



A WORLD OF

Hope

ADVENT 2018



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The Advent season—the four Sundays before Christmas plus the intervening weeks—provides us with a special time to anticipate and prepare for the birth of the Christ child. We have daily opportunities to remember the profound gift of this holiday and its meaning for our lives.

With this booklet, we hope you will take a moment for prayer and reflection each day, remembering the divine presence that is born into every human being.

We have included stories and writings for each day of Advent from contemporary ministers and a few Unity legends. The entry for Christmas Eve can be read aloud as a meditation for a church service or family gathering. The booklet concludes with the twelve days of Christmas until Epiphany on January 6.

This year we also offer spiritual perspectives on depression and grief at the holidays, because so many have asked for support.

Wherever you are this holiday season and whatever is happening in your life, we wish for you an Advent season that renews and deepens your faith, peace, love, and joy, celebrating the presence of God in all things.

Your Friends in Unity

A WORLD OF *Hope*

Rev. Mark Fuss

Earlier this year, as spring made itself known, I had the joy of traveling with a small group of pilgrims to Assisi, Italy. Staying in a Franciscan convent, we walked daily the narrow and hilly streets of Assisi, following in the footsteps of St. Francis. The echoes of deep faith, selfless service, and abundant love were evident at every turn centuries after Francis walked the earth.

One morning as we gathered in the tiny Pilgrims Chapel, Sister Monica came to speak to our group. After sharing about the work the Franciscans do in the world, she paused for a moment.

“We live in uncertain times,” she said, “a world where people are hurting, the poor go hungry, and endless challenges arise. Competition is the order of the day. We, too, are in a competition—a competition of love and forgiveness. Who can love more? Who can forgive more? We are here to bring a world of hope.”

Time seemed to stand still as we all breathed in to the sacredness of the moment and the truth she had shared—a competition of love and forgiveness, bringing a world of hope.

During this Advent season, we, too, can be part of a competition. With our themes of faith, peace, love, and joy, we can ask:

Who can grow in faith more?

Who can share more peace?

Who can love more?

Who can bring more joy?

Together we can bring a world of hope. Merry Christmas.



Practicing Hope

Jolie Rundy

It seems to me that there is no such thing as “false hope.”

I know why people say, “I don’t want to get your hopes up.” They want to protect you from experiencing disappointments and failure.

I don’t see a problem with hope.

Hope is one of those practices that can alter everything.

Hope is all good.

Hope is one of those declarations that alters energy.

Energy is everything. I said that backwards: Everything is energy.

Hope for the best is affirmative and good and creative.

In the presence of hope, anything and everything is a real possibility.

Practicing hope is a holy union with God’s unlimited goodness.

So I say: I hope I make a difference. I hope you have peace today and beauty and love and joy and everything your heart desires.

I hope you know how beautiful you are, how magical and powerful and important you are, to everything and everyone.

I hope you remember to enjoy breathing, walking, sharing, loving, eating, listening, caring, praying, communing, hugging, kissing, being you. I hope you enjoy being you.

There is no one like you in all the world. You are unique!

I hope you know you are the light, and I hope you know that you make all the difference in the world.

I hope you know you are loved.

The Both/Ands of Christmastime

Jim Blake, Unity CEO

I wrote in the 2017 Advent booklet how special Christmastime is to me. How much I unapologetically love glitter and snowflakes, shimmering lights, and all things that sparkle, plus the endless supply of heartwarming, knot-in-my-throat Hallmark movies. Many of you connected with that sentiment—much to my delight.

I am also aware that our world has become increasingly complex these days. So much so, it can seem like overwhelming chaos. The widening inequities among our social classes, the never-ending list of social justice causes that need to be meaningfully addressed, and more divisiveness than ever, for every possible reason one can think of.

Some might ask, “Jim, how can you just ignore all of that and pen words about your ‘snow globe’ holiday scenes and get lost in your holiday spirit?”

My answer is this: It is precisely the holiday spirit that will help us overcome many of the problems we see in our world. For it is that very spirit that brings forth our generosity, compassion, and creativity.

It’s the feelings generated within each of us at the end of a Hallmark movie that make us want to be better human beings

and uplift, inspire, and raise one another’s station in this world.

That spirit calls us each to say, “Enough is enough! Can’t we all just do better and be better and see past our differences to what we have in common—which is that we are people?” We are all people with common and differing problems but also with families and many of the same needs that drive us.

May we use this time during the holidays to look directly at the seeming chaos and not ignore it, and also to know the human spirit that magically arises during this time of year—the holiday spirit—will someday overcome all that we see before us, just as it has for centuries.

With each passing season we move closer to a sustaining peace and oneness. May it be so.





Christmas: The Story of Us

Rev. Ed Townley

It seems totally appropriate that Christmas comes in the middle of the three holidays we celebrate as an eventful year comes to an end. Thanksgiving is a holiday of the present, as we center in gratitude for this year's bounty. We celebrate the new year six weeks later by looking forward to an exciting future, perhaps with a list of resolutions and new choices.

Christmas bridges both these energies, I think. Through its traditional music, customs, and events, it reminds us at an ever-deeper level of the spiritual journey that has guided us to this point. At a metaphysical level we are looking forward to and giving birth to a new dimension of Christ awareness that will transform our lives in days to come.

There have been years in my life in which my ego mind would insist that Christmas was an unnecessary extravagance that I couldn't afford and didn't need anyway. I suspect we've all gone through years like that. Looking back we can often realize that those Christmases were among the most memorable of all. How can that be?

In Unity we turn to the overall flow of the Bible, not only for details about the observance of Christmas itself but to understand the long, challenging journey that brought us to the moment of birth. After all, the Bible is more than a history of the Hebrew people; it is also our own spiritual journal—the story of the individual and collective growth in awareness that brings us, year after year, to the dawn of a new Christmas.

Just think for a moment of the characters we encounter in the magical, mystical story of the first Christmas. They're a motley crew—men and women, rich and poor, Jews and Arabs, even two-legged and four-legged if we include—as we should—the sentient beings in the stable. The one thing they have in common is that each is stretched far outside their comfort zones by the roles they are called to play.

Mary is forced to ride a donkey in the ninth month of her pregnancy, which itself was an enormous leap of faith beyond the comfort zone of a young Jewish girl. Joseph is blindly obedient to forces he doesn't understand, risking the shame of marrying a woman pregnant with a child not his. The shepherds are asked to walk off their jobs, risking their very livelihood, to go see a babe in a manger. Shepherds have been fired for less!

The Magi—wealthy, educated, refined—are guided to follow a mysterious star for miles across the desert to honor a spiritual birth within a people of whom they are not a part. Even the angels probably had better things to do than hover around singing carols to a bunch of bewildered shepherds.

Can such a dramatic new realization really occur in such a squalid setting? Shouldn't we try to find someplace more impressive? Nope. Angels from on high appear above us, singing not about immediate locations or problems, but about the cosmic dimension that is truly at the heart of Christmas—glory, peace, and goodwill.

These figures live within us, whether we observe Christmas or not. It has an overwhelming energy of spiritual birth and new possibilities in each of us individually and in our collective consciousness. We can struggle to ignore or control it, or we can surrender to its magic. The four weeks of Advent are intended to help us make that choice.

Hope

Rev. Toni Stephens Coleman

Ah, Hope—
Are you planted in my genes somewhere?
You push me into unknown places
Give me discovery and strides
I never would have taken.

Ah, Hope—
Are you Thought? Emotion? Impulse?
From where do you come
That you cause me to do anyway
What I want to do but don't always know?

Ah, Hope—
Are you what seeds my life action
To stretch and expand to become
More aware, more alive, more
That can be desired and Be More Me?

Ah, Hope—
When you are pushed down
When you are trod upon
You are strengthened and push back
Between the cracks to find a way,
To make a way, to be a way—
To be—Hope.



Overcoming Christmas Depression

Rev. Kelly Isola

The usual chatter we experience at Christmastime is centered on gift-giving, parties, shopping, decorating, children, Santa Claus, joy, laughter, and general holiday merrymaking.

Simultaneously, for millions of others, there is another experience happening, oftentimes silently: depression. Yet because of the seemingly polar opposite feelings to the “usual” Christmas spirit, you may not hear from those who are depressed. More often than not it is shame and judgment carried in silence.

As the poet Emily Dickinson described it, “It’s like a funeral in the brain,” and frankly, who really wants to talk about depression during the holidays? It’s supposed to be a time of life, enthusiasm, peace, hope, and faith, right?

Ironically, Christmas is the quintessential archetype of light, yet it takes place during the darkest time of the year for half the world. The shadow side of this season of light and hope is despair

and loneliness. Many people fall in to that abyss of depression. Regardless of whether it is seasonal, situational, or clinical, the experience is one of disconnection from all of life. You identify as the “outsider,” not belonging anywhere. The brain says you “should” feel differently, but you don’t. There is nothing bleaker than being alone “in the cold,” left out, hungry, and lost in the dark, while you look around and see others are gathered around the fire—the flames of life—sharing happiness, family, joy, peace, and friendship.

If we are feeling like an outsider, our minds and bodies fall into despair. We can “freeze to death” during this season of warmth. For some the depression comes from deep grief or some kind of loss, for others it is a long-standing medical illness, and for others it is simply the body and mind responding to fewer hours of sunlight each day.

Whatever the label, there is a yearning for deep closeness, for someone to shine a light on what is good and true, to heal the sense of worthlessness or inadequacy that comes with depression. Humans very often simply despair and give up when they feel permanently left out in the cold and dark, rather than risk speaking up. *Please do not do that.*

Is it any wonder that light has come to mean so much to us? Light is deep within us as the symbol of what is most sacred, divine, and alive. If you or someone you know is suffering from depression, then be the light for them. If medical attention is warranted, pick up the phone and make it happen for the person. Oftentimes there is little to be said; rather, you can simply be a presence of light and love, which is the most healing thing you can do.

Here are a few more things to support you during the holidays if you find yourself embodying the archetype of the outsider:

- Observe your activity on social media, and you might discover that if you engage with it less often, it will mean more life and light for you. We have a habit of judging our insides by someone else’s outsides, and social media exacerbates that. This kind of comparison is almost always skewed and tends to trigger our own wounds about unworthiness.
- Notice how much time you are devoting to self-care. Unfortunately, it can be the first thing we abandon because it is a very busy time of year, yet self-care is needed more than ever. Being so busy oftentimes leads to stress, anxiety, and exhaustion, which in turn expands the depression. Exercise, yoga, healthy eating and sleeping habits, meditation, and whatever practices are a part of your self-care are necessary for living in the warmth of this season of light.
- Finally, be mindful of what you do have to be thankful for—getting time off work, the family member who cooks your favorite traditional foods, sitting quietly listening to Christmas songs, or even just the idea of the year ending and the promise of a new one to start fresh—anything, no matter how small, to support you in not feeling like the outsider. Don’t forget that holidays do end, and more important, you are not alone. You belong to an assembly of the courageous.

Let’s expand our light every day, in ever-increasing circles and in ever-increasing ways, so that the true meaning of Christmas is lived out through the divine light of our humanity with wisdom, compassion, and great joy. *You* are the reason for the season!