

Dark of Winter, Soft and Still
Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer
Sunday, December 24, 2017 (10:00am)

First Unitarian Universalist Church
Rochester, Minnesota

READINGS

Silence by Billy Collins.

In Midwinter by Rebecca Parker

The Work of Christmas by Howard Thurman

HOMILY

They had been travelling for some time now.
Winding through the farm fields,
travelling by memory and weaving this way and that way,
looking for the best roads, the clearest path.

Sometimes, in an attempt to keep with tradition,
and to spend rare and quality time with family,
you make some not so great choices about travel.

But here they were,
barrowing through the snow, that was falling more and more –
this family packed into their car
thinking the song
over the river and through the woods to grandmother's house we go
sounds so happy and joyful
compared to how they were feeling on the way to grandma's.

That Christmas Eve, leaving midday and planning to arrive early evening,
the song of the angels was *snow, snow, snow*.

They sang songs to keep the children entertained and distracted –
which may or may not have been helpful to the driver.
They played car games of finding things outside –
which was more difficult than usual with the sheet of white all around.

Eventually, as the road seemed endless
and the storm didn't seem to have any letting up at all,
and the fear of running out of gas in the next several miles
in the middle of nowhere was starting to become a possible reality
on the lonely road,
made them turn the heat way down to save on fuel –
now, in a cool car in the snowstorm,
they decided to look for shelter.
No towns for several miles, they knew – certainly no gas stations.
So the new game for the children was
okay, kids – look for a farm house that has a light one!
First one to find it gets a special treat!

The special treat was to not become frozen.

After what felt like hours, which was probably just several minutes, *found one!* a child joyfully yelled from the backseat.

Indeed, this was true – faint winter lights hung with garland around the wrap-around porch of the old farmhouse, just ahead.

The driveway was filled with snow,
not passable for their small car.

So, at the end of the long driveway leading off the highway to the farm,
they piled out of the car,
grabbed what bags they thought were necessary,
leaving the gifts and the food,
they took what they could
and trudged up the driveway.

They got to the porch,
where light was streaming out of the windows,
and the family was gathered in the dining room for games and food
on this snowy Christmas Eve day.

Surprised, certainly, by footsteps on the porch and a knock at the door,
they looked out the window at this family,
opened the door,
with the feel of warmth and the smell of fresh baked food
falling out the door like a blanket on them -
a woman opened the door and said to the mother,
“oh my, don’t tell me you’re Mary”

It was hard to believe, but she was.
*“well, I am – but this isn’t Joseph –
and these two are definitely not Jesus.
And I really hope I’m not pregnant.”*

Trying to get out of a biblical narrative, the father said,

*“We’re about out of gas, and have been just creeping along in the snow –
If you have some gas, that could help us just keep going to a nearby town?”*

And the woman looked at the kids,
and the weary parents,
and said –
“sorry, I can’t give you any gas – because it’s not safe for you to drive.
Come on in – we’ve got enough food for an army in here,
and plenty of room in this old house for you all –
if you don’t mind playing games and sharing a holiday meal with us,
you can wait out the storm here.”

And they did.
The children played games together,
the adults told stories and talked about the weather,
and the storms of years past,
and family and holidays
and the blessings and curses of family roadtrips.

The storm continued on, and the winter sky grew dark,
and they found enough room to stay the night –
there was room at this inn –
room enough, shelter enough,
for the wayfaring strangers
needing a place to rest in the midst of the storm.

Did this really happen? Ask any hearer of the story.
But that’s never the point of any story.
The answer, almost always, is *yes* and *no* –
at least, not exactly.

But does this really happen?
Do people really find themselves stuck in a storm?
Do people really find themselves needing help from strangers?
Do people really open their doors in welcome to those in need?

The first two – stuck in a storm and need help? Always, every day, that happens.
The last one – open doors of welcome?

That, in part, is up to each of us to make the story true.
And yes, this one did happen,
and so often doesn't –
but what a world it could be
if it happened more –
and we opened our doors and shared our food and our warmth
and told stories, and played games, and sang songs,
enough for a soul to warm up, get rest, and be ready to face another day?

In midwinter
writes Rebecca Parker

*the world comes indoors and is our guest of honor.
Arms hug the arriving logs
that clatter in to take their place by the fire.*

*The forest, which we've called and asked to come,
travels long roads to get here.
Finally she arrives, tired, but still bursting
with the energy of high mountain cascades and starry nights.
She tumbles across the threshold
to be fussed over until she is comfortably settled in the living room.
Soon the whole house is filled with the world's presence.
And it is up to us now to make her feel at home.
Let this be the year
we fully welcome the world,
and treat her right,
and lift our glasses in a toast to her,
and thank her,
and keep our resolutions,
and mean it when we say,
Joy to the World.*