"What Are We Waiting For?"

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
at the First Parish in Wayland, MA
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As you've already heard, we are in the midst of the Christian season of Advent. Advent is a season of waiting, of anticipation...and, no, not just for presents at Christmas!

Within Christianity, Christmas matters not simply because a brown-skinned, Jewish baby named Jesus was born. Christmas matters to Christians because they believe this baby, God become human, was born to save the world.

Saving the world often makes a powerful story.Who doesn't love a good action movie where a hero appears amidst imminent danger and saves the world from cataclysmic destruction? Even in a story where the world has been virtually destroyed—like the tv show *Walking Dead* or the *Hunger Games* series—I find it easy to applaud the heroic efforts to not only survive, but to also hold on to a sense of human dignity, compassion, and love. Faced with our own fears and struggles with life, stories that show heroes overcoming threats help to give us hope that such things are possible.

In this way, I see great power in the Christian story that promises that this small baby will one day vanquish evil and save the world. *Of course* the birth of such a one *would* be anticipated and hoped for—hope for the end of suffering, of brokenness, of despair and darkness. Longing for a transformation of the world, the Christmas carol cries out, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel"—come, hoped for child, savior of the world.

Perhaps to many, these Christian words like savior and salvation feel vacuous at best or spiritually violent at worst. While I'm not partial to these *particular* words, I do feel strongly that a meaningful religion must address the pervasive reality that something is wrong in our world.

Yes, there *is* so much beauty and so much goodness in the world—from frost glittering in the sunlight to the lovely music of a choir like ours filling the room to the feel of arms wrapped tight around you in love. There *is* love and goodness, compassion and generosity in our world. *And* there is greed and cruelty,hatred and violence. There is something *wrong* in our world—*many* somethings wrong.

Religion, as I understand it, is the vehicle by which we wrestle with this complex experience of life—its profound beauty and goodness muddled with unspeakable grief and senseless acts of violence.

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Scholars tells us that at the time Jesus was born, many in Israel were living in poverty and powerlessness. The Kingdom of Israel was under the imperial rule of Rome and the Jewish religious rulers frequently colluded with their Roman occupiers to keep hold of their power and wealth. Rather than a society of peace and equality,Israel was a deeply stratified society with hierarchies of power and influence. As an occupied nation, there was also a military presence throughout the cities and countryside with its potential for and practice of violence helping to keep the "peace."

Given this context, there were many looking for a change, for a leader that would make their lives better, for a messiah who would transform their world. They were waiting for a savior. Given our own context of ongoing wars, growing economic inequality, systemic racism, and climate change that impacts our entire planet, what *are* we waiting for?

There are many different issues and challenges in our society that I could point to today, but I think for many the questions surrounding the pattern of unarmed black men and boys dying at the hands of police have been prominently on our minds this week.

When I found the poem, "Who But the Lord?" by Langston Hughes, it was impossible to not be struck by how the fear of police brutality crosses decades. In the poem a man waits for someone to save him. Fearful of the brutality of the police, the man calls out "*Oh, Lord, if you can, Save me from that man!*" But the Lord was not quick enough and the man is badly beaten. The man wonders, who can protect him if God will not?

On Thursday evening, I joined in the demonstration #enoughisenough on Boston Common. In choosing to be there, I wanted to witness to my hope for change and for a different future. I'm not a lawyer, nor have I sit on a grand jury. But I am a witness—I am watching the video of 12-year old unarmed black boy, Tamir Rice, shot within seconds by a white police officer. I am watching the videos and hearing the stories of unarmed black men dying at the hands of the men they call the Law. I am listening to the voice of black men and women who are saying that these encounters with police are not *new* news, but a way of life for which they must prepare their children, their black sons. And as I listen, I am learning more about how my own white skin shapes my experiences of life in such different ways.

Although I had wanted to bring my 17-year old son to the demonstration Thursday evening, he had been home sick from school that day so he stayed home. Instead, I found myself thinking about him as I watched the young black men and boys in the crowd around me on Boston Common. What would I do, what would I say,what would I hope for if my son was black?

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What are *we* waiting for?
In a season of advent, in a season of streets filled with protests, what do we hope for? Do we long for a savior—for a God or a Lord to come and protect us, to protect those in harms way? In a later version of Langston Hughes' poem, he concludes with the italicized phrase,"*We'll see*." Is this a "we'll see" that wonders if there is anyone else who *can* protect him, or, is this "we'll see" asking *if* there is anyone who *will* protect him? Who is Langston Hughes really waiting for? A supernatural savior? A weapon to strike back? An ally? A law. . *the* Law to protect him?

Must we wait for supernatural intervention? Must we wait for a miracle birth of God become human? Must we wait for a divine savior to fix our world . . . or to take us to another? Or, as the line goes,"Are we the ones we have been waiting for?"

"We are the Ones" is the name of the group who organized the demonstration on the Common Thursday night. On their Facebook page, they describe themselves as: "a coalition of young leaders from Boston's Urban center of Dorchester, Roxbury, and Mattapan who want to create change in their communities." They also write, "We CANNOT wait on our Martin. We CANNOT wait on our Malcolm. WE ARE THE ONES!"

Reading this, I wondered anew who am I waiting for?Am I waiting for a hero?

In becoming a Unitarian Universalist minister, I learned that the "white minister" killed in Selma in 1965 that spurred new attention and action by the white community was James Reeb, a Unitarian Universalist minister. I also learned that Unitarians and Universalists filled the ranks not only during the civil rights era but also during the fight to end slavery. I learned that the Unitarian symbol of the chalice emerged from the work of Unitarians working to get Jews and others in danger to safety in World War II. I learned that being a Unitarian Universalist means standing in a stream of prophetic men and women who spoke out, who marched, and who acted to change the world, to bring more love and justice into our shared world.

Born as I was in 1972, such stories were just that *stories* . . . moments of history where *others* did great things. Now its 2014. And I watch the news, I see the videos, I hear the voices of brokenness and rage, of anger *and* hope. There is work to be done here and now. Who are *we* waiting for?

Answering this question is not simple, nor easy. Answering this question gets to big questions of hope—what is our vision for what we hope comes next? What is our expectation for how this vision will come to be? Who is going to change the world?

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In the 19th century, Unitarian Christianity was radical because it departed from the traditional Christian story that Jesus was God incarnate. In a sermon most consider foundational for Unitarian Christianity in the United States, the Rev. William Channing proclaimed "God is *one*" and that Jesus is a being *distinct* from God, not equal to or the same as God. Although stripped of his divinity, Jesus still mattered to Channing as he still does for a number of Unitarian Universalists today.

For me, a major turning point in my understanding of Jesus came when I first began reading scholars of the historical Jesus—Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, and others. From these scholars, I learned more about the context of empire, of social unrest, of poverty, violence, and injustice into which the historical figure of Jesus was born. (And yes, I do believe there was a historical man at the root of what has become Christianity.) As I learned about this context, I began to imagine another way of understanding of how Jesus transformed the world—not as an incarnated God, but as a man whose own spirit was full of love and compassion, wisdom and capacity for healing, passion and a desire for justice.

He transformed the world into which he was born by daring to speak out, speak up, and *act* out in ways that challenged the status quo as he called for a new kind of community—one grounded in a spirit of love that brought people together to feed the poor, to heal the sick, to visit those in prison. Jesus transformed his world by living a radical human life of love and service. In this season of advent as we wait for Christmas, for this holiday that marks the birth of Jesus, I challenge us all to consider what it means to wait not for a divine being to become incarnate, but for human lives to be transformed by a commitment to a better world.

There is something wrong in our world when there is a ongoing pattern of deaths of unarmed black men, of disproportionate incarceration of black and brown men and women, and of rising economic inequality. I don't understand all of the reasons why there is this pattern. I know that it is a complex picture and that there are differing points of view. But what I do understand is that this has to change. And increasingly I am convicted that I have to be a part of this change.

I'll be honest with you. This has been the hardest sermon for me to write yet because I knew that eventually I would be here at this moment trying to turn towards the end of the sermon, to some conclusion, to some sense of 'answer' and 'response.' But frankly I don't know how to finish this sermon in a neat tidy way that will leave us walking out of here feeling okay and comfortable. Because I think right now is a time when we as a predominantly white congregation need to feel uncomfortable. We need to hear what is

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going on for others whose experience of life *is* different than our own. We need to learn what we don't know about what its like to be black or brown on the streets of our nation.

Let us start by looking for news, analysis, and responses written by African Americans—to learn from people who have experienced firsthand what it is to live within a society shaped by racist legacies. But let us not simply read a newspaper of watch a video, let us also look for ways to act—to listen for opportunities for how we can get involved as allies to those who are asking for change. And when you find these opportunities, share them with each other, invite one another into the work. Finally, I'd like to invite those who are interested to join me in January in reading Michelle Alexander's book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in an age of Colorblindness.* Lisa Maria and I will let you know details about this.

Yes, this is a season of advent, of waiting and anticipation for Christmas. But this is also a season of death, of protest, of calls for change. The story of Christmas is a story of hope—a hope that sees in the story of Jesus a man who inspired and led a renewed sense of community grounded in a spirit of love. Let us believe that a person inspired by a dream of a better world, a more loving and just community, can indeed speak up, act out and help to change the world.

What are we waiting for? Let us not wait for a hero—divine *or* human—let us live and act in the moments that are here and now. We are the ones. Let us not keep waiting.

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