

"An Abiding Presence"  
Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval  
Unitarian Church of Montpelier  
December 11, 2016

*The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Audio recordings of sermons can be found online at <http://ucmvt.org/worship/sermons/>.*

**Reading**

"Psalm 139-It's All Too Big" by Christine Robinson

You are closer to me than I am, God  
You shine through my chaos and confusion  
from my innermost self.  
You know my weak points and my hurt places,  
the habits I resort to and the goals that sustain me.  
You well up in me  
You hold me in the palm of your hand.

I can't quite grasp this-it's just too big.  
Understanding flits by in the corner of my mind  
and is quickly gone.

You're in all of this from the big bang to  
the outer edge of space and time.  
You are the seed at my center from my birth to now  
to my death and beyond.  
Deep in every growing bone, every forming love,  
every struggled thought.

There is nowhere that you that you are not.  
Search me, try me, purify me  
Lead me to the way of Oneness with you.

In a couple of weeks, we will celebrate the arrival of Christmas, a day marked by the Christian tradition to celebrate the birth of Jesus of Nazareth.

I want to acknowledge that in the last month or so in our worship services, we have been focusing on some heavy topics and emotions. In some ways, it has been a long Advent season. The Advent season in the Christian tradition lasts for the four Sundays leading up to Christmas. It is a time of waiting and hoping in prayerful expectation for the coming of the Messiah - the one sent by God to redeem the world.

While the Advent season doesn't officially shape how we structure our services here, I think the themes of the season find resonance as we hold a space of anticipation for the holidays that are coming, for the return of the light, for the new year.

We won't focus much at all on the context of the birth of Jesus during our Christmas Eve services, so I want to do that a little bit now as that context helps us reflect on the season of anticipation and darkness that we inhabit in this moment.

Jesus was born and lived his entire life during the reign of the Roman empire. At the time of his birth, Caesar Augustus was the emperor. Despite the official narrative of "Pax Romana," or Roman Peace, this was a time of brutal repression and oppression - the use of state-sanctioned violence to exert control, heavy taxation of subjugated territories, and slavery.

It is in this context that Mary and Joseph prepare for the arrival of their baby. They must go to Joseph's hometown to register to be counted in the census. According to the book of Matthew, almost as soon as Jesus is born, the family must flee from King Herod who is determined to kill the supposed "King of the Jews," and so they travel to Egypt to wait until it is safe to return.

Up to that point, the Jewish people had lived under the rule of empire for millennia and had survived and endured despite being forced into exile and facing religious persecution.

We cannot forget that it is in this context that the innocent baby is born in a manger. It is for this reason that the anticipation of the messiah, one who would usher in a new era of true peace, was so great.

So, while we sit with the darkness of winter, we can remind ourselves that the arrival of the one who was believed to be able to save humanity came at a time of great darkness.

In this season, we journey from darkness to light. We may feel impatient to get to the light. Yet, waiting often happens in times of darkness - times of uncertainty in which the present is unpredictable, and the future is yet unknown.

Many of you are on journeys of uncertainty right now.

Life is uncertain when your mind no longer remembers things the way they used to.

Life is uncertain when doctors can't determine what exactly is ailing you.

Life is uncertain when the social safety nets you depend on for basic health care needs and to put food on the table hang in the balance.

Life is uncertain when you don't have right documents to be in this country legally.

Life is uncertain when you grieve the loss of loved ones no matter how many weeks or months it's been.

When we are living with uncertainty, we often search out for some reassurance that we are held by something larger than ourselves. I know this has been true for me.

The summer that I served as a hospital chaplain I was living in Chicago near my parents. I faced many situations in the hospital of being called upon to provide a spiritual presence to people in times of uncertainty and loss.

About halfway through that summer, my mom called out of nowhere to say that something was wrong with my dad. She had called 9-1-1 and an ambulance was on the way. I rushed over to their house and found my parents in their living room with EMTs tending to my father. I rode in the ambulance to the hospital with him. They got him stabilized in the ER pretty quickly, and he was admitted so they could run some tests.

I was scared, of course. And, none of us could know exactly how it would all turn out. As a hospital chaplain, I had witnessed others turning to their faith and spiritual practices during these times. Some people would pull out a rosary or a bible. Many would ask that I pray with them. All were seeking some kind of reassurance that things would be okay.

In that moment, I needed that reassurance as well. And, I did have faith - not that "God" would make it all okay, but that moment by moment we could make it through.

In the end, the medical staff determined what was wrong and got him on a course of medication to address his ailment. He stayed overnight and went home the next day.

In moments of uncertainty, like that one, I have felt a need to place my trust in something. I must admit that I envy those who have a bedrock faith in a transcendent force many would call God, and especially of a God that is unwaveringly and constantly present. It is something I have been longing for in recent days.

The omnipresence of God is a characteristic of God found in every theistic religious tradition. God is everywhere. God is always present.

This is the character of God that is present in the book of Psalms. And, in our reading this morning, we hear of a God that "shines through chaos and confusion", who is in all of existence "from the big bang to the outer edge of space and time." God is in the universe writ large, in its long story across time and even across space. This God is also right here with us in our daily existence, in "every growing bone, every forming love, every struggled thought."

This ancient view of God is one still held by many people across traditions.

When I was taught about an omnipresent God as a child growing up in my parochial Catholic school, I remember the mental gymnastics my mind went through as I tried to make sense of this assertion. Was God really everywhere all the

time? Should I be reassured by that or troubled by that thought? I had lots of questions.

In our Unitarian Universalist tradition, similar notions of God exist. Our Universalist heritage, in particular, affirms that God is love and proclaims that God's love remains constant regardless of the ways we mess up or fail to extend that love to others.

My theology has changed and developed over time, incorporating beliefs and experiences of the divine as the inner light within each of us, as sacred mystery, and as an abiding loving presence available to us in each moment.

I recognize that this is a theologically diverse community. There are some of you who believe that divinity doesn't exist or is irrelevant and it is our human capacities that we ought to put our faith in. Some of you are willfully agnostic and say that we simply can't know the answer to any of these questions and we ought to just live in the mystery of it. Some of you may have a belief in some kind of transcendent divine force, though you may call it by many names. None of us is required to share a common belief about the divine to be a part of this community.

I bring us into this conversation and bring our focus to these questions because as people on a spiritual journey we are called into deep reflection about what sustains us and in what we can put our faith especially in dark and uncertain times.

I believe that the holy manifests as love. It is an animating force, present and available always. There is a holy presence called by many names that remains with us in times of struggle. It connects me to you and you to the person sitting next to you and to the person living in a town where the last factory shut down decades ago and is waiting for the jobs to return, to the person praying for the bombs to stop in Aleppo.

The presence of this mysterious force may not always seem apparent, and I call into question its constancy.

The theologian, Miguel de la Torre presents a slightly different take on divine presence that I find insightful. He says, "Messiahs don't show up once and for all. Instead, the presence of the divine invades the here and now so that we are not alone in the midst of suffering due to oppression."<sup>1</sup>

The presence of the divine invades the here and now. Now, the word "invade" here is pretty strong with its militaristic tone. For me, it is the idea that the presence of the divine interrupts the here and now that I find reassuring. That it is the in-breaking of the divine making its presence known that can call me back to what is true regardless of current realities.

The presence of the divine can take many forms as it breaks through to the here and now.

I had such an experience this past Monday. I joined the couple hundred people or so for the march down State Street to TD Bank in solidarity with the people of Standing Rock. As we marched at a gentle pace singing together, snow was falling. We gathered in a circle of prayer as Beverly Little Thunder, a member of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe and a resident of Vermont, led a pipe ceremony. She said that this was something she rarely does in public, but it felt fitting as the snow was falling that morning just as it would be in North Dakota. And, as she spoke I watched the snow drift gently down and fall on the pipe, and I looked at the faces of those gathered there with determination, hopefulness, and camaraderie. And, I felt the gentle presence of the sacred.

The divine, the holy, may not always feel present. Yet, I believe that the abiding presence of love is still at the ground of it all.

And, there are moments when the presence of the holy interrupts our day to day calling us to recognize it. In the smile of a child. In the weeping of a friend. In the hands of the one who serves food to the hungry. In the moonlit sky.

Wherever you are on this journey from darkness to light this season, I invite you to recognize the presence of the holy, the sacred, of abiding love. Let the holy, by

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<sup>1</sup> Miguel de la Torre, "Toward a Theology of Hopelessness," March 14, 2015, <http://ourlucha.wordpress.com/2015/03/14/toward-a-theology-of-hopelessness/>

whatever name you call it, interrupt the here and now so that you know that you are not alone.

I close with this version of the Lord's Prayer attributed to the New Zealand Prayer Book of the Anglican Church, translated from the original Maori:

Eternal Spirit, earth-maker, pain-bearer, life giver,  
source of all that is and that shall be,  
father and mother of us all,  
loving holy one in whom is heaven:

may it happen in the way it is good to you;  
may it happen on earth in the same way  
as it happens in spirit world.

With the bread we need for today, feed us.  
In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.  
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.  
From trials too great to endure, spare us.  
From the grip of all that is evil free us.

For you live in the glory of power that is love, now and forever,  
now and forever.

Amen.