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Thunder Bay

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Sermon

People, Look East

Today is the first of four Sundays in Advent. This under-celebrated holiday has a remarkable history, with powerful themes of captivity, oppression, and exile, and an enduring emphasis on patient waiting and un-commercialism. I'll explain why I have come to love Advent, and why I think it would make a great Unitarian Universalist holiday.

Our story begins three and a half millennia ago. The Jews are captive in Egypt, hoping for divine deliverance from the evil of slavery. Who indeed will ransom captive Israel?

They have been slaves for 400 years. Now, led by Moses, of whom we will hear more later, they make an exodus from Egypt, bound for Canaan land. For 40 long years they wander in the desert, until they reach the Canaan border, where they establish the first nation of Israel.

Two and a half millennia ago, the Assyrian Empire conquers the northern kingdom of Israel, and ten of the twelve tribes of Israel are simply lost.

A century later, a coalition led by the Babylonians successfully attacks Assyria's capital, Nineveh, and now it's Babylon's turn to rule the land.

Babylon systematically begins to crush the kingdom of Judah, and takes Jewish hostages to Babylon, to secure Israel's compliance with the Babylonian laws of occupation. The Babylonians finish the job in 586 B.C., when they destroy Solomon's Temple and the holy city of Jerusalem. More than 100,000 Jews are exiled to Babylon. A Diaspora is born.

Nearly 50 years later, King Cyrus the Great, of Persia, conquers Babylon, and permits the Jews to return to Israel.

In the words of Bob Marley:

By the Rivers of Babylon

there we sat down,
and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.

For the wicked carried us away.
Captivity / required from us a song.
How can we sing a joyful song
in a strange land?

So let the words of our mouths
and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Zion.

Captivity encompasses oppression, and evokes sympathy with the downtrodden, the excluded, the neglected, and the poor.

Especially, identification with those in prison.

There is one more verse to Huddie Ledbetter's Midnight Special:

Umbrella on her shoulder,
Piece of paper in her hand,
She come to see the governor,
She want to free her man.

Let the midnight special shine its light on me,
Let the midnight special shine its ever-lovin' light on me.

A kind-hearted Governor reduced the 35-year sentence to two years, and Huddie Ledbetter was a free man.

Now is the most difficult season of the year, for many, this passage from Halloween to the winter solstice. A time of gathering darkness, a time for tucking in, and for preparing. It's a season especially difficult for those who are far from home, those who stand little chance of returning.

Refugees have fled from many countries to Canada:

Afghanistan - 2743
Sri Lanka - 2207
Pakistan - 2102
Colombia - 1729
The People's Republic of China - 1249
Iran - 1243
The Democratic Republic of Sudan - 1240
India - 1201
Iraq - 927
The Democratic Republic of Congo – 782

In the United States, the number of those who feel like political prisoners may be huge. The American political left and the great middle wrestle with

despair, feeling threatened and excluded from “their country” by autocratic, conservative oppressors who believe differently, and happen today to hold the reins of power.

But, surprisingly, many on the right seem to share that feeling. They complain that permissive liberals have stolen “their country” from them, through pornography, abortion, gay rights, and similar policies.

It makes you wonder: How come we liberals don’t feel better, if we have actually won? And how come the conservatives don’t feel better, if they have actually won? Is it possible for everyone to feel excluded, everyone to feel exiled?

Those who read their Bible literally would say yes. Exile is part of the universal human condition, and has been, from Adam and Eve on down.

Surely the most poignant kind of exile is the inside job.

Serving a large church in Seattle, I was talking with a former Board president, worship associate, member of my committee on ministry.

She said, You know, I used to feel at the center of things around here. Now, I don’t. It feels like there’s an in crowd here, and I’m not part of it. Guess what? I said – I feel the same way. We burst out laughing. If a minister on staff and a highly respected lay member can both feel “out of it,” what can it possibly mean to feel “in it”?

That bumper sticker attributed to Plato speaks of this internal exile when it says, Be kind, for everyone you meet is having some kind of hard time.

Lives of slavery, imprisonment, and exile develop their own imperatives – with an emphasis on making do, simple living, radical hospitality -- as if life itself could be at stake. Sometimes it is. Jews in Nazi Germany would ask of Gentiles one and only one question, on which everything depended: will you hide me?

Lives like these, of necessity stay focused on the deeper issues, and insist that everyone be ready to move, on a moment's notice. These are improvised, nimble lives. If they were music, they might be jazz, or the blues. Life on the road, life on the lam, on the bum, life in camp. A romantic life, at least from a distance.

Advent presents a measured life, spread over four Sundays between the American Thanksgiving and Christmas. Patience is built-in. In Advent we await the birth of Jesus, as, historically, Mary has been waiting for eight months now. A pregnancy like this leads to new life, for us and perhaps for the world. We wonder, what is that new life that calls to us, that waits patiently for us?

Advent evokes that “spirit of expectation, of anticipation, of preparation, of longing . . . for deliverance from the evils of the world . . .”

As the Jews in exile in Babylon waited for deliverance, they were in part sustained by the voices of their prophets, foretelling the birth of a Messiah, a Liberator of the people. The prophet Isaiah chides his listeners: “Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will be with child, and will give birth, and will call him Emmanuel.” Is 7:13. God with us.

Later Isaiah adds: “The wolf will lie down with the lamb; the leopard will lie down with the goat; the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.” Is 11:6.

These seasonal holidays do tend to make us wait, do tend to stretch time – “Do not open until Christmas.” Hanukkah, the festival of lights, celebrating the miraculous candle whose single day’s worth of olive oil, somehow lasted for eight full days. Don’t let the light go out, let it shine through our love and our tears. The Indian holiday of Diwali, the Festival of Light, celebrated by Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, and Nepalese Buddhists.

And perhaps closest to home, for those who suffer from seasonal affective disorder, the patient waiting for the return of the light, at the winter solstice, the unmistakable reassurance to the primordial yearning in each of us, for reassurance that, yes indeed, the Sun, that went away, is really coming back this year. December 22, at 1:08 a.m. our time. Nineteen days, fourteen hours, and ten minutes. As if anyone were counting.

For some of us, part of Advent’s attraction that it makes a quiet but effective case for unplugging the Christmas machine, that world of incessant, suffocating materialism that Margaret Atwood satirizes in *The Edible Woman*.

Her heroine has a meaningless, disjointed existence, full of distractions, and inauthenticity, a life that is so unintentional, so accidental that when she feels an overwhelming need to accomplish something substantial -- she goes to the laundromat.

Advent, by contrast, is a dedicated, purposeful time, fully and faithfully lived, a model of intentionality and of right relationship with history and the profounder spirit of the season. It is also a protest against that juggernaut called Christmas.

I became interested in Advent nearly 20 years ago. For a long time I had resisted the commercialism of the holidays by retreating to the far desert over Christmas and New Year’s.

My then-partner was raised in a minister's family that celebrated Advent every year, and she had come to treasure it, ever since she was a child. I knew nothing of Advent except that it seemed kind of stiff and churchy to me. But I had come to love the desert, of which my partner knew nothing. So we made one of those domestic bargains that sometimes surprise. I would join her in celebrating Advent, and she would join me in exploring the desert. The story has an O. Henry ending: she wound up falling in love with the desert, and I fell in love with Advent.

Here is just a little of how we celebrated. Please feel free to beg, borrow, or steal whatever you like. I'm glad to chat with anyone who is thinking about holiday services at home.

On the evening of the first Sunday in Advent, we would celebrate in our home by inviting half a dozen friends to join us for an early, light supper. When they appeared, always promptly at six o'clock, we would hand them a mug of hot apple cider, with cinnamon and cloves, and let them warm their hands by the fireplace. We showed off our undecorated Christmas tree, and invited them to choose an ornament, and hang it on the tree. These were family ornaments accumulated over 40 years, sentimentally meaningful as well as beautiful.

Then we'd all repair to the dining room table. We would light the Advent candle, with a few words. And then, with parts in hand, we'd have a simple, informal home worship service. Everyone had a role to play, even the littlest children. We might sing an Advent hymn, or a Christmas carol, or maybe a song for Hanukkah. We'd read from the Old Testament prophets like Isaiah and Amos, or from modern writers too. Poetry, humour, whatever worked. One Sunday, we located a quotation from Golda Meir, the premier of Israel, saying that Jews had come to resent Moses because, as she put it, He dragged us 40 years through the desert, in order to bring us to the one spot, in the Middle East, that has no oil.

We might sing a folk song or two, from that marvellous songbook, Rise Up Singing. Perhaps The Midnight Special, or the Melodions' rendition of Bob Marley's Rivers of Babylon. We'd pray a little, share some silence, sometimes speak to the occasion, or the news of the day.

And then we'd eat. Simply, but elegantly. A meal to travel by. It began with soup, a hearty, stick-to-your-ribs soup, pumpkin or lentil or clam chowder, or even French onion soup. From a big antique tureen that we would carry in, ceremoniously, from the kitchen, and present to the table.

Not being bakers, we were lucky to live in a neighbourhood with plenty of bakeries. For the second course, two or three loaves of bread, enough that everyone could sample a different chunk or two. Italian ciabatta, Jewish braided challah, French bread – all traveling breads, warm from the oven, bread you could hit the road with.

And then, cheese, from around the world. Monterey jack, or Stilton, Brie, or Jarlsberg. Cheese with passports. Finally, dessert – more desert food, dried apricots, peaches, figs; apples or dates or Mandarin oranges; all kinds of scrumptious nuts; perhaps a bite or two of chocolate. One final toast, a quick goodbye, and the evening was done – or just begun.

Sometimes, afterwards, my partner and I would sit for a while, in silence, in our living room, appreciating the fire and smelling the woodsmoke, and the aromas of the meal, savouring the presence of good worship, good food, good singing, good friends.

By that time, I had long come to love the desert, its unspoiledness, its desolation, and starkness. I can't speak of it, even today, without retreating to a private, special place in my soul. The desert represents a whole way of being to me. It is an intensely real, but also magical place, partly inside of me, partly out there in the real world. And I mean, way out there.

It took forever and a day to get there, even with good weather. That was part of the charm. We'd pack up a truck and head east out of Oakland, bound for Lake Tahoe and Reno, Nevada. Turn right on Route 395, which some people call the most beautiful road in America. No argument from me.

We'd ramble southeast, down the spine of the Sierra Nevada, in the lee of great peaks, and past the haunting Mono Lake and its mysterious tufa, to a genuine, old-fashioned, Western town called Bishop, our jumping-off point. There we'd bed down, and rise at the crack of dawn to buy our last-minute provisions at the market.

South of town, there is a wide place in the road called Big Pine, where there is, yes, one big pine, supposedly planted by Teddy Roosevelt. We take the turn toward Death Valley. Soon the paved part of the road ends, and the washboard takes over for the next week or two. A sign reads Next Services, 87 miles. It is full of bullet holes.

Following switchbacks through the passes, up steep hills and down steep hills, hugging mountainsides and not looking down, past old mining sites abandoned decades ago to the sun and the wind, yet still remarkably preserved, across gullies that wash out faithfully, every spring -- till we found ourselves in a remote, spacious, pastel valley, on a washboard road tucked up in the shadow of the Inyo Mountains, ten thousand feet above.

That road forks, at the sign of a bat, painted on a large rock, the Bat Rock -- painted a different color every year, whatever was on clearance at the hardware store -- and there you turn left. It's about 45 minutes from there, if all goes well. One year it didn't, and 45 minutes turned into four or five days. As the four-wheel-drive tow truck fishtailed up an incline, and the snow began falling hard, the teenager behind the wheel turned to me and said, "You sure you wouldn't rather just . . . give us the vehicle?"

There is no electricity, no land line telephones, no houses, no firewood, no nothing. The only attraction is a pair of hot springs, one rough pool, the other almost chic. They were created back in the early '70's, by a man whose desert name was the Wizard, and maintained ever since by those who use it. Four palm trees stand guard over the hot pool, providing shade at mid-day.

You have not really lived till you roll out of a couple of sleeping bags, in what feels like the middle of the night, with Orion riding low in the western sky, and, in moccasins and terrycloth bathrobe, an orange or two in hand, truck on over to the hot pool, step into it gently, and set yourself on the concrete bench facing southeast, to watch the sunrise peek over the mountains, and the shadow of the sun come racing down the western mountainside, and across the valley floor to the pools.

It's a place of almost complete isolation, severely understated beauty, illusions, optical and otherwise, sometimes deep fear, with yarns full of nonsense, places to hide out, and sometimes people – people in a kind of exile -- hiding out in them.

Life in the desert is wonderfully Advent-ish – austere, reduced and yet infinitely expansive, seemingly bleak, but subtle, movable.

Advent would make a great Unitarian Universalist holiday. Let me take a final moment to say why.

1. Advent is anti-materialist. It is as unplugged a holiday, as it could be.
2. It asks of us patience, hope, and modesty, not excess, frazzle, and dismay.
3. It's a measured, deliberate, intentional, mindful time. Whatever's frantic tends to melt away.
4. Advent sets up limited expectations, and seldom disappoints, unlike Christmas, that creates such lofty expectations and so often disappoints, especially for children.
5. Advent reminds us of human hunger, rather than Alka-Seltzer.
6. Advent is gazing into the campfire in the evening, and noticing the kitfoxes darting in the shadows. It is not staring at the laundry, going round and round and round in the laundromat.

We are Unitarian Universalists. We do have choices.

May the gravitas of Advent be yours this season too.

Amen.