

# ***Wanting, Needing, Waiting***

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*Note that sermons are written to be spoken, and do not always follow conventional grammar, paragraph structure or timing. Minor changes may have been made to the text, for clarity.*

## **Reading**

Our reading today is an adaptation of Henri Nouwen and Psalm 42.

When we feel disconnected from the divine, our sadness is the first sign of its return. To need love is to know love. To need justice is to know justice.

Hope brings joy to our isolation. Hope brings love to our longing.

The divine is present when deep calls out to deep.

Our relationship with the divine, our intimate relationship with the divine, can become deeper and more mature as we wait patiently for its return.

## **Sermon**

When I was a child, my Dad was my alarm clock. Every school-day morning, he would knock gently on my door, then come into my room and call out, "Up and at 'em!" Up and at 'em, time to jump out of bed and take on the world. Game on. There's work to be done, and now's the time to do it.

I was raised Unitarian, so I knew that there was no God up in the sky who was going to solve my problems for me. I needed to take action.

The season of Advent didn't make any sense to me. In the Christian tradition, Advent is a time of waiting, waiting for the divine to come, waiting for a higher power to come and make everything okay.

With no higher power to pray to, there was no reason to wait. I knew that it was up to me to be the change I wanted to see in the world. I learned to step up.

Madonna steps up. Have you seen her video for the song 4 Minutes?

The video shows a high-tech surface moving through the world, destroying everything it touches. It's like a high-tech version of The Blob. Time is running out before this blob devours the whole world. The song is called 4 Minutes because there is a big digital clock counting down from 4 minutes to zero, 4 minutes until the end of the world. It's time for action. The pop star Justin Timberlake shows up in the video and says "We've only got 4 minutes to save the world." "Tick tock," says Madonna, as she dances ahead of the blob. "Tick tock, tick tock." The blob comes

after them as they run through someone's house, through someone's kitchen. The people in the kitchen don't offer to help them. The people in the kitchen don't even notice that there is a problem, they don't see the blob even as it dissolves their skin. Only Madonna and Justin Timberlake can see the blob. Their physicality is sometimes urgent, rushed, as the blob comes after them. Tick tock, tick tock, the world needs saving, and Madonna and Justin Timberlake know that they are the only ones who can save it.

And if you've seen Madonna videos, you won't be surprised to hear that in this video, the way to save the world is to have fantastic sex.

We know better. As Unitarian Universalists, we know that saving the world will take a lot of hard work. And we're willing to do that work. We sponsored a refugee family? Great, let's sponsor another one, and another one. Our city is built on stolen land, indigenous land? No problem, we can do the work of reconciliation. Global warming is wreaking havoc on the planet, and it might be too late? Onwards we march, doing whatever it takes to make a difference. There is work to do, and we are here to do it.

There is no time to pause, no time to catch our breath, no time to wait for someone else to fix the problem. We'll take care of it. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the ones we've been waiting for. Let's do this. Game on. Up and at 'em.

Unitarian Universalist ministers Terry Sweetser and Susan Milnor wrote a book called *The Abundance of Our Faith*. They say that we are a faith of abundance. We have more than enough love to give. More than enough love to give. We just need to get out there and give it. If we want progress, if we want the universe to bend towards justice, we need to work work work.

And we do work work work. For a long time, we've made things happen. A couple centuries ago, we helped religion adapt to the age of science. We've been on the forefront of same-sex marriage and queer liberation. All around the world, the Unitarian Service Committee has helped people help themselves, and when people lost their homes, we helped them build new ones.

We get results because we work, and we work, and we work. But we overdo it. We work until we collapse.

For some of us, the last few weeks have felt dark, overwhelming. There is so much work to do in the world. Caring for what's happening in Syria, Beirut, France, and on, and on. Protecting our Muslim friends against unwarranted attacks. Writing letters to help get the Unitarian minister, Rev Fulgence, out of jail in Africa. Keeping an eye on Canada's new government in a time of great potential and great risk. Trying to make the most of the Paris climate summit, and for some of us, being in Ottawa today for the climate march. There's so much we could be doing. And if we get sick, or a loved one gets sick, we can't put our lives on hold. We still need to pay the bills and do the chores. A recent headline in the *Boston Globe* says that Sunday evening is the new Monday. For many of us, Sunday evening isn't a time of rest, it's a time to get a head-start on the week, making lunches, planning our work.

It's all a recipe for burn-out. We lose too many social justice warriors to burn-out. Our congregation has lost too many leaders and volunteers to burn-out.

But there is another way. And Madonna knows what it is.

In the video for the song *Justify My Love*, Madonna arrives at a hotel after a long day out in the world. She staggers slowly along the hallway towards her room. She pauses, pivots, and falls

back against a wall. She slides down the wall to the floor. Her arms lift, and with her eyes closed, she massages the back of her neck. All she wants is to get to her hotel room, so that she can collapse into bed. But she doesn't take action. She doesn't try to make it to her room on her own steam. Instead, she pauses, and she expresses her need, and she waits.

Now I'll give away the ending. She doesn't pray for enough energy to get to her room. She goes deeper. She expresses a deeper need, a bigger need. When you're calling out to the divine, you can ask for anything, you can ask for everything.

At this point in her career, Madonna has not yet studied Kabbalah, Hinduism or Buddhism, so her prayer isn't as enlightened as it could be. Collapsed against the wall of a hotel, all that she asks for is a lover. But the point is that she asks, and she waits. She doesn't start by taking action, fighting her exhaustion. Collapsed against the wall, unable to find the strength to carry on, she creates a clear and vivid image of what she wants. She wants to run naked in the rain; she wants to make love on a train, cross-country. She gives up the burden of responsibility, and she simply imagines what she wants. "Wanting, needing, waiting, for you" she says. "Hoping, praying, for you." And simply by praying, her energy transforms. I won't go into the details of what happens next, because it's a little steamy, but let's just say that she gets what she asks for. It was worth it for her to take the time to be still and to focus on her vision.

Years later, Madonna does study Kabbalah, and Hinduism, and Buddhism. And she develops a daily yoga practice. And she learns that if you're going to ask for what you want, you really can ask for the whole shebang. On the album Ray of Light, she sings of waiting for a time when Earth shall be as one. Waiting for a time when Earth shall be as one. Wanting love. Needing peace. Waiting for a time when Earth shall be as one. Wanting, needing, waiting.

Years ago, Madonna left Christianity behind. But she ended up rediscovering the power of Advent. She got a glimpse of it in a hotel hallway, and she fully found it in eastern mysticism.

We are rediscovering the power of waiting as well. As Unitarian Universalists, we've been connecting with the power of waiting for awhile. We've learned that it's worth it to take the time to meditate while we're together. We've learned of the transformative power, when we come and find the quiet centre.

We can take this to the next level by changing how we experience the season leading up to Christmas. We can transform how we are, during Advent.

It doesn't have to be go go go. Dinner parties, and Christmas shopping, and Christmas carols everywhere you look, red and green everywhere you look. These things can all be wonderful, but they don't have to be everything.

We don't have to work until we reach a state of exhaustion. We can build a time of spiritual renewal into our calendar. We've learned about that, with Shawn. We've learned that Shawn, our minister, is more fully present with us Tuesday through Sunday if we honour his sabbath from Sunday at sundown until Tuesday morning. Shawn is more fully present for us, for the bulk of the year, because his year includes sabbatical time. Recently, sabbatical time has been extended to Dallas and Angela. Perhaps it's time to extend it to ourselves.

Sabbatical time is different from vacation time. Sabbatical time is intentional, and spiritually-focussed. It's a time to let go of practical responsibility, without letting go of vision. It's a time to be crystal clear about vision.

That's what Advent season can be.

It can be a time to pause, a time to develop a crystal clear answer to the question, "What, more than anything, do I want for Christmas this year?"

Don't hold back. Really answer the question: What do you want for Christmas this year? What do you really want, with the fullness of your being? There may be years when you feel like a material girl, and you just want fancy gadgets for Christmas. That's okay. But maybe this year, you want something bigger. Something better. Something deeper. Advent is a time of year to pause from your normal life, and meditate on the question, what do I really really really really really want for Christmas, if I could have it all. If I could have love, love for the whole world. If I could have justice, justice for the whole world. If I could have peace, for the whole world. Imagine spending the whole Advent season meditating on love, meditating on justice, meditating on peace. For me, that experience would be divine.

It's a time of year when you don't have to work for love, work for justice, work for peace. Simply wait. Light a candle, and wait. Light a candle, and gaze into it, gaze into a ray of light, and imagine waking up on Christmas morning to a world of love, justice and peace.

Be clear about what you want. Be clear about what you need. And then wait. You can feel held by the darkness of December, you can feel held by this community of love, and you can gaze into the Advent candle, and wait for your vision to come true.

I know, I know, there isn't actually a Saviour who is going to show up on Christmas morning and give us everything we ask for. That's just a fairy tale.

Or is it? If we spend Advent season meditating on love, might we wake up on Christmas morning and actually feel the love? Will the universe somehow hear our prayer for love? Will it shift something in our hearts? Might love lift us up where we belong?

If we meditate on peace, might we feel peace? If we pause, and wait, might we open ourselves up so that love and peace can move through us, act through us?

Advent isn't about shedding responsibility. It isn't about hoping that a saviour will come and pay the bills. It's about becoming crystal clear about your vision, and then sitting with that vision, letting that vision become a part of you, a part of something bigger than you.

Having a clear vision is a core practice in religious traditions around the world. In India, a singing meditation called kirtan is about having a clear sense of the divine, and calling out to it. My friend Shara sings a traditional kirtan song that repeats over and over, "Door of my heart, open wide I keep for you. Will you come, will you come, just for one time come to me." Be clear about your vision of the divine, and then open your heart to it.

May you find moments in the coming days to imagine your idea of the divine.

May Advent be everything you want it to be, everything you need it to be, everything worth waiting for. Wanting, needing, waiting.

I love you. Amen.

## **Closing Words**

In this community of love, may we feel held, not just on Sunday mornings, but throughout the week. May we feel that we can take the time to pause, to find stillness, and to open our hearts to the divine. May we be nourished by a vision of all souls growing into harmony with the divine. Be at peace.