



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

## The Comfort of Commitment

Rev. Hannah Petrie, Associate Minister  
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301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 [information@uuneighborhood.org](mailto:information@uuneighborhood.org)

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I'd like to begin this sermon with a question. Let's see a show of hands. How many of you would say the big wind storm scared the bejesus out of you? It scared the bejesus out of me. As I procrastinated writing this sermon, I spent several minutes looking up the origin of the word *bejesus*. Merriam-Webster says it's a real word, but not separate from the popular idiom, "scared the bejesus out of me." Other on-line sources said the word was first uttered in 1861, and one said, *the original term was "scared the Bee Jesus out of me". Bee Jesus is like Regular Jesus, only for bees. Having him in you is bad, because then he stings you from the inside. Bee Jesus is known to be frightened by loud, sudden sounds.* My favorite was the urban dictionary, definition number 6: *the thing or state of being that we know and yet do not know, fear and yet do not fear.*

Hmm, I thought, that could describe the slipperiness of Unitarian Universalists' grasp of the meaning of Advent. How appropriate that the root word of advent, vent, has to do with wind, adding ad to make it a wind coming toward us. I have come to think of this windstorm as the Great Advent Windstorm of 2011; it came on Advent Eve, wreaking its havoc into the early hours of December 1<sup>st</sup>.

And I'm not kidding when I say it scared the bejesus out of me. Not so much while it was happening, even while huge tree limbs were falling on our roof and front yard, knocking down patio furniture with a great crash, but *after* the storm, learning just how serious a storm it was. When somebody told me I was lucky the two huge deodar cedar trees in our yard didn't uproot because they're known to have shallow root systems, I wanted to cry, because that would have killed us, had one fallen on our home. Indeed, it was the same type of tree on Christmas tree lane that was uprooted in Altadena, huge trees that fell, that miraculously, did not hurt anyone. Indeed, it seems like a miracle that no one died in this storm.

Do you believe in miracles? Which was of more evidence that God might exist: the power of the storm, or the miracle that no one died by this display of almighty power? Do you believe in God? Before I guide you in answering that question, let's consider how this is the best time of year to ask the question.

I love this time of year, I love the period of Advent, when Christians are asked to *prepare* for comfort and joy, for the arrival of a savior, the arrival of "the good news." I don't believe in the Christ, but the crisis of the Great Advent Windstorm of 2011 presents a special opportunity. It gets to the very heart of *the function* of Advent: which is, to admit, to *surrender*, to the inherent vulnerability that is part of being human.

This is not an easy task for religious liberals! Unitarians came to exist in this country because they dismissed the notion that we need a savior. We're not depraved, they insisted, God gave us gifts of reason and fortitude, that we may thrive of our own conviction and commitment. The beauty of modern Unitarian Universalism is that we can do both – we can affirm our secular strength *and* we can consider the conventional wisdom of the Christmas season. In other words, there are parts of the Christian story that don't make sense to us, and yet, we should accept its invitation to be challenged by it.

Let me give you an example of this by telling you about my own Advent reflections. I'm a modern woman, and a UU one at that! At this time, I'm the breadwinner in my family, and that's gone well. My family has everything we need, and yet – the windstorm has taught me to see that the terror of the great unknown is omnipresent, and I have to live with that. Overwhelming as it is, I have come face to face with my greatest vulnerability: I love my family so much, and yet, I know I cannot protect them from all that may befall us. What kind of vulnerabilities do you have to live with? Perhaps they are similar to mine, and can be summed up as the risks of love. There is a type of suffering in that vulnerability when we love, and it is suffering that leads to great leaps of faith. For many Christians, it is Jesus' suffering that is of most comfort – to imagine Christ's suffering helps people to live with their own.

My Advent reflections cause me to consider the substance of my faith. Do you have faith? Let me ask again, do you believe in God? Let me explain how I won't take no for an answer. One of our greatest UU theologians is going to help me here, James Luther Adams, who insisted it's not possible to believe in

nothing – we serve Gods whether we are aware of it or not, so it's worth examining which Gods we want to serve. He says,

“The question concerning faith is not, Shall I be a person of faith? The proper question is, rather, Which faith is mine? Or better, Which faith should be mine? For whether a person craves prestige, wealth, security, or amusement, whether a person lives for country, for science, for God, or for plunder, that person is demonstrating a faith, is showing that she or he puts confidence in something.”

That quotation is, for me, my Hail Mary prayer. It centers me, it asks me unequivocally to define my Gods. When was the last time you defined yours? Now is the time of year to do it, and whether we call it God is not as important as being able to bring it forth in our lives.

Recently I came across a way of thinking about God that really works for me – it's from modern literature, from a best-selling novel, called *Cutting for Stone* by Abraham Verghese. It drags a little in the middle, but overall, it's a magnificent read. It's an epoch tale that involves two nuns of great faith, and explores themes of commitment, both to family and to medicine.

One of the nuns' faith is described like this, that *her job was to make her life beautiful for God*. While I would have to technically label myself an agnostic, which means I don't know if God exists or not and I'm content with not knowing, I can still get on board with this notion, that my job is to make my life beautiful for God. It is the *function* of believing in God that I have faith in. If it means that I have to carefully consider what makes my life beautiful, then I am hot to trot for this faith.

What makes your life beautiful? Of course it's many things, but in the context of this terrible knowledge I spoke of earlier, this knowledge of how fragile life is, how vulnerable we really are, I see that this beauty can be distilled to a few commitments.

Adams emphasized throughout his writings that our beliefs aren't anywhere near as important as our commitments. This is good news for folks who squirm when asked to recite their religious beliefs, because you can say, “well, what's really important to me are my commitments, and these are what they are . . .” It's a way of claiming that actions speak louder than words, which is essentially what liberal religion has tried to do – to enable us to put stock in the lives we lead, not in the dogma we profess.

Of course serving the wellbeing of my family is my first commitment, but if I stopped there, what would I be teaching my children? That my faith is limited to serving the God of Fear, that we are put on this earth to look after two things: me and mine. This faith should not be mine, as popular as it is these days. Here's an important distinction: the knowledge of vulnerability is not meant to inspire fear. The paradox is *we embrace our vulnerability to find our courage*.

Courage isn't the absence of fear, it's walking through our fear. It takes courage to move beyond the me and mine attitude. But I know God wants me to. To make my life beautiful means to see the vulnerability in everyone, in every living thing. One of the first things we did after the storm the next morning was to hang our humming bird feeder back up, knowing their need, their vulnerability. All their food got blown to bits! And to see those birds come was a thing of beauty, a small way to return to order.

This church is in the process of confirming how important it is to find the courage to move beyond me and mine, and to make it easier to do so. I caught wind of a recent conversation the Communications Task Force just had. Neighborhood Church is tinkering with our messaging, so we can be more effective in relaying our good news. Our good news is that we're the church of the open mind and the open heart. First, we begin with opening our minds and hearts to our own spiritual development. We discover this leads to opening our hearts to our larger community, well beyond me and mine, to caring for others in our church, our local community, our world. Think of these as concentric circles, like rings in a tree trunk. The idea here is to enlarge oneself. If you stayed in the smallest circle of me and mine, a sapling you would remain.

To open our hearts and minds to our neighbors of our world town, to all living things, is to make your life beautiful, to magnify your life in ways that are healthy and noble.

As a religious liberal I don't feel I need a savior, I don't identify with the hero in the Christian story, but I recognize my vulnerability in this life and my need for salvation. My family may be my first beloved community, but I make my life beautiful when my beloved community expands – to friends, to acquaintances, to strangers.

I don't believe in the Christ, but I do take comfort in worldly salvation. My second commitment after my family attempts to meet this need for worldly salvation, and it was also described well in the book, *Cutting for Stone*, again by one of the nuns. This nun, known as Matron, runs a hospital in Ethiopia, not long after WW2. She is exclaiming in exasperation to a missionary benefactor that the Ethiopian people are no more in need of salvation than this benefactor's fellow church members in Houston, TX. Here's the scene:

"But Matron," Mr. Harris says, "the priesthood here is almost illiterate – your watchman doesn't understand the litany that he recites because it is in Geez, which no one speaks. If he holds to the Monophysite doctrine that Christ had only a divine nature, not a human one, then –"

"Stop! Mr. Harris, do stop," Matron said, covering her ears. "Oh, how you vex me." She came around the table, and Harris drew back as if he worried that she might box his ears. But Matron walked to the window.

"When you look around Addis and see children barefoot and shivering in the rain, when you see lepers begging for their next morsel, does any of that Monophysitic nonsense matter the least bit?"

Matron leaned her head on the windowpane.

"God will judge us, Mr. Harris, by what we did to relieve the suffering of our fellow human beings. I don't think God cares what doctrine we embrace."

While my suffering over the risks of love is very real to me, I recognize there are forms of suffering far more visceral. If only I have eyes to see, and ears to hear, if only I have the courage to acknowledge. You know, it's been over three years since the Great Recession commenced in 2008, and the suffering of economic hardship has become a new normal. There was a piece on 60 Minutes recently about homeless families living in Florida, children sharing their stories of living in a truck. One brave girl testified to her new normal, saying it wasn't so bad, that it was just life, and she wasn't ashamed.

I wish I could have told that girl that she was my teacher, that her positive attitude is a miracle, that her spirit gives me more hope for humanity than anything else. There are countless ways we can acknowledge the humanity of our fellow human beings, and attempt to relieve their suffering. But we have to commit ourselves to doing so. It's not enough to think, to wish, or to hope. We have to show up, we have to make decisions about how to commit our time and resources.

Maybe it starts this Christmas season. Maybe this is the year we tell our sister-in-law, you know what, I'm not comfortable honoring your gift request for the item on p. 17 of the J Crew Catalogue, size medium, color marshmallow. I'm going to give you an alternative gift, one that provides comfort and relief to people who need it most. Some of you are thinking, well it's too late for that, cyber Monday has come and gone and my Christmas shopping is done. So maybe next year, you write a letter to your whole family in September, and say, I'm committing myself to a different type of Christmas this year and I hope you'll join me.

Comfort is a spiritual ideal, and it's holy. To relieve the suffering of others, to comfort the afflicted is a religious aspiration worth committing to, and not just this time of year, but especially this time of year. The poem, *Mary*, by Philip Appleman that I read earlier asks us to consider what a miracle actually is. It's a miracle when people heal, and it's a miracle when people help people heal. It's like the line of an Ani

Difranco song, "God's work isn't done by God, it's done by people." It's a miracle when our commitments result in the healing and comfort of those who suffer.

I don't believe humanity is depraved, but I do see that we fail a lot. I say I am committed to relieving the suffering of others and yet I know I fail at it every day. Achieving worldly salvation of this sort reminds me of the ridiculous urban dictionary definition of bejesus: we know it and yet do not know it, we fear it and yet do not fear it. Relieving the suffering of others is so simple and yet it's hard to do. Every day I miss opportunities to do more. Even though I fail, it still gives me comfort to know I'm committed, that it's the right thing to aspire to.

In this dangerous world, this is the salvation, the comfort I cling to. I have to live with the fact that my children are growing up in world that is literally melting, melting at a rate even the scientists can't fathom. The winds are blowing harder, the fires are burning more trees, the rain is not falling right. I suffer with this knowledge. *But* I take comfort in my commitments, and that I teach my children there is nothing more important than kindness and caring beyond me and mine. I take comfort in knowing we have the power to create the Kingdom of God that Jesus spoke of again and again. I think there will come a time when I have to tell my son and daughter, no, we don't believe a miracle can fix this world. It's up to you.

My Christmas wish for you this year is to let this Advent be a dangerous one for you, let it be as dangerous as that windstorm, let it scare the bejesus out of you. If Jesus taught us anything, it's that love is never about playing it safe – to love means to suffer. May our faith, may our commitment, to tolerate this suffering rise to the occasion of our need to love. May we let our love make a big splash, that ripples out and out and out. Let us not play it safe, because the truth is life isn't safe, as the storms shall remind us. Let us take comfort: let us have the courage, the commitment, to be vulnerable.