

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

A Mind of Winter

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## **FIRST READING**

adapted from *The New Testament Revisited* Darcy Steinke

She probably paced the barn, as women did before the scientific model of sickness led doctors to urge them onto their backs. Cool dirt darkened the soles of her bare feet. Cows and sheep, troubled by her moaning, shifted uneasily in their pens.

Pain, which until this night meant to her a more contained and minor thing, is so different in form and texture now, so persuasive, she seems to be drowning in it. The pain washes away all pretense, wears away identity, renders Mary penetrable – the air, the light, the music from the inn, all moving through her until she's the same as the barn's walls, the lowing animals.

Now blood, mingled with salt water, gushes and flows as she squats, steadies herself on Joseph's shoulder, grits her teeth and bears down. Feels herself opening, feels her consciousness, as if made of paper, ripping in two, a sensation so painful, so powerful and disorienting that she senses, as the crown of her baby's head appears, matted with black hair, that a radical transformation is already in the works. And it is in this last delirious moment, as the Bible so succinctly puts it, that Mary brings forth her first-born son.

But before she wraps him in swaddling clothes, before she lays him the manger... let's allow Mary to hold him against her chest, Let her feel the exquisite touch of his delicate fingertips as the baby shifts his tiny head, mesmerized already by the cadence of her human heart.

## **SECOND READING** *from Richard Jeffries*

It is eternity now. I am in the midst of it.  
It is about me in the sunshine.  
I am in it, as the butterfly in the light-laden air.  
Nothing has to come, it is now.  
Now is eternity.  
Now is the eternal life.

## A Mind of Winter

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On the longest night each year, the winter solstice, we gather here, children and adults together, and let the winter night come down around us like a blanket. We light our candles sparingly, deliberately. We remember ancient stories, ancient wonder, ancient fear. Someone said this week in an email, *The power within is the same that holds the planets in place.* They were writing in response to a question about a medical crisis their family has been living through. They said, “We’re moving along, receiving support of all kinds. *The power within is the same that holds the planets in place.*” On the solstice night I think we gather just to taste or glimpse or grasp a strand of that old wisdom, ancient magic, and convey to children, and our own selves once again, that there are forces out there larger than ourselves, larger than our will – light and darkness, seasons, stars and planets, *holding us in our places* – and it’s good for us sometimes to hunker down and listen and remember.

On the solstice here, we begin indoors and then go out. Children lead us out with steady (sometimes not so steady) drums, to the woods, to a fire, and most years we try to recount for the benefit of children, but also for our ourselves, what’s happening around us: owls wide-awake above us, foxes and coyotes maybe watching; little mice and voles, if they’ve already gone to ground, slowing their heartrates to several beats per minute; frogs and snakes and turtles with their cold blood not quite frozen, sleeping under mud. And all the seeds and all the acorns, all the holy hidden possibilities, are invisibly alive and thriving underground, biding their time, resting, growing, waiting, till sometime in April, sometime in May, sometime when we least expect it and most abjectly need it, the shell will crack, the shoot, against gravity and against the odds, will press up and out even through snow if it needs to, through ice and concrete if it wants to, rising green and strong in spring, because right now, in midwinter, it is already getting ready. On Friday night this week, we’ll listen and watch, as humans always have; we’ll welcome winter with a lot of shouting, then stamp our feet and come inside for cider.

Josephine Johnson, a nature writer, says,

*A woman goes to the woods on a winter afternoon, and settles herself in the deep snow under a tree. Nothing moves. Nothing calls. The sunlight falls like a gold sweater on the shoulders. It dries the chilly mud. It is reflected in the bright pin eyes of the chickadee. The sunlight is a free and mindless benediction over the barren winter world. The dry pods of vines move with a small music in the breeze; it is a bright sound, not a deathly rattle. [She draws cold breath] and wonders, “What interval is this? [The sting of ice against my skin reminds me:] I live. I am. [I almost had forgotten.] This is not holy, this is not heaven. [This is no magic.] It is the ancient pagan hollow of the hand that holds the sun.*

Wallace Stevens has a lovely, quiet poem called “The Snow Man:”

*One must have a mind of winter  
To regard the frost and the boughs  
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;*

*And have been cold a long time  
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,  
The spruces rough in the distant glitter  
Of the January sun; and not to think  
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,  
In the sound of a few leaves,  
Which is the sound of the land  
Full of the same wind  
That is blowing in the same bare place  
For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
And, nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.*

There's something about that: listening for nothing. Waiting, really, for nothing. At the winter solstice, we're not waiting for the animals to wake up, the grass to grow green, the birds to come back, the ice to thaw and fish to jump. We're not even really waiting for the light. It comes as it comes, in the fullness of its own time, a force that we can't engineer. Our job is to watch and listen and notice and be reverent, grateful, bedazzled. Our job is to attend, to pay attention, and see in the dark what's shining in ourselves.

On Christmas Eve, we stay indoors, singing all the old carols with all the old words – lyrics that make humanists cringe and pagans blush, and make all of us a little uneasy – which is not the worst thing in a rigorous spiritual life. Confusion and perplexity and a little inconsistency sometimes are good for the soul, especially for heady Unitarians. We sing the old strange words for no reason and for many reasons, to let go of reason just for once a year. Part of it's old poetry and part of it's nostalgia, a return to the music so many here were raised on. Even in the largely Jewish UU congregation I served as an intern in New York, people loved the carols, whether *Hark the Herald* or *White Christmas*, Mendelsohn, Handel, Bing Crosby. We sing the old music with all the old words and light our candles lavishly, deliberately, and try to remember every year to say out loud we know full well that none of it is real. Even Christians mostly know that none of it is real - the virgin, the donkey, the shepherds, the star; none of it is real - but *much of it rings true*. Not the doctrine but the mystery. Not the miracles, but the empirical, undeniable evidence.

Tyrants are always persecuting the poor, demanding their documents and proof of citizenship.

Rich governments are always closing their borders against aliens from Nazareth and Bethlehem, and Guatemala, and hunting down young upstarts who threaten revolution.

Poor women are always and forever asked to bear unspeakable burdens, to accept the burden as a virtue, and suffer like saints.

And somewhere, almost always, someone is opening their door in the night and saying, "I have room for you. Come in."

Sometimes wise men and wise women choose not to be complicit, and bring lovely gifts instead of treachery.

So much of the story rings true.

And people have always been wondering, wandering, under the stars - we still are –whether listening for trumpets of angels, or the wailing of babies, or the whisper of wind breathing into our cynical ears and ice cold hearts the hope of peace on earth, goodwill restored. The lyrics and legends aren't real at all, not historically; they are not even theologically coherent, not for us - but they carry in their cadence, carry in their bird-like bones, traces of truth both beautiful and terrible, strands of archetypal evidence that all this folklore and mythology was made by humans who held the same questions we all hold, people who dwelt within and knelt before the same vast mysteries that leave us speechless even now; they understood the same shattering evils; they understood the same wondrous love. *The power within is the same that holds the planets in place.* The hopes and fears of all the years are almost as old as the winter darkness itself and the returning light.

In western culture and the northern world, all of this coincides. We're lucky, I think, to hold Christmas and the solstice on the dark side of the planet, inside the sparkly snow globe of December. The stories came first out of sunshine and light, from the desert, the Middle East, and the blue-green waters of the Red Sea and the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean. It does snow sometimes in Palestine, in Bethlehem, but there are no pine trees, no reindeer, no chestnuts roasting in the stable. Here, the weather and the land seem ready-made for Hanukkah's Festival of Lights, illuminating eight long, dark nights, and the Advent candles, kindled over four long, dark weeks. These gestures are all about waiting which is all about hibernation, which is all about new life, which is all about gestation, which is all about unknowing, which is all about hope, which is difficult to muster at the end of a darkening month in a darkening year in a darkening age, when the ground of being is frozen as the ground you stamp your boots on. Everything in winter waits, but what exactly for? These stories fit the season here.

*One must have a mind of winter and have been cold a long time to regard the frost and the boughs of the pine-trees crusted with snow; you must have a mind of winter, not to think of misery in the sound of the wind, but mystery instead... to behold the junipers shagged with ice, the spruces rough in glitter of the winter sun; ...You listen in the snow, and nothing yourself, behold nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.*

The mind of winter waits quietly and patiently, even in the midst of holiday hustle; the mind of winter waits patiently and quietly, even in the fear-filled desperate urgency of so many wrongs to be righted and so much work to be done, injustice to be undone. The mind of winter acknowledges the urgency and draws a quiet breath, listening for a deeper, older music to sustain the spirit for the long, long haul; it trusts a deeper wisdom; waits for the rebirth or restoration of abiding, ancient hope with roots as wide as the canopies of trees, binding all of us and everything together. Sometimes before rushing to the next thing, even a worthy thing, it's good to wait and listen; wait for nothing you can actually name, listen for nothing that makes any sound, but a slow dawning in the soul that feels like light in wintertime. Sometimes we're wise to wait

without waiting, just pause, and breathe, and see what comes, see what rises, see what waits for us.

Two weeks ago in the service I invited you to sit for a moment with the question, *What are you waiting for?* I want to ask that again now, but in a slightly different key: at this time of year, at this time in your own life, *what's waiting for you?* What or who awaits you, as one year closes and a new one opens wide? What work, what person, what risk, what rest, what blessing? On this threshold of the turning year, patiently, impatiently, what might be out there waiting for you now?

*silence*

It's impossible to know what waits for us. We think we maybe have a plan, but really we cannot imagine what the year ahead will bring, in our own life or our shared life, the life of this whole world. You could not have known a year ago what these past 12 months would bring, what unexpected blessings, what unimaginable losses. In wintertime we take a breath, mindful that we can't know what's ahead any more than our ancestors who feared the sun might not come back. We take a breath and try to anchor in their wisdom: *the power within is the same that holds the planets in place.* "Peace on earth" has never felt so unrealistic, never seemed so out of reach – but peace within your own container - peace of mind, peaceful spirit, calm and grounded center: how can we stay open and hospitable, grant space, grant room, to *that* holy possibility? What practice - reading, praying, walking, serving other people, giving, resting, breathing - might make that peace more possible? What's waiting for you now? "Goodwill to all" seems a just little grandiose, but being just a little kinder to one or two more people in your daily orbit might be well within your grasp. Who's waiting for you now? So much is out of our control – that's a given, that's a fact. This season is an invitation to listen in the silence, watch for signs and portents of what maybe isn't out of our control, what maybe we might do or be or yet become on purpose. Ordinary, sacred transformations.

I think of Mary, Blessed Virgin, peasant girl, handmaid of the Lord – none of these titles really desirable for a young woman in her time or in ours. The church made her the Queen of Heaven, well aware that she was also, in the pagan mind, the reincarnation and the resurrection of every ancient goddess the church itself had banned. But at some point, some forgotten point, she was also just a person. Like all women before her, and every woman since who's ever born a child, she was a person, and she must have known, along with any happy curiosity, along with any joy, loneliness and fear as well, the terror not just of opening her body, but also of bringing something fragile, something innocent and lovely, to a dangerous and fractured world. This is not magic or mythology; this is how it always is. She couldn't know what she was waiting for, what might lie ahead – we never really do. Her message to the angel is, "Let it be with me according to thy will," and theologians ever since (feminist, misogynist), have argued whether this was proof of her free agency – choosing to say yes - or an abdication of her power. But if she's a person – not a queen or goddess, not a saint – if she's a person, then the most important part of Mary's story is the part that isn't told, not in the text or the great Renaissance paintings, or the carols or Magnificat. The part that matters most, maybe, is not the Annunciation nor even the Birth, but how she waited, resigned herself to waiting, all those months, and what she wondered, what she feared and dreamed about, what it felt like – not to be the Holy Blessed

Virgin, full of grace, but to be a human being, full of mystery, which is miracle enough. The text says *she pondered in her heart* – and that’s the line I wish could be set to a carol, not just for Christmas but a song to hold the entire mind of winter: the fallow land, the seeds below; the smothering dark that already by Saturday this week will be giving way to light; the cold that draws us closer to the warmth of one another; the silence that speaks louder than music or words or plans or opinions or noise of any kind. She pondered in her heart.

Darcy Steinke writes, *before she wraps him in the swaddling clothes, before she lays him in the manger, let’s allow Mary just to hold her baby against her chest. Let her feel the exquisite touch of his delicate fingertips as he shifts his tiny head, mesmerized already by the cadence of her human heart.* Before she gives him over, hands her child over to theology and politics, armies of the just, crusaders, evangelists and empire, before she becomes an icon and he becomes a god, allow them to be human, even for one night. This is the power of their story, and the same as ours: to be born and live and love and die, and bless the word between the birthing and the dying. There are no magic children, no children holier than thou. Every one of them, everyone of us, is here to bless the world with love and light and bring to bear our own most ordinary incarnation. The seeds are buried deep within us, always waiting to be born.

There’s no rushing incubation, gestation, the return of the light in the fullness of time. “It is eternity now,” says the poet.

*I am in the midst of it.*

*It is about me in the sunshine.*

*I am in it, as the butterfly in the light-laden air.*

*Nothing has to come, it is now.*

*Now is eternity.*

*Now is the eternal life.*

*silence*

These words in closing are adapted from Jan Richardson:

### ***Blessing for Waiting***

*Who wait for the night to end - bless them.*

*Who wait for the night to begin - bless them.*

*Who wait in the hospital room*

*who wait in the cell*

*who wait in prayer - bless them.*

*Who wait for news*

*who wait for the phone call*

*who wait for a word*

*who wait for a job  
a house  
a child -  
- bless them.  
Who wait for one who will come home  
who wait for one who will not come home - bless them.  
Who wait with fear  
who wait with joy  
who wait with peace  
who wait with rage  
who wait for the end  
who wait for the beginning  
who wait alone  
who wait together –  
- bless them.  
Who wait without knowing what they wait for  
or why -  
- bless them.  
Who wait when they should not wait  
who wait when they should be in motion  
who wait when they need to rise  
who wait when they need to set out - bless them.  
Who wait for the end of waiting  
who wait for the fullness of time  
who wait emptied and open and ready  
who wait for you and your blessing –  
[bless them.]*

Amen