

**Hope in the Dark**  
**Two Rivers Unitarian Universalist**  
**Worship Service: December 19, 2010**

**First Reading “In Praise of Winter” by Greta Crosby**

Let us not wish away the winter.

It is a season in itself, not simply the way to spring.

When trees rest, growing no leaves, gathering no light, they let in sky and trace themselves delicately against dawns and sunsets.

The clarity and brilliance of the winter sky delight.

The loom of fog softens edges, lulls the eyes and ears of the quiet, awakens by risk the unquiet.

A low dark sky can snow, emblem of individuality, liberality, and aggregate power.

Snow invites to contemplation, and to sport.

Winter is a table set with ice and starlight.

Winter dark tends to warm light, fire and candle;

winter cold to hugs and huddles;

winter want to gifts and sharing;

winter danger to visions, plans, and common endeavoring – and the zest of narrow escapes; winter tedium to merrymaking.

Let us therefore praise winter, rich in beauty, challenge, and pregnant negativities.

**Second Reading “Hope in the Dark” by Rebecca Solnit from *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*.**

On January 18, 1915, six months into the First World War, Virginia Woolf wrote in her journal, ‘The future is dark, which is on the whole, the best thing the future can be, I think.’ Dark, she seems to be saying, as in inscrutable, not as in terrible. We often mistake the one for the other.

There are times when it seems as though not only the future but the present is dark: few recognize what a radically transformed world we live in. Who, a few decades ago, could have imagined a world in which the Soviet Union had vanished, and the Internet had arrived? Who then dreamed that the political prisoner Nelson Mandela would become president of a transformed South Africa? Who, four decades ago, could have conceived of the changed status of all who are non-white, non-male, or non-straight?

We adjust to changes without measuring them, we forget how much the culture has changed. Twenty-five years ago, a million people gathered in New York City’s Central Park to demand a nuclear freeze. They didn’t get it. The freeze movement was full of people who believed they’d realize their goal in a few years and then go home. They were motivated by a story line in which the world would be made safe – safe for, among other things, going home from activism. It’s always too soon to go home. And it’s always too soon to calculate effect.

Causes and effects assume history marches forward, but history is not an army. It is a crab scuttling sideways, a drip of soft water wearing away stone, an earthquake breaking centuries of tension.

Sometimes one person inspires a movement, or her words do decades later; sometimes a few passionate people change the world; sometimes they start a mass movement and millions do; sometimes those millions are stirred by the same outrage or the same ideal and change comes upon us like a change of weather.

All that these transformations have in common is that they begin in the imagination, in hope. To hope is to gamble. It’s to bet on the future, on your desires, on the possibility that an open heart and uncertainty are better than gloom and safety. To hope is dangerous, and yet it is the opposite of fear, for to live is to risk.

I say all this to you because hope is not like a lottery ticket that you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. I say this because hope is an axe you break down doors with in an emergency; because hope should shove you out the door, because it will take everything you have to steer the future away from endless war, from the annihilation of the earth's treasures and the grinding down of the poor and marginal.

Hope just means another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed. Hope calls for action; action is impossible without hope...To hope is to give yourself to the future, and that commitment to the future makes the present inhabitable...Anything could happen, and whether we act or not has everything to do with it....The future is dark, with a darkness as much of the womb as of the grave.

### **Sermon: Hope in the Dark – By Gretchen Haley**

A couple years back, a friend and I were sitting together during a break from a seminar we were taking on Exodus. We got to talking about the black church. He told me about things he wished were different about what he considers his lifelong religious home. And in turn, I confessed my own frustration at the theology so popular amongst people of color. What I described as this sense that we humans are powerless and we must wait for God to save us. I told him, it just seems to reinforce their powerlessness. I mean, why do they just accept that?

He looked at me in my privilege, and gently, lovingly even – offered this wisdom: When you can't imagine anything in this world that's gonna make things better, you better start hoping there's something other than this world that could.

I got it.

In the darkness of our days, we all go searching for a savior. *All* of us.

It's not just the black church. Or the Pentecostals, or the Church of Latter Day Saints. We all do. Religious liberals might think we are exempt from such business, but when things get rough, we can be the most apt. Though we may call it something else; we all hold out for a hero.

Someone to sweep in and solve what feels unsolvable. Someone to lead us to the mountain top. Someone to make sense of losses and failures. Make us feel we are really as worthy as we say we are. As precious and worthy.

Sometimes being aware of all the world's brokenness, all the human ways we mess with each other, with ourselves – it just gets to be too much.

Another friend gets news of a cancer diagnosis, and the unemployment rate climbs another percentage point. The North and South Koreans seemed destined to bring us all towards nuclear annihilation. The rescue efforts in Haiti bring a Cholera epidemic. Old family grudges keep us alone over the holiday. The Denver winter weather hits 70 degrees, while world leaders skip out on the annual conference on climate change.

It's too much.

And whether we are talking about the state of the world, or the struggles within my family, or my friends – at a certain point, I confess I do what most of us do to cope: I try not to think about it. I put it away.

When the world overwhelms, how can we not retreat? Whether to the distanced objectivity of rational analysis, or to the isolated chambers of our warm houses, and our prized individualism, it seems to me perfectly logical that we'd all duck for cover. We keep our conversations light, on the surface. We fiddle with our blackberries and i-pads and download another app.

To keep on living in the midst of all that breaks our hearts, we hide our eyes, and tuck in our hearts, and in the private moments of our days, we clutch desperately to the hope of some unforeseeable miracle.

Maybe some great scientific discovery will finally prove all that we believe to be true in irrefutable scientific terms. Or someone will finally find a way to cure all diseases, stop aging, end suffering.

Maybe the miracle will come when we have read all the books in our library. Our intellect and reason will save us. Maybe we will can argue our ways towards world peace.

Or maybe we don't know exactly where it will happen, or how. And this great unknown, this hope for some great impossible transformation, makes us all the more prone to pretend that there is enough light for us all, that the sun has returned even while it remains the longest night.

No. Religious liberals are not exempt from messianic thinking. We may do it differently than our fundamentalist friends, but we're just as prone.

Remember, a few years ago, in the dark days of the Iraq war – before the surge? The dark days of cowboy diplomacy. Staring down photos of prisoners tortured and humiliated. Remember that creeping feeling of despair, watching, everyone – everywhere, our leaders, our friends and neighbors, our relatives, so easily confusing justice with vengeance.

Regardless of your political leanings, religious liberals everywhere recall the early years of this decade as dismal, and dark. Once an idealist, the pull of cynicism, the pull of helplessness, the pull of retreat. If you're like me, it got to you. Sucked you in.

Who can turn things around? We wondered, from the dark caves of our hearts: Can anyone?

We should have known better, but when this young, charismatic, intelligent bi-racial man of African descent came along, and wanted to run for President – many of us thought we'd struck gold.

Though the reality of these last two years of governing may have made you forget what that felt like, let me remind you – even for skeptics, that inauguration night was a night of hope. In this complex and crazy world, we felt hopeful, and renewed. That there is someone out there who can see clearly, who can call us to a brighter future, remind us of who we were always meant to be. *Yes we can.*

Remember? That sense of pride. The sense of redemption, for a country so encumbered by racism, to elect a person of color, a person from humble beginnings, to its highest office. Surely, we were saved.

These aren't new feelings. These hopes for a wise leader, a savior. It is a human tale. Repeated over and over, across history.

In the ancient Roman world, emperors were often imagined as “Saviors” of humanity. Their people held the great hope that these men might deliver them from any evil that threatened their well-being.<sup>1</sup>

And living in the middle of that Roman empire, the long-suffering and perpetually occupied Judeans, scattered across Palestine, and Egypt, and other parts of the ancient near east. These Judeans too held out hope for a savior. A savior who would restore them to their homeland, return security, remind them of their potential, their worthiness.

Talk about a shared sense of powerlessness. Things hadn't been right for centuries. About five hundred years before, they'd been marched out of their lands – the lands their faith told them was given to them by their God. Even when some were able to return, they remained under foreign rule. Their great temple had been destroyed, more than once. Reading their history, you start to realize that this is a people who had more often been out of sorts than settled. More often longing for their land than living in it. I mean, if anyone deserved the right to escapism – the ancient Jews are right up there. Centuries of homelessness, of loss, of despair.

And so, with each turn in the darkness, they placed their hopes in a great and righteous savior, yet to come. They turned to the words of ancient prophets, calling for *Emmanuel* - God with us. A political hero, to return to us to political power. An anointed one, a *messiah*, who could finally make things right.

Sometime in the last couple centuries before the Common Era, things really started to heat up. Taxes were at an all-time high. But that wasn't the worst of it. No, what pushed their anger over the edge was a matter of the spirit. Their oppressors outlawed their religion and required worshipping of pagan gods. This was the last straw.

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<sup>1</sup> To refresh my memory on the history of the ancient near east, I turned primarily to Bart Ehrman's textbook, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (2007).

Secret meetings led to silent, and then not-so-silent protests. Self-styled prophets began proclaiming the coming change on that ancient form of cable news, the street corner.

A family of priests led a successful rebellion and for a period of 80 years, they restored a sovereign Jewish state. This time of hope is commemorated each year in the festival we know as Hanukah.

Unfortunately, it didn't last. In 63 BCE, the Roman general Pompey conquered them, and once again, they found themselves an occupied people. The voices of those prophets grew louder, more insistent. The great change is coming. The apocalypse is near.

Apocalypse: from the Greek *apocalypsis*, meaning, an "unveiling" or a "revealing." In a single defining moment, the prophets proclaimed, the world would be made anew. They would be restored, healed, made whole. And yet, this restoration was not in their own hands, but God's. For their suffering to end, these apocalyptic prophets declared, the Jewish people must just remain faithful, and await God's intervention. Like my friend had reminded me, for a people who could imagine no earthly way for things to get better, their best hope lay in a power other than anything they could possibly imagine.

And from this thinking, from this context, comes the story of a single man, messenger of God, or God him (or her) self. The story of a child who might rescue the masses, one life lived so that all may live.

When the present and future darkness overcome us, we can't help ourselves. It is a human instinct. Whether we are speaking of the hope we place today in our democratically elected leaders, or the hope ancient Palestinians placed in the coming King, the hope we place in scientific discovery, or in rationalist arguments, all these stories, all these urges remind us of our tendency to seek solace in the acts of some great individual, somewhere else, not here.

To look to the future for some miraculous restoration. To a magical moment of transformation that can come upon us all, restoring unity, and justice, for all. And the darker the day, the more we place our hope in a brighter future; the longer the night, the more we yearn for the sun.

In his book *Taking Flight*, Anthony de Mello tells the story of a great guru and her disciples.

"One day, with her disciples gathered all around her, she asked them how they could tell when the night had ended, and the day begun.

One said, 'When you see an animal in the distance, and can tell whether it is a cow or a horse.'

'No,' said the Guru.

'When you can look at a tree in the distance, and tell if it is a neem tree, or a mango tree,' another one tried.

'No,' said the Guru.

'Well, then, what is it?' asked her disciples.

The guru looked at them all before her, pausing a moment to look into each of their eyes. And then she answered:

'When you look into the face of any man, and recognize your brother in him. When you look into the face of any woman and recognize in her your sister. If you cannot do this, no matter what time it is by the sun, it is still night.'

How do we know if where we live now, it is still night? If in our times, if the day has yet begun? The Guru says, it is night when we *recognize* – in the face of any other person, every other person – to recognize there our brother. Our sister.

Note she says "recognize," rather than "see." In Greek drama, the word "recognition" points to a certain kind of scene, standard to many of their ancient plays. The *anagnorisis*. The recognition scene.

It is usually toward the end of the play, and it is usually involves one character revealing themselves to another. A kind of inter-personal apocalypse, I suppose. Perhaps they had been there all along, but hidden. Perhaps they had not been hidden, but time had passed since they'd last seen each other, and they did not realize that the person before them is someone they love. Or perhaps it is a moment where finally the two characters see into one another for their deeper truths.

In any case, it is always transformative, and almost always leads the protagonist towards action.

The *anagnorisis*, the recognition scene. Now that I've told you about it, you should look for it in contemporary dramatic pieces. You'll see it everywhere. Because it's a very human scene to play. It's a very true scene to play. Two people seeing one another for who they really are, and from that recognition, being transformed, and taking action.

In the darkness of our days, our survival depends on our capacity to play this scene. The return of the sun depends on our capacity to live out the recognition scene, over and over.

We are holding out for a hero, but we've still got it all wrong.

Our real hope, our real salvation, the real light of the world – resides not in the actions of some super-human savior and his or her singular glorious sacrifice, nor in the longstanding Unitarian fallacy of individual self-improvement and rational self-reliance – any more than the ancient Jews were saved by the coming of a new King to overthrow their foreign oppressors.

Our real hope resides not in the coming of a single anointed one, but in our recognition of the ways we are *all* anointed. The ways we have all been commissioned. The ways we are *all* the messiah. And our charge?

Our charge is to see. No, our charge is to *recognize* one another. To look up, and out. To raise our eyes, peering across the room, across town, across the county, the state, the country, the world, and to play that recognition scene. To recognize in each person – your spouse, your relative, your friend, your adversary, a piece of the holy, a reflection of the divine.

My daughter (who's five) asked me yesterday: do superheroes exist in this world? I told her no. They are pretend.

Because finally - there are no heroes here. Just as there are no villains. There's just us. Sisters and brothers. Recognizing one another, again and again, for who we are: One.

Bringing the light that is already here, the miracle that has already occurred, that is already present. Knowing together, the joy, the hope of the world to one another, moment by moment, hour by hour, day by day. Knowing together, how we are one.

Now. Our scenes of recognition do not instantaneously end the darkness. As Rebecca Solnit says: History is not an army, it is a crab scuttling sideways. A drip of soft water, wearing away stone. The anagnorisis cannot stop the next cancer diagnosis, or the sudden heart attack, no matter how often or how well it is played.

But it can bring light to those dark moments, reminders of the relentless presence of joy. And I have to believe that these scenes of recognition are the building blocks for yesterday's Senate decision to repeal the life-negating Don't Ask Don't Tell policy. That happened because enough people started to recognize themselves, recognize their family in people they had previously thought of as strangers, as others.

So let us play the scene. More often, in more ways. Let us see. Let us recognize. And let the day come! Let it be revealed! Let us all be revealed.

And as we play this recognition scene, the anagnorisis – over and over. Let us be changed. Let us be transformed. And from this transformation, let us act.

I put my hope here. That you'll recognize me. That you'll peer across at that person that seems so strange and different and frightening, and you'll recognize there, your family. Yourself. The holy. The sacred.

This is the hope that will change the world. This is the axe we'll use to break down doors with. The axe we'll all need to keep on going. The feeling deep within that another world might be possible. Not guaranteed. Not promised. But possible.

To hope in the dark – is to follow that ancient wisdom, affirmed across religions and cultures. Love your neighbor, as yourself. And yes, everyone is your neighbor: Everyone. Just, love. Be transformed by the power of love. The transformative power of recognition. The transformative power of love. This is our hope. This is the light of the world.

And as we read in Christian scriptures, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John 1:5