

**Channing Memorial Church
Unitarian Universalist
Ellicott City, Maryland
The Reverend Susan LaMar, Minister
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A Cloak or a Seed

[Stand and wait . . .]

Waiting is hard, isn't it? Especially when you don't know what you are waiting for.

Once there was a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Some of the younger monks had left in dissatisfaction, and no new men were joining. There were but a handful of monks and their leader, the abbot, remaining. They began fighting among themselves, each blaming the hard times on the faults and failings of the other.

One day a traveling rabbi stopped at the monastery for a night's rest. He ate, and prayed alongside the other monks. The next day, as the rabbi prepared to continue on his journey, the abbot drew him aside. He told him of the problems of the monastery and asked him for his observations and for some advice to share with the other monks.

Upon hearing the abbot's woes, the rabbi was quiet for some time.

"Cannot you give me some advice to help my monastery to thrive again?" the abbot begged.

"You monks will not listen to my advice," the rabbi replied. "But perhaps they would benefit from an observation. The Messiah dwells among you here at the monastery."

"One of us?" asked the abbot astonished. "Which one?"

"Oh, that I cannot say," he answered. "Share this with your brothers, and in time it shall be revealed to you."

The abbot thanked him and sent him on his way. He then gathered the monks together, who listened in amazement at the news.

"One of us!, But who?" each one asked out loud. Then to themselves they wondered, "It couldn't be Brother Robert – or could it?"

"Surely not Brother Henry, but there are times when . . .

"Not the youngest, well, maybe . . ."

"The abbot himself?"

"Could it be me?"

Some things began to change at the monastery as each began to see the Messiah in the other and to hear the Messiah's words in each word spoken.

Soon people began to wander back to the monastery, and in time new men joined and the monastery thrived.

[Pause]

What changed? What changed? The quality of the waiting changed. It changed from a discouraged, despondent waiting, a blaming, dissatisfied waiting,

to an expectant waiting. An open waiting, a hopeful waiting. A waiting that had behind it an awake, alert, "what if?" A quickening waiting.

[Pause]

Advent is a time to reflect on what healing, hope, and joy might reside in the shadows, *waiting* to be born. In the darkness of the valley of the year, we wait. As the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations. If we could just figure out what that LORD is, maybe we could help. The rabbi in our story had a pretty good idea of what it is.

Advent means "coming" -- so in these weeks before Christmas we reflect about what it means for Christmas to be coming -- for something new to be born. As Unitarian Universalists the story that we share at this time of year is that we celebrate the birth of Jesus, a great and wise teacher. We spend this time leading up to the birth reflecting on some of the virtues, or "goodnesses" that he represented in the way he lived his life and how we hope to be able to live our lives. Jesus was a man who "lived for our righteousness" -- "lived to show *us* how to live good lives." We admire the virtues that he lived out . . . love, truth-telling, speaking out for justice, forgiveness, kindness, peace, and hope . . .

What if every one of us lived for the righteousness of all? What if everyone lived to find the Messiah, the anointed savior, in every one else?

Both religiously and culturally the Christmas story has taken on some pretty strange trappings -- on the religious side, a virgin birth, angels singing, Jesus as a literal son of God. On the secular side, a shopping frenzy and endless, annoying and cloying repetition of Christmas carols everywhere you go, parties galore. One choice is to dismiss the religious side as supernatural nonsense; another is to close your eyes and stop your ears and pull a blanket up over your head to shut out the secular noise.

But there is another choice: You can rise to the spiritual occasion, so to speak, take up the spiritual challenge, enter the metaphor and expand your humanity. You can take on the "what if" character of the story and wait in expectation and in hope. You could, in your own life, play the role of John the Baptist, or the visiting rabbi at the monastery. Possibility is coming . . . but you must awaken to it.

Waking up to such a thing is way harder than dismissing it all -- religious or secular -- but ultimately way more transformative . . . and transformation is the purpose of a spiritual journey.

A few years ago I thought I was pulling a blanket up over my head to block out the secular noise. The blanket I chose, though, was the scriptural story of the season. Yup, pulled it right up and started spending time with it, trying to figure out what the heck it was talking about. And what a great blanket it turned out to be. It not only shuts out all the secular cultural noise, but it opens up a new path -- a different new path each year.

Under that blanket . . . that cloak, a seed was germinating. It was a question, addressed to me and stunning in its simplicity: It asked, "What is being born *in you* this year? What is coming after? What voices are calling? What is unexpectedly germinating, gestating, and how will it come forth?"

The trouble with questions that are stunning in their simplicity is that the answers are sometimes -- though not always -- just as stunning in their complexity. That's what

makes it a spiritual journey, I suppose. It is true of scripture in any tradition: when you engage with it at the spiritual level, it turns out that the story isn't about the story . . . it's about you. Uh.

That first year for me the birth happened to be a big one . . . a decision to get divorced, to be born as a single person free to make choices and no longer to enable the poor choices of a life-partner who was self-destructive. Sometimes they have been big like that . . . heeding a call to go into the ministry was another big one for me . . . but more often they are small . . . little births. This year it's going to be to give birth to a less cranky me!

At any stage of your life you *are* being called to be something new . . . to be born into a new way of being. It can be unnerving, if not downright terrifying. As when you were first and literally born . . . you were bombarded with sights and sounds and tastes and smells and touches, all unfamiliar and bewildering . . . When you went off to college or got your first job, you were a baby at that. If you started a family, you were a baby parent. And so on . . . a baby middle ager; a baby elderly person. A baby widow. A baby divorcee. A baby empty-nester. A baby in recovery from an addiction. At every stage of your life you are giving birth to the next stage, and likely feeling unprepared and awkward about it. At every age and every stage you have to take that new being that is within you and figure out who it is.

Which is, of course, why we join together in community . . . to be shepherds and angels to each other . . . cheering one another on in each of these ages and stages.

And you know, it is not only as individuals that we are called to be born anew. The story of the rabbi in the monastery reminds us of that. All those monks looked up and around . . . together. What about me? What about you? What about him? Could it be? . . . As each of the monks pulled out of themselves, stopped grumbling, looked around, *that is when things began to change*. They began to cheer each other on, witness to one another's spirit. They stopped waiting passively for things to change. They started waiting expectantly . . . no, actively. They were the voices crying in the wilderness, crying out words of expectation. And people wanted to be there!

That's happening here, you know. I've been thinking lately about what is being born here at Channing Memorial Church. We've been waiting a long time and it's really hard to see sometimes. Unlike that monastery, we don't actually live together. But this congregation is living into the Advent of something new . . . that clay that we've been wedging for the past few years? It's on the potter's wheel and beginning to take form. It may not show, but there has been a lot expectant work going on behind the scenes. Eight Action Teams . . . Outreach and Diversity, Theological Diversity, Worship, Music, Religious Education, Growth and Intimacy, Families at all Life Stages, Service . . . eight teams have been hard at work, capturing ideas for what this congregation might look like and be like as we go forward . . . and preparing to actually make it happen. I don't go to all the meetings, but I'm on most of the e-mail circles that are going around within the Action Teams as they come up with ideas and thoughts and suggestions for the church's future, and let me tell you they are doing some amazing work.

But we still have to wait. . . Come January, something new *is* going to be born here. The teams will be coming together, and shaping a new creation. All of you and more are and will be part of it. Because of course the Messiah isn't a person at all . . . it is what happens when we look up and around in expectation and hope. It is what keeps

happening when we move forward in confidence. It is what keeps happening when we prepare the way well.

I end this morning with a Wendell Berry Poem, simply called The Seeds.

The seeds begin abstract as their species,
remote as the name on the sack
they are carried home in: Fayette Seed Company
Corner of Vine and Rose. But the sower
going forth to sow sets foot
into time to come, the seeds falling
on his own place. He has prepared a way
for his life to come to him, if it will.
Like a tree, he has given roots to the earth, and stands free.

May you sow your new life, may we sow our new life, standing free, and thriving,
together.