



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

Advent and the Season of Hope

By Rev. Dr. John Morehouse

Sunday, December 15, 2019

Jan Richardson writes of this season:

Prepare: Strange how one word
will so hollow you out.

But this word
has been in the wilderness
for months.

Years.

This word is what remained
after everything else
was worn away
by sand and stone.

It is what withstood
the glaring of sun by day,
the weeping loneliness of
the moon at night.

Now it comes to you
racing out of the wild,
eyes blazing
and waving its arms,
its voice ragged with desert
but piercing and loud
as it speaks itself
again and again: Prepare, prepare.

It may feel like
 the word is leveling you,
 emptying you
 as it asks you
 to give up
 what you have known.

It is impolite
 and hardly tame,
 but when it falls
 upon your lips
 you will wonder
 at the sweetness,
 like honey
 that finds its way
 into the hunger
 you had not known
 was there.

—Jan Richardson

from Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons

UUUs never think much of Advent. The season of preparation for the birth of Jesus. The season of waiting and expectation. After all we aren't very good at waiting, are we? But here it is again, this season of encroaching darkness. I welcome Jan Richardson's line that advent comes "racing out of the wild, eyes blazing and waving its arms, its voice ragged with desert but piercing and loud as it speaks itself again and again: Prepare, prepare." But most of us are rarely prepared as we rush headlong into the tumble of the Christmas season; gifts, and plans, and parties. But also, loneliness, grief at missing a loved one, the dull throb of mediocrity in contemplating how we will survive another year before us.

Jan Richardson, whose poetry speaks so poignantly to me this time of year, knows something of the raw blaze of this season of expectation.

While most Christians see this as a time of quiet repair, Ms. Richardson does not. Long a poet and artist, she had worked and lived in deep collaboration with her partner, the singer song writer, Garrison Doles. Garrison died quite suddenly in December 2013, in the midst of the advent season changing Jan interpretation of advent from a season of quiet expectation, to one of fierce preparation. She wrote of Garrison's death:

Let us agree
for now
that we will not say
the breaking
makes us stronger
or that it is better
to have this pain
than to have done
without this love.

Let us promise
we will not
tell ourselves
time will heal
the wound,
when every day
our waking
opens it anew.
Perhaps for now
it can be enough
to simply marvel
at the mystery
of how a heart
so broken
can go on beating,
as if it were made

for precisely this—
 as if it knows
 the only cure for love
 is more of it,
 as if it sees
 the heart's sole remedy
 for breaking
 is to love still,
 as if it trusts
 that its own
 persistent pulse
 is the rhythm
 of a blessing
 we cannot
 begin to fathom
 but will save us
 nonetheless.

She reminds me that the only cure for love lost is to love again. The only way beyond the darkness is through it. She reminds me that in a season of expectation of the miracle represented in a birth, there is a preparation of the heart that needs to happen in order to receive that miracle. Far from a season of quiet hours by the fire, the advent season, this advent season, is preparation by the fire of all that we hope for and have lost.

My uncle Reggie was something of a boyhood hero for me. He was actually a step Uncle but who cared? He was athletic, tan, sure of himself and a daredevil. He loved to race through the woods on his motorcycle or tear up the snow in his snowmobile. He often got into accidents, some serious. My step grandmother was beside herself. Her first husband Rev. John Robinson, Reggie's father, had been a pious Unitarian minister in rural NH who died young when Reggie was just a boy. Leaving behind Reggie, his sister Midge and his widow Gerry. Gerry remarried my grandfather who had also lost his wife to cancer and they did their best to keep Reggie safe. I

loved Reggie because he was everything I was not: daring, wild, impetuous. He taught me how to ride a motorcycle and how to ski and climb mountains. But unbeknownst to me, Reggie was a manic depressive. Losing his father at such a young age was very hard.

On the third Sunday of Advent right before Christmas my step grandmother found his body hanging from the pipes in the basement. He had killed himself. He died at age 22. For him, there was no quiet advent season, for him there was only raging through the desert. My grandmother was never the same.

I always know that the weeks leading up to Christmas are so juxtaposed. Laying bare the reality of both light and darkness, rarely in equal measure. One of the reasons the Jan Richardson's poems are so poignant is reflected in this very reality. And perhaps it is your reality. What we offer here, is not sentimentality, but light. Light that you will either be strengthened from or light you will add to by your very presence.

Next weekend we will have several important services to help you either find or bring the light. On Friday, Margalie our intern minister will be offering a Blue Christmas Service, designed to bring our heart ache to and find comfort there. Then the next evening, on the winter solstice Saturday, Rev. Shelly and Marjory Partch will offer an evening of labyrinth walking as it is laid out in its splendor in this very room. And the following day, on Sunday, I will return to the pulpit to offer reflections on the coming of the light.

We are in the third Sunday of Advent now. The four Sundays preceding Christmas are dedicated to Faith, Hope, Love and Joy. Faith that we will once again celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace, Hope that the year before us will bring the changes we desire and need, Love that we have one another to journey with us and Joy that we have finally arrived at the birth, the day of greatest night, and greatest promise. As some of you have expressed to me over these past few weeks, may peace and love come to all the world, even if it isn't in my lifetime.

In this third Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of Love I am reminded of Jan Richardson once wrote after losing her partner, "What we choose changes us. What we love transforms us." Darkness,

this present darkness is about more than expectation, it's also about transformation. We are transformed by the darkness, like a womb ready to give birth, we come out of the dark into light. So it has always been and so it will be again.

Like Jan Richardson my step grandmother found her way again, although advent always held a different meaning for them. Jan remarried, my grandmother recommitted her considerable energy to helping others.

I have accompanied so many of you through this season. It has and will always be a humble honor to do so. I love Christmas because it is blessed by advent first. Waiting for the light is always worthwhile. Like Jan Richardson I find meaning in comparing our waiting for the Christ child to the journey of John the Baptist, who preceded Jesus in his ministry of hope and renewal. As Jan Richardson once wrote:

“Although the Advent path leads us through the desert, deprivation is neither the focus nor the final word of the wilderness. As the honey-eating John knew, the desert offers its own delights. What the wilderness gives us is a path that helps us perceive where our true treasure lies. And does not merely give us a path: empties us enough so that a path is made within us. Through us. Of us. A road for the holy to enter the world. A way for the Christ who comes. What's in your way these days? If you were to imagine your life as a path, a road, what would it look like right now? Is there anything cluttering your way? Is there something you need to let go of in order to prepare the way for the Christ who enters the world in this and every season?” (from The Advent Door “A Road Runs Through It”, © 2018)

Blessings to you in these Advent days. May you find delights even in the desert spaces of this season.