

The Power of Advent  
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CALL TO WORSHIP – Responsive #437

READING from “The Gospel of Mary of Magdala” by Karen L. King, 2003

I’ve decided that this year is the Christmas of the Woman. For so long there was “no room at the inn” in the workplace for women, and when women were finally allowed in, so many have been groped, harassed, and generally made to understand what they’re up against.

Perhaps this miracle of ever-growing accountability in our culture and the purging of false power is a lasting one, and perhaps finally the record can be set straight, that women are just as valuable as men, just as capable, for example, of being a disciple of Jesus as Peter, Levi, Andrew, and the rest were – if not more so.

The little-known (go figure) Gospel of Mary suggests that Mary of Magdala was favored by Jesus as the disciple most capable of grasping and relaying his real teachings, not the false ones, that much of Christian doctrine became. The Gospel of Mary did not make it into the Biblical canon, and we can guess why.

So here I read the first six paragraphs of the introduction, in order to introduce you to the Gospel of Mary . . .

PRAYER #706

READING from “The Gospel According to Jesus” by Stephen Mitchell

SERMON

Our Worship Theme of the Month is Hope. But first: what is the big deal about Advent? It basically means, “coming toward” the arrival of Jesus, and solicits our preparation. Before Jesus, people for millennia observed these weeks as “coming toward” the longest night of the year, Winter Solstice. Later, there was a Festivus for the Rest of Us (that’s from the Gospel of Seinfeld), but no matter how you celebrate your holidays this time of year, these next three weeks offer a deeper spiritual experience, should you choose to listen to the still, small voice inside.

This is a time to look inward, in a fashion that works for you – maybe it’s a time to meditate while you knit, take long walks, or clean your home. Or just meditate, or pray. Or just sit, and be. Maybe it’s a time to dust off the project you neglected all year long, so that some hidden, neglected part of you can become dynamic and healing once more.

The premise of this is organic in origin – we are less active in the world in the darker, colder portion of the year. It encourages solitude and the invitation to envelop ourselves in a nurturing cocoon, where our deepest dreams and hopes for ourselves and our world might become more known to ourselves, as these energies ferment into a kind of “nectar of power” that is spiritually based and, after the holidays, gives us strength and enthusiasm for our pursuits in the New Year.

The idea is that only through embracing the darkness of the season may we come to know the light, as it returns and we are better equipped to actually *let it in*, illuminating the relationship between our most noble and higher purposes and the challenges of life as it is. *This* is the hope of the season, the hope Advent offers. A more intelligent spirituality, powerful enough to manifest itself toward “The Good” in our lives.

In our modern world, we neglect the divine spark within each of us, we get, as sin is defined in the Gospel of Mary, “separated from God.” This doesn’t make you bad or good, it just is, this is never about shame, piety, or purity. This is simply the human condition. The good news is we are endowed with both a choice and a drive to know thyself. Reza Aslan has a wonderful new book about this, how studies have shown children are born hard-wired with a longing to know God, to know this divine spark within us.

This is the time of year when our opportunity to make the choice is more *pregnant* (if you will), to open that long-shut door in some dark corridor of our soul, and release our child within – not merely in joyous frenzy – but in the quiet ways too, like when the child, in speechless awe, observes the wonder and the miracles that occur in nature, *and* within her or his own heart, mind, and spirit.

It is the love that only exists within, always waiting for our “coming toward,” for our *Advent*.

At the beginning of the fall, I mentioned in my sermon how I struggle with disciplined spiritual practices. I told you I would check in throughout the year, and so I make good on that with my first quarterly check-in. Soon after I lamented that I suck at meditation, and have no discipline for yoga, I signed up for a free meditation class through my kids’ school district. I went to the first class, meditated very well that day, and started dabbling in my own meditations, complete with cedar-burning, candles, a bell. I didn’t make it back to the rest of the five-week class – a case of “you get what you pay for” perhaps. I got too caught up in life-as-usual.

But then something wonderful and unexpected happened. My son noticed me meditating, and suggested we meditate together. Apparently, at some point, he has learned to meditate in public school. Since then, once or twice a week we meditate together for about five minutes, with the ritual of switching on the electric tea-light in a chalice, lighting some incense which my son loves, and I officially begin our meditation by ringing a bell. A few minutes later, Pender will conclude the meditation by ringing the same bell.

So what I thought was going to be lonely and arduous – establishing a spiritual practice – has turned out to be nourishing in its simplicity. A few moments of ritual, presence, and peace with my boy.

You know, I'm a little taken with the Mary and Jesus story. I seem to get more so, as I age. I recommend a children's movie that's in theaters right now called *The Star*. My son and I saw it a week ago, and we both cried at the end. It tells the story on which the Mexican Posadas tradition is based, the journey of Joseph and his very pregnant wife Mary, after they arrive in Bethlehem, and no one lets them rent a room, even though Mary is trying to have a baby. "There was no room at the inn."

This is the line, and the part of the story I identify with the most: all the inn-keepers shutting their doors, because they are too wrapped up in the cares of the world, to recognize a spiritual opportunity, right before their eyes. Isn't that, like, all of us? Too busy to make time for deep reflection and solitude, too impassioned by our lower needs, that we miss out on what knowing the Kingdom of God can do for us: that meeting our higher needs can lessen or even negate our lower needs. Can't you picture it – the inn-keeper takes one look at this desperate couple and says, "you are not good for business! I do not want to hassle with you."

I know this will get confusing, because there are two Marys in the story of Jesus. His mother Mary and his disciple Mary of Magdala seem to book-end Jesus quite appropriately, one at the beginning and one at the end, as though that were an undeniable message in itself that could never be obfuscated: our entry to the Kingdom of God begins with a woman and ends with one, too – as good as the first word, and the last. The last has many more words than the first, appropriately.

Let us examine a few of the take-aways of the Gospel of Mary, according to theologian Karen King, who has distilled the take-aways of her mentors, such as Elaine Pagels and many others.

The most striking is that it confirms absolutely what Stephen Mitchell says: that, for goodness sake, for "anyone who has two ears to hear," (one of Jesus' favorite things to say) never forget that the key to the Kingdom of God is never in any far off place, or earnable – it's already here, within, closer than breath, closer than heart-beat. This is so because we are spiritual beings, and the purpose of our existence is to remember that we are made of the same stuff that God is, even as our bodies also contain many earthly elements as well.

The Gospel of Mary warns, it's only the spiritual stuff in our being that will live forever – all the other elements will go back from which they came. So it behooves us to look after our spiritual elements, and that to become a model, or an example of "The Good" – God is never referred to as male or female in the Gospel of Mary – is one path to eternal salvation, not unlike the goal of reaching *nirvana* and escaping the unending cycle of *samsara* for the Buddhists.

Discovering this Gospel of Mary for myself has been disquieting. It is one of the oldest scenes recorded of a woman being villainized by a man jealous of her sensibilities. It's also an account of another man, a fellow disciple of Mary's, sticking up for her. It shows both these attributes of men that we all know – one of fear, vanity, and dominance on the one hand, and one of gentleness, wisdom, and humility on the other.

I often feel it is these two faces of men that will decide the fate of all humanity. Shall we facilitate and attend to the lesser roots of our elements as humans – the greed, gluttony, and ego, or the higher roots of compassion, simplicity, and wholeness?

Stephen Mitchell says, keep it simple, it's here and now, and the Gospel of Mary has a similar message toward this end: don't get caught up in the rules and the laws, especially the ones you make up yourself! Keep it simple, and merely come to know the light within as the source of your true being, and the key to the Kingdom of God.

I am cautious about the binary interpretation here, that all things spiritual should be favored over all things material. What about the spirituality of sex and love and connection – what about that feeling of joy at smelling the pine trees, tasting all things peppermint and chocolate – what about the bourbon balls and egg nog?? Next week I will explore more in depth the spirituality of joy, but today I'm pep-talking about the quieter side of the season, the much more enduring joy we can have, if we choose to seek. It's one of Jesus' best known aphorisms, if you seek, you shall find. That is the message of hope of this season in a nut-shell: if you seek, you shall find. It plays well with us religious liberals because it's all about you!

But find we won't in any half-measures of seeking. We have to decide it's worthwhile. Like most people, my quest for enduring spiritual knowledge tends to fall last on my list, in fact it doesn't even make the absolute tyranny of my almighty to-do list. Like a lot of us, everyone else's needs come before my own.

Maybe this is why this is one of the sermons on our liturgical calendar that I feel most passionately about and wholeheartedly look forward to delivering this time of year. Indeed, Advent does give me hope in a way I can't quite put into words, but in a word, it's about *vulnerability*. About admitting that we have sinned against ourselves, in our benign neglect, in our separation from the holy.

I can't help but see a parallel metaphor here. While it would seem this year is the Christmas of the Woman with the countless parade of women victims coming forward about sexual crimes, I keep thinking about the men. Call it internalized sexism, or whatever, but it's the names of these sad, sad men I can't get out of my head: Cosby. Weinstein. Rose. Their separation from the holy would seem an unbridgeable chasm, the very chasm we are wondering if this time we might finally heal, when it comes to sexual violence between human beings, and especially between men and women.

I want to name the bravest man I've heard of to emerge in this era of "Me Too." There is a young man named Wade Hankin, a 25-year-old man from Seattle, who launched a partner hashtag to #metoo — #ihave — in a post in which he admitted his own inappropriate actions involving women and encouraged other men to do so as well.

Talk about vulnerability! He admits that he once blacked out at a party, assaulted a woman, has no recollection of it, and has felt deeply ashamed of it ever since. This is only one man – the #ihave did not take off at all, really. But it's an example of exactly what needs to happen – men and boys need to be able to admit how alone they are, how the dead silence of machismo often imprisons a man for a lifetime. There is a new, very timely book about this called "Deep Secrets: Boys' Friendships and the Crisis of Connection" by Niobe Way. I plan to read it, with the hope of saving my boy from a life of no connection.

*Of course* the good news 2000 years ago would have arrived as a little bundle of total vulnerability – even before he was born, the story says, rulers and rule-makers wanted Jesus dead. So much did they fear his radical message of simple salvation: the ages-old paradox of ultimate strength in our complete vulnerability.

Even if you haven't born children, as men or women, think about when you have experienced your worst close calls of vulnerability, when you thought your world might end, that you might not get to whatever goal has been entrusted to you, as it was for Mary.

That's what Advent is about: vulnerability, however we might prescribe it for ourselves – for me, it's about trying to do this gosh darn meditation class (I'm taking it again and haven't missed a class yet), and about having actual compassion for myself. It's true, I am not good at this, but with more Advents under my belt, I will say I am getting better!

That's what we Unitarian Universalists believe – that we are instrumental in our own salvation. Jesus and the story of the Posadas and the like may inspire us along the way, but we believe *we* have to do it at the end of the day, that like Mary of Magdala, Disciple of Jesus, we have the last word. For what better salvation is there, then taking stock and comfort in our own actions? In our own achievements, incremental though they may be in this day and age, and as it turns out, in any age?

Like the sexual harassment reckoning, in life there are baby steps and seismic steps. We are in such a time as seismic steps, and therefore, this is the Advent/the Hanukkah/the Solstice of the Woman. But I hope it can also be A Time for the Men, when finally, they are no longer separated from a deep, precious and sacred part of themselves – so that they may feel and cry, instead of yell and hit. So that they can confide in their friend, rather than self-destruct alone, or take others down with them.

Let us usher in this new time, as we open our hearts to the power of Advent: just like the Marys did and the Holy babe that somehow survived his own birth, all those hundreds of years ago. It could have happened last week, or it could happen today or tomorrow –

when one by one, women and men wake up from the dream of a distant future. They wake up and they are healed in the eternal presence of the now, for they are no longer strangers to themselves, or to each other. They are home.

Let it be so.