

“Stillness in the Waiting”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
December 6, 2020

Reading

“Renunciation” by Jennifer Welwood¹

There will always be voices that promise you greatness and glory:
They call out from the worldly marketplace;
They call out from the spiritual marketplace;
They call out from the fill-your-holes-marketplace;
They call out from the bigger-better-more marketplace.
Do not buy their false promises, or purchase their ephemeral wares;
What fulfills for a moment is not worth the price of your soul.
There are heights that will lift you, but not when you try to ascend them;
There are powers that will fill you, but not when you make them your own.
There are treasures, and there are imitations of treasures.
If you have lost your true gold, at least turn away from the glitter.
Want only what is true.
This will lead you to the well of your deepest sorrows.
Follow that passageway, all the way down;
Become the dark emptiness of your absent core.
Be still. Don't measure the waiting.
Be still. Let the waiting become a fire.
Be still. Let the fire show you its secret heart:
A strand of clear light running through you.
Gather yourself there, and the luminous universe opens.
In that vast expanse, fathomless, infinite ocean of light,
Lose yourself, and find yourself, and become what you already are.

Sermon

Being still, as in without motion, is not something that comes naturally to me. I'm pretty sure I've inherited this trait from my mother. I tend towards needing to move

¹ <https://jenniferwelwood.com/poetry/renunciation/>. Printed with permission.

my body with some frequency and to generally being engaged with a lot of different activities. Usually, on the weekends one of the best things I can do for myself is to set aside 30 minutes of “unscheduled” time into my day to just sit and let go of to-do lists and chores around the house, as hard as it is.

In many ways, the pandemic has forced us into a kind of stillness whether that stillness feels natural or not. A stilling of travel to far away places. A stilling of visiting with friends and family outside our homes. A stilling of playdates and, for some of our children, leaving home to go to school. A stilling of in person holiday gatherings and parties.

This forced stillness has been hard for so many of us, and you may feel like you’re just waiting for it to be over. I know my own mind has been wandering into thinking about all the things I will do when this pandemic has passed. Oh, all the places I’ll go and people I’ll see.

This morning, we lit the Advent candles to honor the period of waiting in the Christian tradition that precedes Christmas. And, as it turns out, this season of waiting has many meanings this year.

There is the waiting that comes along with the anticipation of winter holidays to come, not only Christmas, but Hanukkah, Solstice, and Kwanzaa.

There is the waiting for this year, 2020, with all of its hardships to finally be over and fully in the past.

And, there is the waiting for the light at the end of this pandemic tunnel - waiting for safe and effective vaccines and a time when it will be safe to once again be in the presence of one another’s company.

All of this waiting can be challenging and uncomfortable, especially when so many things feel like they’re out of our control.

Yet, waiting is a natural and common part of our human existence. Expectant parents know of this waiting - whether it’s expecting the birth of a child, the adoption of a child, or the arrival of a child into their home for a temporary period of time. There is so much hope and anticipation in that period of waiting. Yes, it can be nerve-

wracking; sometimes there is disappointment along the way; and it can also be an exciting and joyful time.

We do not know much about what it was like for Mary and Joseph to await the birth of their son, Jesus, all those years ago. From biblical and historical accounts, we can piece together that this period of months was....well, awkward. Mary and Joseph were young and are set to be married. Then, Mary becomes pregnant but Joseph wasn't involved in that part of the story. An angel appears to Mary to tell her she is with child, and an angel also appears to Joseph to tell him not to leave Mary because this is a holy child. Then, Mary and Joseph are told they needed to return to the towns of their birth, so they can be counted in the census. They set out upon the road, Mary, practically about to give birth. I imagine that this waiting period for Mary and Joseph was quite challenging in a number of ways.

Of course, there is more to the story which we will enact during our pageant next Saturday, and I hope you will join us then.

Waiting isn't easy - whether it's anticipating the birth of a child or getting through an unprecedented pandemic — especially when the waiting is full of such uncertainty. And, right now, the waiting might feel empty without the social contact and activities you might normally be engaged in.

You might be tempted to fill up this time of waiting. Even in a pandemic, the consumerism that often accompanies the holiday season is still present. I know my email box and social media feed is filled with ads these days. And, it may be tempting to fill up the discomfort of this period of waiting with more stuff or to numb away the discomfort or to get busy for the sake of avoiding the empty feeling that might emerge when you're not busy.

In light of all this, stillness is an interesting and important theme for the month. What does it mean to be a people of stillness in this particular moment?

While we might initially equate stillness with absence or an emptiness, I think there is actually more to it. What if we think of stillness as a state of being rather than the taking away of what we could be doing?

In this kind of stillness, we find an inner quiet. A complete presence. A stillness that is focused and attuned.

In his meditation, “How Good to Center Down!,” the African American, Christian theologian Howard Thurman writes of this kind of waiting moment and how we listen to persistent questions: “What are we doing with our lives? What are the motives that order our days? What is the end of our doings? Where are we trying to go?” And, he says, “As we listen, floating up through all the jangling echoes of our turbulence, there is a sound of another kind —A deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear.”²

I believe it is this stillness of the heart that we are after and that can serve us in this waiting moment. A stillness of the heart that can lead to clarity.

There is another holiday coming up that may be less familiar to you that speaks to stillness. This coming Tuesday, December 8, is a Japanese Buddhist holiday called Bodhi Day. Bodhi Day celebrates Siddhartha Guatama’s attainment of enlightenment. The story goes that after years of wandering and searching for true meaning in life, the former prince came into a period of meditation beneath a bodhi tree (a variety of fig tree). In this period of stillness, he attained enlightenment. According to Rev. Earl Ikeda, resident minister of the New York Buddhist Church, “As [the Buddha] sat under a Bodhi tree, reaching down with his finger touching the earth, he awakened to an awesome awareness that everything in the entire universe is connected and removed himself from all the forms of anger, greed, and desire that cause suffering— and thus attained a state of perfect wisdom and compassion.”³

The Buddha would go on to teach for about 45 years founding communities of followers of the spiritual path that would come to be known as Buddhism.

In Buddhist practice, there is wisdom and freedom from suffering that can come from stillness. An awakening is possible in which we can know that everything is connected and true peace is possible.

² Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981), 28-29.

³ Reverend Earl Ikeda, “O Bodhi Tree, O Bodhi Tree,” *Tricycle*, December 9, 2019, <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/bodhi-day/>.

Even when our thoughts are swirling, or the world beyond us feels chaotic, there is an inner stillness, a stillness of the heart, a way of being in which we can find grounding and clarity.

No matter what religious holy days you may be celebrating this winter season, I think this stillness of heart is available to all of us in this waiting moment.

In our reading that I shared earlier, I love how Jennifer Welwood pairs stillness and waiting.

She writes: “Be still. Don’t measure the waiting.” That’s a tough one. I, for one, am counting the days until the new year and measuring the wait to Christmas one Advent calendar chocolate at a time. Yet, Welwood is pointing to the quality of stillness that isn’t concerned with time.

“Be still. Let the waiting become a fire.” Could there be something luminous in this waiting? Something to brighten the path ahead?

“Be still. Let the fire show you its secret heart: A strand of clear light running through you.”

What if, at the heart of the fire of this waiting, there is a light running through you?

In this season of lights and hope, of waiting and anticipating, may seek for stillness that brings clarity.

May you breathe through the waiting and the wishing.

May you find a stillness of heart that cannot be measured but that can light your way forward.

So may it be.