

A Jesus Worth Waiting For
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Meditation and Prayer

The Water Protectors at Standing Rock have called for a national Interfaith Day of Prayer today, December 4, to support them in their standing against the Dakota Access Pipeline, their standing to protect their water and to protect our planet from the excesses of fossil fuels. In this spirit my meditation and prayer today:

Let us join in a time of meditation, prayer, and then shared silence...

Here in this ancient house of meeting and worship, may we hear the wisdom of the ages speaking in our hearts, speaking to our minds...

Wisdom which calls us to help one another...

Wisdom which calls us to serve life...

Wisdom which calls us to protect our living planet which sustains and nourishes us and all life...

And so in this spirit we pray...

Pray for and with those standing to protect the water of Standing Rock...

Pray for wisdom among our political and business leaders that they might turn away from the continued use of oil and coal and gas, which threatens our lives and all life on our Earth home...

Pray for our own strength to do what we can to help support the sustainable flourishing of life on our Earth home...

Readings

“The Sacred Hoop” by Black Elk (1863-1950)

Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell. And I understood more than I saw. For I was seeing in the sacred manner the shape of all things of the spirit. And the shapes as they must live together like one being.

And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that make one circle, wide as daylight and starlight; and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father.

And I saw that it was holy.

¹⁻⁵ A green Shoot will sprout from Jesse's stump,
from his roots a budding Branch.
The life-giving Spirit of GOD will hover over him,
the Spirit that brings wisdom and understanding,
The Spirit that gives direction and builds strength,
the Spirit that instills knowledge and Fear-of-GOD.
Fear-of-GOD
will be all his joy and delight.
He won't judge by appearances,
won't decide on the basis of hearsay.
He'll judge the needy by what is right,
render decisions on earth's poor with justice.
His words will bring everyone to awed attention.
A mere breath from his lips will topple the wicked.
Each morning he'll pull on sturdy work clothes and boots,
and build righteousness and faithfulness in the land.

⁶⁻⁹ The wolf will romp with the lamb,
the leopard sleep with the kid.
Calf and lion will eat from the same trough,
and a little child will tend them.
Cow and bear will graze the same pasture,
their calves and cubs grow up together,
and the lion eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child will crawl over rattlesnake dens,
the toddler stick his hand down the hole of a serpent.
Neither animal nor human will hurt or kill
on my holy mountain.
The whole earth will be brimming with knowing God-Alive,
a living knowledge of God ocean-deep, ocean-wide.

Sermon

For Christians, Advent is a time of waiting for the birth of Jesus the Christ, the one anointed by God.

Well, this year I've been asking myself this question: What sort of Jesus is a Jesus worth waiting for?

Do we have a choice, you might ask?

Well, we sort of do! The fact is that over the centuries right up until today there have been many understandings of just who Jesus was and why he was (to say the least) pretty important:

King... savior... Son of God... second person of the Trinity... social revolutionary... healer... miracle worker... teacher of ethical living... teacher of perennial wisdom...

Do we need to choose? Or is it possible we can understand Jesus as in some sense all of the above? Certainly as Unitarian Universalists we are free to make our choices, or to dismiss the importance of Jesus altogether.

In any case, I can of course only speak for myself.

And in the end I answer my question simply: For me, a Jesus worth waiting for is the Jesus who reminds us of who we are and who we can be and how we can be.

I will unpack this.

First, think of Jesus' birth in the stable.

There are two birth stories, as you know, one in the Gospel of Luke, and one in Matthew. Easy enough to forget when each year we see nativity arrangements that put the shepherds in the same scene with the three wise men. But the shepherds are from Luke's telling and the three wise men from Matthew's telling... and never the twain shall meet... except in popular imagination and on the front lawns of churches.

Which actually is okay.

In any case, here are a couple of thoughts that come to me as I reflect on these birth stories, assuming all the way through that one way of understanding the birth of Jesus is as symbolic of the birth or rebirth of love.

So then, if it is a manifestation of love born in that stable, what does it tell us that love was born in such humble circumstances? Born, only stretching the story slightly, to parents we could consider refugees or homeless (at least inn-less), and with no very clear idea who the baby's father was (so, not only humble, but maybe somewhat disreputable by ordinary social conventions).

Yet, even so... even so... or maybe especially so: *love* born! Love all that matters, love more important than the circumstances of the parents, than the lack of grandeur in the surroundings, love most important of all, love maybe even *more* apparent, shining even more brightly in humble circumstances.

And if it is a manifestation of love born in that stable, what does it tell us that wise men from afar, kings in some tellings, came to worship a tiny baby? What does it tell us about what really matters, and what doesn't matter much at all? All the finery of the three kings bringing their expensive gifts... as nothing compared with the love.

And if it is a manifestation of love born in that stable, what does it tell us that this baby and his parents were in great danger, as the story in Matthew recounts: this baby born in the time of King Herod, who was so cruel and so afraid for his own power that he had all the baby boys of the kingdom killed so that he would be sure (or so he thought) to kill the one who might, just might threaten his reign? What *does* this tell us about the relative power of violence and hate and fear on the one hand and love on the other? (And can we think of any contemporary examples....?)

So – Jesus the baby, symbolic of the birth and re-birth of love, love more important than riches, love more powerful than cruelty and violence. Surely worth waiting for!

Then we have stories of Jesus the man, a living exemplar of love.
And how did he live?

First and perhaps foremost, all the Gospels agree that Jesus was a healer, and that his healing was *one at a time*, one on one... through touch, through presence.

Jesus gave of himself, over and over again, not to everyone all at once, but to this person, then the next, then the next.

What a critically important reminder that we, too, do not have to heal all the world all at once: Just this person in front of us can be helped in some measure simply by our presence, our care, our love, our good cheer or friendly word. Might be our child, sister, brother, parent; might be a friend; might be a stranger who confides in us as we sit on the Red Line commuting to Boston, might be the clerk in the store, might be someone who suddenly needs us when threatened.

One at a time.

This, then, also a Jesus worth waiting for.

Further, throughout the gospels we are told that Jesus healed and helped and consorted with the marginalized of his day: prostitutes, the poorest of the poor, lepers, tax collectors. *All* welcome at his table, all welcome in his life, all welcome to walk by his side.

This too, now more than ever, the example, the reminder we need, this too a Jesus worth waiting for, encouraging us to ask: Who among the marginalized and scorned might we walk alongside?

Put this all together and we begin to see, as I've often preached, how we can understand the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven of which Jesus frequently spoke.

The Kingdom, or the Reign of God (as some contemporary translations put it) simply as the realm we enter every time we are present for another, every time we utter a kind word, every time we welcome a stranger, every time we bring understanding of those who are different from ourselves... in short, every time we share love, thereby manifesting ourselves as love.

To put this yet another way, the Jesus worth waiting for in my book is the *wisdom* Jesus, the Jesus who didn't just talk wisdom but walked it, demonstrating over and over the wisdom teaching of the shedding of the isolated self of ego, revealing the higher, transcendent Self of love.

Not a grand, sky opening, heavenly choirs singing matter. Again, please notice this, I need to say it again: Jesus healed and helped one person at a time.

This is so striking to me, yet somehow all too easy to miss – particularly if we have come to think of Jesus as the one who came to save *all* of humanity, the whole world, whatever that would mean. But the Gospels tell us that whatever that might mean, it surely means healing and helping one person at a time, over and over, but just one person at a time.

And this we can each do too!

All of which thus far leads me to say as I said at the outset:

For me, a Jesus worth waiting for is the Jesus who reminds us of who we are and who we can be and how we can be.

In other words, a Jesus worth waiting for just might be... *us*... us at our best, us when we live from our heart's compassion, us when we are present for this person and the next... and the next...

Writer Richard Rodriguez recounts time he spent with Mother Theresa in 1987 at San Quentin Prison (he is quick to add, not as prisoners). Speaking to a group of prisoners on death row, Mother Theresa said this: “If you want to see the face of God, look at the prisoner standing next to you.” This of course meant looking at the face of a murderer and seeing the face of God.

And in case anyone doubted her meaning, she added, “I see the face of God when I look at you.”

She could have been quoting the Quran, where it is written: “Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God”.

Or Walt Whitman:

I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four,
and each moment then,
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face
in the glass...

And all of this, whether Jesus or Mother Theresa or the Quran or Walt Whitman, seems to me not unlike the spirit of the words we heard from Black Elk, who said that “seeing in the sacred manner the shape of all things of the spirit... as they must live together like one being... all the children of one mother and one father.”

Also not unlike the hopeful prophetic spirit of Isaiah, imagining wolf and lamb, cow and bear, lion and ox getting along just fine... “The whole earth... brimming with knowing God-Alive, a living knowledge of God ocean-deep, ocean-wide.”

Finally, then, on this Interfaith Day of Prayer in solidarity with the people at Standing Rock, we could ask whether a Jesus worth waiting for would be praying with and standing with the people at Standing Rock?

Well, opinions might differ on this, depending on what one thinks of the Dakota Access Pipeline.

What I believe we *can* say for certain is that a Jesus worth waiting for would see the face of God in the face of every member of the Standing Rock Nation, in the face of every person standing with the Water Protectors at Standing Rock, and *also* in the faces of the pipeline construction workers, *also* in the faces of the executives leading the Dakota Access Pipeline, *also* in the faces of each politician on both sides of the pipeline question.

But seeing God in the face of each person on every side of every issue doesn’t mean that a Jesus worth waiting for wouldn’t at the same time stand on a particular side of a picket line or a border crossing or a detention center... protecting the powerless, helping the helpless, healing those (one at a time) in need of healing.

Just as we can choose to do.

Actually then, no need to wait... for somebody or some thing or for just the right words... no need to wait... to remember who we are and who we can be and how we can be.

So may it be.