the arrival of something--or someone.

**We are waiting.**

This is the time of living in darkness, in the hues of unknowing.  
Of being quiet, of reflecting on a year almost past.

Waiting for a new beginning, for a closing or an end.

This is the time for digesting the lessons of days gone past, anticipating the future for which

**We are waiting.**

Waiting for a world which can know justice.

Waiting for a lasting peace.

Waiting for the bridge to span the divides which separate us.

Waiting for a promise or a hope. For all of this

**We are waiting.**

**READING** from **Meditation: from a Monk Who Dwells in Daily Life** Thomas Moore

A pilgrim was walking a long road when one day he passed what seemed to be a monk sitting in a field. Nearby, men were working on a stone building.

"You look like a monk," the pilgrim said.

"I am that," said the monk.

"Who is that working on the abbey?"

"My monks," said the man. "I'm the abbot."

"It's good to see a monastery going up," said the pilgrim.

"They're tearing it down," said the abbot.

"Whatever for?" asked the pilgrim.

"So we can see the sun rise at dawn," said the abbot.

## SERMON

### It Begins: Engaged Waiting

the Rev. Anne Bancroft

So . . . the theme for December is hope. The question that we are asked to consider as participants in the Soul Matters Sharing Circle is “what does it mean to be a people of hope,” and I confess that I struggled with this one. What might it mean to be people of hope in this seemingly unprecedented time? I don’t need to list the problems facing us . . . you all know them: from climate change to politics, economic inequality, a seemingly bottomless dearth of integrity. Is it naïve to be hopeful, then? Does it smack of Pollyanna?

We get a packet of information every month, relative to the theme being considered, but it also includes the calendar of events relative to religious things, which is always kind of interesting. This is a busy month, of course. In addition to the Christian season of Advent, Bodhi Day, which is the anniversary of the Buddha’s enlightenment on December 8; Hanukkah – the Jewish celebration of light, this year from December 12 to 20; the pagan celebration of Yule/Solstice on December 21, and Kwanzaa, from December 26 to January 1. It is also Seasonal Depression Awareness month; the international day of persons with disabilities today; and tragically the anniversary of Sandy Hook shootings on December 14. Rosa Parks was arrested on December 1, 1955 (62 years ago). Oddly, they neglected to mention Pearl Harbor Day, December 7.

And then, as I mentioned, they ask: What does it mean to be a people of hope? This is such a weird time right now; I feel like every week I could share a list as long as my arm of political and cultural challenges. And, then the fact that we are finally hearing about the plethora of sexual assaults is phenomenal – and shocking – and, I suppose, hopeful, in a way – that they are coming into the light and being addressed . . . sometimes. And, I am also reminded that we each have our own very real and ongoing concerns.

And the thing is that where hope is concerned, like so many things, I found myself thinking: It’s complicated. It’s not as if you either have hope or you don’t. I think I told you about the story of the minister who is approached by a congregant saying, “Well, it’s easy for you – you have faith,” as if faith were something you could pick up at the market. Hope doesn’t sit over here on its own, available for a visit. It is amorphous, intangible; and, it feels to me, actually, that hope needs a partner even to exist. Or maybe partners, plural. At the very least, it seems it needs imagination. One can’t hope for what one can’t imagine. And, I think, engagement . . . even as it is forward-looking – out ahead of us somewhere, hope needs engagement with the present, doesn’t it? Cornel West suggests that hope is an existential phenomenon, less a thing than a way of being in the world.

I think it’s why the story of Jacob resonated so loudly for me. In Genesis, chapter 32, is the description of Jacob returning home, having been away with his wife’s family for many years, and he’s not sure

what reception he will get from his brother, Esau, whom he has duped out of his birthright. One night, fording a stream, he sends his wife and children ahead and finds himself wrestling in the river with someone, or something – it's not entirely clear if it's a person or an angel of some kind, some heavenly representative.

And I thought . . . we wrestle, don't we, with our own challenges, our own fears – they wake us up at night and keep us really busy, sometimes all night long. Try as we might to put them aside and go back to sleep, sometimes we wrestle endlessly. In Genesis, Jacob prevails, sort of, though he is left with an injured hip. And aren't we left in our struggles with a sort of mark, or a changed part of ourselves, if only our tender hearts? When we find our way to hope, aren't we grounded in some way by what we want to be changed? Don't we carry that?

And yet – Jacob survived the struggle. Whatever he was wrestling with cried out, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." And Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." Turn my worries around, help me see these challenges as something useful. And, he was blessed.

Maybe he was blessed because he was willing to fight; he was engaged; he struggled. He didn't give up. Is that what hope requires?

This is the first Sunday of Advent – in the Christian calendar, the time of waiting, of anticipating an arrival. It begins, then . . . the time of engaged waiting. I love the invitation that this time of year represents – a period of time to imagine a new way, a new energy, a new life. It's not here yet – the phenomenon, whatever it is, Christmas is not here yet – but we get to imagine it, and it is inherently hope-filled in its yearning – for light, for love, for kindness, for giving.

What do you want? What do you hope for? You get to ponder it this whole month. It could be something really grand. In the words of Bruce Springsteen, of all people: "I want to find that river of life, I want to find that river of love, I want to find that river of faith, that river of hope, I want to go to that river of transformation where you can go and be changed . . . I want to go to that river of resurrection where everybody gets a second chance, I want to find that river of joy and river of happiness . . ."

Or it could be less grand: I want . . . what? A bit of peace in your heart? Or peace of mind? (Not that those are small things, by the way.)

Our imaginations call us to think forward, and to wonder what it would be like, IF the world were a more perfect place, and sometimes we dare to hope.

And sometimes, things get in our way, right?

The Thomas Moore reading this morning – so simple and amazing.

“It’s good to see a monastery going up,” said the pilgrim.

“They’re tearing it down,” said the abbot.

“Whatever for?” asked the pilgrim.

“So we can see the sun rise at dawn,” said the abbot.

Because we need to see the sun rise, don’t we, again and again?

And it made me wonder: What wall stands in the way for us of seeing the sun? What stops us, if anything, from seeing the beauty of a new day? From feeling hopeful? Are there things WE need to deconstruct? Our cynicism, perhaps; our despair; our sense of fatalism.

The thing about hope is – in addition to imagination, and engagement, it requires WANTING . . . sometimes wanting something else more than what is already in front of us, so we have to ask what we’re willing to break down – if only within – so we can see the sun rise. What are we willing to give up in order that our hope might come to pass? In order that we might hope at all?

We’re so impatient, aren’t we? That’s the other thing about hope . . . sometimes what we hope for takes time.

The Rev. Christina Shu shares:

“As the Advent calendar demonstrate[s], this is a time of anticipation and waiting, of allowing oneself to be in a state of preparation to receive hope. [But] we live in a culture that does not value waiting, or taking the long view. Our individualism, our consumerism, our addiction to “fast” everything. . . . I remember the Dalai Lama once joked that Americans always want to know, what is the easiest, the fastest, and the cheapest way to enlightenment.”

Silly us.

Here we are at Theodore Parker Church, for example, becoming what we hoped for – more outward-seeking and doing; more engagement with the present struggles of the world, which might be what it means to be a people of hope, right? Imaginative, engaged, wanting . . . and yet we struggle, because it’s different and we’re impatient with it all.

Poet and UCC minister Jan Richardson offers us Jacob’s Blessing – a testament to hope, I think.

If this blessing were easy,  
anyone could claim it.

As it is,

I am here to tell you  
that it will take some work.

This is the blessing  
that visits you  
in the struggling,  
in the wrestling,  
in the striving.

This is the blessing  
that comes  
after you have left  
everything behind,  
after you have stepped out,  
after you have crossed  
into that realm  
beyond every landmark  
you have known.

This is the blessing  
that takes all night  
to find.

It's not that this blessing  
is so difficult,  
as if it were not filled  
with grace  
or with the love  
that lives  
in every line.

It's simply that  
it requires you  
to want it,  
to ask for it,  
to place yourself  
in its path.  
It demands that you  
stand to meet it  
when it arrives,  
that you stretch yourself

in ways you didn't know  
you could move,  
that you agree  
to not give up.

So when this blessing comes,  
borne in the hands  
of the difficult angel  
who has chosen you,  
do not let go.  
Give yourself  
into its grip.

It will wound you,  
but I tell you  
there will come a day  
when what felt to you  
like limping

was something more  
like dancing  
as you moved into  
the cadence  
of your new and blessed name.

I want that blessing for you, and for all of us – that blessing of hope: the one that requires imagination and engagement, wanting and patience and steadfastness. I want us to be willing to bear the mark of our efforts and trust that hope will move us forward.

I want us to be involved in creating a future that is inherently hopeful, which means it will be a struggle, and it will require our commitment, because we don't hope for ourselves alone. Hope is a shared endeavor. We are each other's bridge.

Let's take this time of anticipation, of waiting, of wondering, to nurture the blessing of hope within ourselves and each other. Let's have it be OUR way of life, eyes wide open for the sun's rise. And even as it is a place of challenge, of wrestling and risk, let it be a place of comfort for us and for our world.

## **CLOSING WORDS**

**Blessing of Hope**

*Jan Richardson, from *The Cure for Sorrow**

So may we know the hope that is not just for someday  
but for this day— here, now, in this moment that opens to us:  
hope not made of wishes but of substance,  
hope made of sinew and muscle and bone,  
hope that has breath and a beating heart,  
hope that will not keep quiet and be polite,  
hope that knows how to holler when it is called for,  
hope that knows how to sing when there seems little cause,  
hope that raises us . . . again and again and again.