

**Darkness Holds it All**  
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First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany  
December 7, 2025

**Reading** *You, Darkness* by Rainer Maria Rilke, translated by David Whyte

**Sermon**

Most mainline protestant churches in this country use the Revised Common Lectionary – collections of bible readings for each Sunday of the year. There are usually four readings - one each from the Hebrew bible, the psalms, the epistles (which are letters written by early church figures, like Paul) and the gospels (the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John).

Most Unitarian Universalist congregations – including this one - don't use the Lectionary. We do use bible readings sometimes – our roots are Christian and so are some of our people - but four bible readings every week would be a lot for us.

Still, sometimes I envy my colleagues who use the Lectionary. Here, every Sunday starts with a blank slate. I imagine I wouldn't mind – sometimes - having my readings chosen for me, narrowing my options for a sermon direction. Of course it's possible that as a Unitarian Universalist I would do something else anyway (we are not known as people who take direction well) but in my imagination, it sometimes seems appealing.

And, so, once in a while, I dip into the lectionary, to see what inspiration it might offer. What I noticed - this time - was that the readings for the first Sunday of Advent (which was last week) are not all joyful celebration of the good news. They're about people living lives where things are really not going well.

There are reminders to slow down, pay attention, prepare for transformation and new beginnings. There are promises of something sacred yet to come. Those are solid Advent themes. But there is also plenty of the pain of the here and now.

An example from one of the psalms:

O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?

You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure.

You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves.<sup>1</sup>

From a Hebrew bible reading:

you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.<sup>2</sup>

And from a gospel reading:

In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 80:4-6

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 64:7

<sup>3</sup> [Matthew 24:29](#) and [Mark 13:24](#).

Advent does not assume that all is well. It begins with the voices of people for whom so much is not well that it seems even their God has abandoned them. They are suffering and crying, their enemies are laughing at them, even the light of the sun and moon go out.

This season of hope and new beginnings starts with despair.

As we approach the longest night, we experience more and more literal darkness. We feel that in our bodies. We might feel the soft, soothing, calming darkness of today's story. The darkness might also evoke feelings of difficult experiences: loss, pain, despair, fear – suffering and crying, laughing enemies, an uncaring Universe – and darkness has become a metaphor for such things. When the poets, our ancient religious ancestors and we speak of darkness, we are mostly not just talking about long nights.

And neither am I – as always, I invite you to hear my words as you hear them. But with two caveats.

First, the use of darkness as a metaphor is often subtly or overtly racist. The darkness of a long night is evocative and it works to frame and connect with other experiences. But when we only use that metaphor to talk about things that are painful, uncomfortable, undesirable, scary ... that's racism.

And in our language, that happens. A lot. If you've never done the exercise where you call to mind common expressions that use the words dark or light (or black or white), and then notice which ones are negative, I invite you to try it sometime. ("It was a dark time" "going over to the dark side," etc.)

So we want to be careful about our metaphors. Not to avoid this one altogether, but – in the words of retired Unitarian Universalist religious educator Jacqui James - to "balance and reclaim" it in its wholeness.<sup>4</sup>

And that gets us to my second caveat - thinking about darkness as only negative is not reality. Darkness is much richer than that.

There is that invitation to be still and rest.

I hope we all can make a little space to heed that call. And if resting in that embrace is what you really need from the darkness today, please take that with you.

And, there are other treasures that can only be found in the dark.

**Darkness holds it all,** says the poet  
the shape and the flame,  
the animal and myself, ...  
and it is possible: its great strength  
is breaking into my body.  
**I have faith in the night.**

In this time of literal darkness, Advent begins by asking us to be with all that is, including what is not OK in our lives. Not to rush to fix anything, not to leap right to whatever joy might be around the corner, but to name it (shout it if necessary, demand that God do better if that works for you).

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/dark-and-light>

And to not be too quick to shine light in all the corners – to instead seek the treasures hidden in the dark.

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Author and conflict consultant Michael McRay<sup>5</sup> wrote an Advent reflection a few years ago about his time working with Christian Peacemaker Teams in Hebron, in the West Bank. One of their responsibilities was to be present for confrontations between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian civilians – to film and document what happened, so the rest of the world would know, and perhaps things would change.

This kind of active waiting for change was ... is ... painful. In McRay's words, "For our exiled friends in prison longing for freedom, for our oppressed [siblings] waiting for justice, for our loved ones on the streets dreaming of a warm home, waiting is agony."

"But," he goes on, "hope is the stuff of survival. It's little wonder people who live in places of suffering are often filled with great hope and joy." And he quotes one Palestinian friend as saying to him, "What choice do we have but to hope? The alternative is death."

Choosing to hope here, now (amid all that is not well) isn't just an Advent thing. It's a life thing. And doing that work together is what religions, including this one, do at their best. My colleague Rob Hardies has said that "**religion is telling each other stories of hope.**" Those stories take shape and grow in the hard parts of our lives.

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*I believe in the sun, even in the darkness.  
I believe in God, even if God is silent.  
I believe in compassion, even when it must remain hidden.*<sup>6</sup>

These words are written on the wall of an underground shelter in Cologne where a group of Jews hid for an extended period during World War II.

If that's not quite the way you've heard this quote, that's because it's been altered over the years – as best I can tell, this is the closest translation of the earliest known primary source.

*I believe in the sun, even in the darkness.  
I believe in God, even if God is silent.  
I believe in compassion, even when it must remain hidden.*

These people were in literal darkness, underground - nurturing a belief in the sun as they waited without its light; sustaining a belief in their God, in spite of all the reasons to feel abandoned; and a belief in compassion, which they were experiencing from those who secretly protected and fed them, and which they had no expectation of receiving should they be discovered.

The darkness holds it all; they had faith, as the poet said, in the night.

Without what's wrong with the world, we wouldn't need strength, hope, trust, imagination, stories of hope. But here, in the real world, we do. And the places we discover these things, and nurture them, are the places where all is not well.

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<sup>5</sup> Claire Brown & Michael T. McRay, *Keep Watch With Me*, Abington Press (Nashville, 2019) page 15.

<sup>6</sup> <https://humanistseminarian.com/2021/04/04/i-believe-in-the-sun-part-v-the-source/> The third line is not a literal translation, but seems to best capture the meaning.

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Scott Russell Sanders, in his book *Hunting for Hope*, tells this story of a young British couple on vacation in Indonesia when their ferry sank in a storm.

They clambered into a lifeboat, but so did many others, and the lifeboat floundered. So they set off swimming, calling back and forth to keep track of one another in the rough seas, until they came upon a floating spar, and there they clung, waiting for rescue. Eventually five other passengers joined them; but one by one the others ran out of strength, let go, and drowned. Asked [later, for the television camera] how they managed to hold on for thirteen hours while the waves hurled them about, they smiled. One said ‘We remembered things we’d done together, we told jokes, we sang.’ ‘We promised one another we’d get married straightaway,’ the other says, ‘if only we survived. It seemed almost like some great power asked us a question. How could we let go?’<sup>7</sup>

The darkness holds it all, and sometimes its strength can find its way into our bodies.

It is the strength of the Jews in the Holocaust whose faith grew while in the darkness, the strength of the Palestinians who still practice hope, the strength of the couple whose faith in their future together was forged in that shared impossibly difficult and tragic experience.

The darkness holds it all.

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At this point, I can feel myself getting a little tense, and I suspect I’m not the only one. We’re getting perilously close to a theology that has been (and still is) used to encourage people who are oppressed to accept their suffering because it is good for them. It’s a theology that was preached to enslaved people (and to those who enslaved them). It has been and still is used to encourage women to stay in abusive relationships because their suffering brings them closer to God. When I suggest that **there is something sacred woven into the hard parts of our lives** that is not what I mean.

The point is not to leave the young couple in the water so they can deepen their faith. Or to keep having wars, or force people to hide underground, because suffering breeds hope. I hope we will always reduce suffering anywhere and any way we can.

And. In this world where all is not well, the places of suffering are also where we find hope, faith, joy, strength.

We don’t go looking for these places. We try to avoid them. But we all find ourselves there, sometimes. And just as so often we use light to drive away the literal darkness, so too we deny or distract ourselves from what is hard. Sometimes, that’s all we can do.

But ... if we can take time to be present there, we might also find the treasures that can only be found there - and that make another way of being possible. The darkness holds it all - suffering, nourishment, strength, faith, the stories that speak of hope ...

And, fortunately, we don’t have to go there alone. For as the vacationing couple discovered, when we tell each other those stories of hope, that great strength of the darkness might just become ours.

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<sup>7</sup> Scott Russell Sanders, *Hunting for Hope*, 22 (also quoted in Frederic Muir, *Heretic’s Faith* 111-12).

In hard times, we might take some inspiration from those ancient Christian and Hebrew people quoted in many Protestant churches this time of year, and look the suffering head on. And then, we too might practice finding the hope and faith and joy that the poets tell us is there – in the darkness, that holds it all.

So let's celebrate light in all the ways people do this time of year. But let's not always seek to drive away the darkness. Instead, let's allow ourselves to slow down and pay attention, and perhaps discover something we need in its strong and nourishing embrace.

Darkness, soothe my weary eyes, that I may see more clearly.

When my heart with sorrow cries, comfort and caress me.

And then my soul may hear a voice, a still, small voice of love eternal.

Darkness, when my fears arise, let your peace flow through me.

May it be so.

Amen.