

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

## No Extraordinary Power

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WHITE BEAR UNITATRIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH  
328 MAPLE STREET MAHTOMEDI, MN 55115 WWW.WBUUC.ORG

## FIRST READING

### Blessing for Waiting

Jan Richardson

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

o bless

## SECOND READING

*from Denise Levertov*

Praise  
 the invisible sun burning beyond  
 the white cold sky, giving us light and the chimney's shadow.

Praise  
 god or the gods, the unknown,  
 that which imagined us, which stays our hand,  
 our murderous hand,  
 and gives us still  
 in the shadow of death,  
 our daily life  
 and the dream still  
 of goodwill, of peace on earth.

Praise  
 flow and change,  
 Praise night  
 and praise the pulse of day.

## No Extraordinary Power

In the congregation I served before this one, in an old church in an old New England town, for many years they held no services on Christmas Eve. It just wasn't part of their tradition. One year we decided just to open the building, a beautiful old meetinghouse right on the city's main street. We set candles on the window ledges and put wreaths on doors, and the first year maybe a dozen people stopped and sat in there, in the quiet candlelight, on their way home from work, their way home from shopping; one or two were homeless people whom we knew pretty well;

most we knew not at all. A couple of people, (I know because they told me), slipped in to escape for while the wild rumpus of family gatherings, the chaos of wrapping paper and relatives and cooking. Someone told me afterwards, “I offered to go out for milk and somehow got lost in the snow...” The next year there were more people, and the third year that we did it there were maybe 50 people over a two hour period. Some stayed the whole time, in the darkening, deepening silence, most stayed maybe 20 minutes. That third year, the last before the congregation shifted to real services on Christmas Eve, with “Joy to the World” and “Hark, the Herald” and readings and readers and not-so-“Silent Night,” that third and last year there was a power outage through the whole downtown. The dark was very dark, no artificial light coming through the windows from the street at all. The dark was dark, and the quiet was dark, and even as the sanctuary grew colder and their breath came out in clouds, people stayed, kept their mittens on, snuggled in their scarves, swaddled in the candlelight and shadows. When people got up to leave they were careful to be quiet, but you could hear this little whisper all around the room, this blessing among strangers in the dark, *merry Christmas, merry Christmas, merry Christmas...*

I don't know why they came. I know why I loved it, but I don't know why the others came. Most of them came alone. Some sat with eyes open, some with eyes closed. Some cried. Some leaned forward, heads bowed, with their prayer-hands on the pew in front of them; some breathed deep, deep breaths. If we'd had any readings, maybe someone would have read Jan Richardson's Advent poem, her “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 for the end of waiting/ who wait for the fullness of time  
who wait emptied and open and ready / who wait for you  
o bless.*

We all joke in December about dreading the holidays, especially these ones bearing down on us at full throttle right now; we want to get past them as quickly as we can, but I always wonder whether we'd do better to elongate the season, to draw from the wisdom of Advent in the

Christian calendar, which stretches the waiting and wondering and wandering, the pondering of darkness and holy light and holy night and mystery, across a month of Sundays. In the darkness, in the silence, maybe we finally remember what we're waiting for and looking for and wanting.

Some time ago I learned a story. 150 years before those candlelit Christmas Eves, a former minister of that church, one of my predecessors there, was sitting in his study. A graduate of Harvard Divinity School, he had shown great promise for the ministry, but after less than a year it was clear he couldn't do it; he was terrified of public speaking. On Sundays he had to lock himself in his house, and they couldn't coax him out. He left that pulpit ashamed. I think of him often, John Sullivan Dwight, and how he must have felt. He became something of a recluse but he was a strong writer and lover of music, and he went on to curate a musical journal which found a wide readership, even in Europe. He stayed connected to the world, but privately and quietly. One day, in 1847, someone sent him the text of a controversial French Christmas carol, *Cantique de Noel*. It had been commissioned by a priest, but a few years later was banned from the Catholic churches when authorities discovered the composer of the music was a Jew and the lyricist a socialist wine merchant. People loved the song all over France, but they couldn't sing it publically in church. Somehow, in Massachusetts, John Sullivan Dwight received a copy of *Cantique de Noel*. He found the music strange and exquisitely beautiful, and the words jolted him awake, the text moved him powerfully, in the way it tied the pretty story of the stable and the star and the shepherds and the sheep to Jesus' radical intention to upend the world. Dwight was an abolitionist, and for him the carol was a sacred anthem about human evil, morality and slavery. He translated the French words into English:

*O Holy Night, the stars are brightly shining...  
Long lay the world, in sin and error pining,  
till he appeared, and each soul felt its worth.  
A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices,  
for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn...*

*Truly he taught us to love one another,  
his law is love and his gospel is peace.*

*Chains shall he break,  
for the slave is our brother,  
and in his name all oppression shall cease.*

*Fall on your knees,  
O hear the angel voices...  
O holy night, O night divine.*

The carol became as popular in America as it was in France, and for different reasons, just as controversial. Some people were upset: what does Jesus have to do with slavery and the politics of sugarcane, the economy of cotton? What does Christmas have to do with conscience?

There's another story about another carol and another Unitarian. At around the same time and not too far away, Edmund Hamilton Sears was minister in Wayland, Massachusetts. He, too, had

found ministry to be a struggle, an emotional strain. He, too, quit his pulpit, and wrote “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear” while preaching part-time, as he tried to heal from what was then called “melancholy,” and we now call clinical depression. He was trying to do soul repair, to mend a broken spirit, and also he was trying to make sense of maelstrom of daily news, events swirling and churning all around him, and his despair over revolutions in Europe, and closer to home, the travesty of America’s war with Mexico. It was 1849 and his carol, like “O Holy Night,” became (and remains) hugely popular. “Midnight Clear” is unusual because it makes no mention of the virgin birth or the manger or the baby even, at all. It’s a hymn of peace times of war, peace among the nations and peace within the heart, an anthem of despair and hope. The first two verses are familiar to us, but the third and fourth verses were kept out of many hymnals and anthologies. Again, what does Jesus have to do with war and peace? Edmund Sears wrote:

*Yet with the woes of sin and strife  
The world has suffered long;  
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled  
Two thousand years of wrong;  
And man, at war with man, hears not  
The love-song which they bring;  
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,  
And hear the angels sing.*

*And ye, beneath life's crushing load,  
Whose forms are bending low,  
Who toil along the climbing way  
With painful steps and slow,  
Look now! for glad and golden hours  
come swiftly on the wing.  
O rest beside the weary road,  
And hear the angels sing!*

If there’d been carols or a choir in my old church on those candle-lit Christmas Eves, I would have asked them to sing to the people that verse about the weary road and rest, and then:

*For lo!, the days are hastening on,  
By prophet bards foretold,  
When with the ever-circling years  
Comes round the age of gold  
When peace shall over all the earth  
Its ancient splendors fling,  
And the whole world give back the song  
Which now the angels sing.*

It sounds so sweetly sentimental now, but from a man writing out of his own depression into the debacle of a racist, raging war, it was a powerful indictment, a clarion reminder that *another way* is possible. I imagine these two, John Sullivan Dwight and Edmund Sears, quietly in their studies, snow falling, night falling, discouraged by the state of the world, the wars of the world, the slave system which in 1850 looked to be permanent... I think of them, these Unitarian colleagues who did not know one another, each separately striving toward some kind of hope, each doubting his own power, and possibly his worthiness (they couldn't even do their job), listening in the winter dark, the candle-lit dark, for music that wasn't yet there, straining for the solace of songs that had not yet been written ... and then writing them. That in itself is a miracle. Their illumination of the complex, mysterious theology underneath a simple story, the saving power of that story, is a blessing to the world.

And just as an aside, because it's only fair, I'll tell you that I know of one more beloved winter song written by a Unitarian who was a contemporary of these two. James Lord Pierpont was the son and brother of Unitarian ministers who served, respectively, in Medford, Massachusetts and Savannah, Georgia in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Both towns have plaques that claim that he wrote "Jingle Bells" while staying there with his clergy relatives, and the mayors of both towns still fight about this. But the sadder story here is that James Pierpont defied his abolitionist family in both states and denied his roots by serving in the Confederate army and writing battle songs for the South. "Jingle Bells," of course, was not one of them, and it's still a great song, and I'm telling you this only because, as the holidays remind us, families are complicated, and family history is complicated. Our Unitarian Universalist family is like all our other families in that way – a messy mix, a wintry mixed precipitation, of holiness and imperfection, and stories half-remembered and barely understood, and old songs to see us through. Winter is long; we have time to tell all the stories and sing all the verses of all of the old songs, and in the coming days, we will.

In the deepening dark of the waning year, in the deepening snow, the deepening cold, in this season, this era, this strange age we're in of deepening disenchantment and widening despair, discouragement within and discouragement without, what music are you waiting for? What story? What glad good news, if not trumpeted from angels, then delivered hand to hand? If you were sitting in a darkened church on Christmas Eve with a few dozen fellow travelers, strangers all, what prayer would you be praying?

I think of Adrienne Rich, the great poet.  
*My heart is moved*, she wrote,

*My heart is moved by all I cannot save:  
So much has been destroyed  
I have to cast my lot with those  
who, age after age,  
perversely, with no extraordinary  
power, reconstitute the world.*

She wrote this many years ago, sometime way back in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It has been a kind of touchstone for me, like a prayer or piece of scripture that you tuck into your pocket and hold

against your heart till the paper becomes soft and the words almost invisible, as if they've seeped into your skin, into the marrow of your bones. These lines remind me that I am not alone when I feel most isolated in some personal struggle or loss or fear, some great and quiet thing – loss or fear, or regret or sadness or shame or worry or doubt - when it feels like much has been destroyed. It reminds me I am not alone when I feel most desperate in the face of larger, more public devastations. This is about love and hope and faith. It is a reminder that people have been struggling for a long, long time, against destruction, against disappointment and despair, against desecration of the planet and desecration of each other, devastations of the spirit and the body and the body politic.

*...with the woes of sin and strife  
The world has suffered long;  
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled  
Two thousand years of wrong...*

*Our hearts are moved by all we cannot save: so much has been destroyed. Without any unusual powers, believing sometimes we have no power at all, we cast our lots with those who, amazingly, reconstitute, restore, reimagine, re-translate, recreate, rehabilitate and reconcile this world. The ones who, by their art and by their love, with no extraordinary power, find ways to put small pieces of their corner of the world back together, in beauty.*

If you were sitting in a quiet space, a lovely, warm, and well-companioned space, filled with light and music, near the end of a year, near the end of a decade, surrounded by snow; if you had just slipped in on a morning in mid-December, catching your breath between a hundred thousand holiday errands, and come in either to escape for a moment, for an hour, from all the demands and the people clamoring around you, or to escape, for an hour, from solitude, from loneliness, and to be, for a moment, in the midst of other people, what prayer would you be praying? If someone said, *Just take a breath, and be at home. Allow your breath to help you orient yourself in time, in space, to find yourself here now, and fully present* – what blessing would you bring, and lay upon the altar of the day?

Next week, next Saturday, marks the winter solstice, when, without any effort whatsoever on our part, without us even noticing, the days will gently lengthen, the light will slowly creep back around the margins of the morning and the margins of the afternoon, and before winter even sinks its teeth into us, moves into our bones for real, our half of the earth will be turning toward the summer. The light returns in spite of us, and our only work is to notice and be grateful, and answer with the light we bring each other.

So take a breath, and be at home.

Allow your breath to help you orient yourself in time, in space, to find yourself here now, and fully present.

Take a breath, with eyes open or eyes closed.

Breathe in, and then breathe out.

To bless a person is to notice them, their beauty and their brokenness.  
 To bless the world is just the same,  
 to notice and to name with gratitude the beauty and abundance that sustains you,  
 to notice and to name the brokenness, the sorrow and injustice that breaks your heart.

What are you blessing this morning, with the gift of your attention, your gratitude, your concern,  
 or your love?

Who and what are you blessing this morning, with the gift of your attention, your love?

What weighs on your heart these days, and what makes it sing?

Breathing in and breathing out, on the threshold of the solstice, we'll hold silence. And out of  
 the silence, and into it, if you're moved to speak aloud, to share your blessings for the world and  
 those you love, I invite you to do so.

*silence*

These words are adapted from Sandra Michaelson Brown:

***The Solstice Wreath***

*The grim news has come to my attention  
 that something in the world has come unfixed —  
 owls no longer haunt the [forest],  
 appearing out of the dreamtime as we pass,*

*indeed whole souls have gone missing, as if being  
 has itself gone dim — ....  
 A vital light is missing from the world, by which I mean  
 that ephemeral gold that spins the seen*

*and unseen worlds together. In my life  
 I don't expect to see a springtime swelling  
 of the shriveled nut so many spirits  
 have become. What's to be done?*

*This is the winter solstice of an age,  
 although the season's worst is yet to come.  
 What's delicate and true has come undone:  
 is the only fitting answer  
 a pure and focused rage?*

*Today I wove a wreath of bone and fir  
 and filbert withes, twined in sacred holly,  
 incense cedar from an ancient tree.  
 I wove, affixed a star, and spoke a spell:*

*“Let this circle stand as the gate of winter  
sure passage to the days of lengthening light.”  
And then I whispered names in the fragrant bough  
Lacing love like a scarlet ribbon through the fronds.*

*Long I wove and dreamed back friends and kin,  
each great soul calling back the sun.  
I thought at last, “My life here is not done.”  
And some bright star rekindled from within. . .*

We bless the world by noticing. We bless each other, and bring the light, by paying our attention.