

When It Seems that We Wait Alone

Amanda Udis-Kessler, December 16, 2019; written for Vista Grande Community Church UCC Longest Night/Blue Christmas service (December 21, 2019)

This year, I heard my first Christmas music in a store two days after Thanksgiving. My father-in-law had just died and I had flown to Nebraska to support my wife's family. On this particular Saturday, that meant accompanying my sister-in-law on errands related to the upcoming memorial service. The Staples in downtown Lincoln was playing some gratingly cheery song about how wonderful it was that Christmas was coming. Meanwhile, the store staff could not figure out how to take a photo of my father-in-law and turn it into a presentation piece to sit on an easel at the door as people came in for the memorial service. The gratingly cheery holiday song morphed into a gratingly cheery Muzak version of a Christmas carol. I wanted to punch someone.

Christmas carols, and Christmas music in general, can be a great blessing. When we are in the right frame of mind, these songs can trigger warm memories. If we first learned Christmas music at a young enough age, hearing it now might bring us back to more innocent times, before things got so lousy and unjust and terrifying and brutal and sad. But we who are gathered here today are here because the warm memories of the season, if we have any, are complicated by the pain we feel now. We're here precisely because things are lousy and unjust and terrifying and brutal and sad, even if there are moments of joy and gratitude mixed in with the lousiness. We're here because at least some of the time we want to weep endlessly or punch someone or just turn off the goddamned happy Christmas music for a minute. This is not the most wonderful time of the year for us. It might be the worst time of the year. Or it might be a bewilderingly complex time of year, threads of pleasure interwoven with strands of regret. Our lives hold loss and betrayal and grief that this season reminds us about or awakens or magnifies. The happiness we seem to see around us can make us feel more alone, more isolated, more hopeless, especially if our own sadness is not lightened with moments of ease. We might well sing tender, happy Christmas carols in a few days and by then we might even mean it when we sing them. But today there may be no sliver of light for us and the way we are feeling, we aren't convinced there will be one any time soon. So, what can we do?

This is what we can do: we can sit here together in the gloom and the grief and the loss and the fear and the complexity and not try to wish it away. We can be company for each other in the sitting. We can ask not for light but for patience. And then, when we have the strength to do so, we can be light-bearers for each other.

As I say a bit about each of these ways of approaching the longest night of the year, I want to be clear about where I'm coming from, because it might not be where you're coming from. I gladly and gratefully attend Vista Grande Community Church, but not as a doctrinal Christian. Instead, I read the Christian story from what I would call a spiritual humanist perspective, by which I mean that for me, God is not an entity external to human lives and human actions, not a person who can intervene and change us from the outside, but a force of love, compassion, peace, justice and hope that only exists through our actions. God is born and lives in us when we embody holy love, sacred compassion, deepest peace, righteous justice, and faithful hope. I absolutely honor

your experience of God if it is different from my own. But from my perspective, waiting on the longest night is not about waiting for an inbreaking miracle. It is about waiting for our own hearts to thaw, and perhaps, if we are like the Grinch, for our hearts to grow three sizes. It is about waiting for our hopelessness to give way to hope and for our courage to return. And it is about waiting together as bearers of the light for each other.

From this perspective, it is a point of deepest integrity that we wait in our discomfort without denying it, ignoring it, keeping busy to distract ourselves, wishing it away, or waiting for an external intervention that we don't really expect. It takes profound strength to sit in our sadness without a clear timetable for healing. It takes equally profound strength, if a slightly different kind, to sit in our complicated mix of negative and positive feelings without a sense of closure. But I have learned three things about emotions over the past half-century: first, we fail to honor our emotions at our peril, second, they will all pass eventually unless we are in the grip of mental challenges that need a more targeted response, and third, our emotions won't actually harm us unless we harm ourselves trying to get them under control. I'm not proposing some sort of feel-good wellness macho but instead suggesting that many of us can in fact tolerate the discomfort we feel and that there are resources, here in this room tonight and elsewhere, for those of us who cannot tolerate the discomfort that we feel.

So, we sit in the muck, as Pastor Clare might say. But we don't sit in it alone. We who have gathered tonight can be and are company for each other. You are the not only person who struggles with the season. All of us in this room bring pain, sadness, regrets, grief, and other difficult feelings to this space. This space is big enough, free enough, open enough, graceful enough, for all of us to meet here and honor ourselves and each other. Whatever is hard for you right now, know that someone else, someone here right now, wishes you an easier heart and a joyful coming of the light.

And as we wait, conscious of our own struggles and perhaps now more conscious of the struggles of those around us, we can orient ourselves toward whatever our best source of strength is, and we can ask for that strength to be reborn in us. The light will come when and as it comes. We can demand that the light come now, but as those brilliant theologians the Rolling Stones said, you can't always get what you want. So, what can we ask for that perhaps we can get? We can ask for our own best selves to awaken. We can ask for the patience that lives within us to make itself manifest. And the courage. And the hope. And the holiness. We can make it through the longest night, drawing on our own resources and the resources of others.

Finally, as we rouse our own strength, patience, power, and passion, we may find that we have enough to share with each other, that we can be light for each other even when we struggle to find the light ourselves. In a couple of minutes, we will come to the open mic sharing part of this gathering. If, during that sharing, you find that you have compassion for one other person in this room, and if you have the ability to share that compassion with that person during or after the gathering, know that you yourself will have become part of the Christmas story, a figure in the Nativity scene. For you will have become an embodiment of mother Mary, light-bearer, Christ-bearer, bringer of hope and kindness, justice and peace.

We do not need to be perfect, redeemed, or saved to care for each other. We don't need to believe any particular doctrines. We only need to be present in our complicated emotions, wounded healers open to each other and to our own fullest selves. As we gain access to our own honesty, tenderness, and compassion, we will find light and love and grace to offer each other. As we tend to each other, we will receive as well – a sliver of light if not the brightest noontime, a touch of hope if not a complete restoration. As the darkness deepens, as our hearts open, we wait, we mourn, we listen, we comfort, and in so doing we will, I hope, find a measure of peace.