

I know what it says in the Order of Service. Meditation first, then sermon. But we're going to do things a bit differently than planned. We'll get to that meditation, but after the sermon this time. Sometimes the sermon I think I'm going to write isn't the one that comes out on the page.

Life's often like that – a bit different than we'd planned. Just when you think that things are a certain way or going along just fine, something, or some things, come at you from out of left field and they smack you right upside the head and you realize that things are not going to go the way you thought they were. Perhaps you were feeling secure and comfortable, and now you're not. Maybe you thought you had resources of a certain kind or worth or promise, and now you don't. Instead of being able to focus on one set of plans, dreams, or hopes, you find yourself having to put your energy and attention back on the basics. You want to feel hopeful and positive about a bright future, and yet you find yourself, instead, in a dark and murky place of uncertainty and doubt.

This is the day of the Winter Solstice; in Pagan traditions, a time to celebrate the turning of the year – Yule – when the Earth tips on her axis and the Northern Hemisphere moves toward the expanding light of Spring. Nature repeats and repeats the cycle of light and dark – each day, each year as the Earth makes her journey around the Sun. And, like nature takes this season to go inward, to slow down and hold itself in darkness, our souls can find themselves in a place we experience as dark and cold, as well. Just because it's natural doesn't mean that we enjoy experiencing this cycle. Like we complain about the short days and chilly temperatures, finding ourselves in a dark place spiritually can be discomfoting and frightening. As if there weren't enough within our individual lives to challenge us, there's been much in the news lately that makes this particular season one which seems darker and more uncertain than any we've experienced in quite awhile.

When the foundations of our life are shaken, the indicators of well-being tumbled, and our sense of security rattled, we can enter a period like winter, a dark night of the soul.

At times, it just seems so unfair. We, personally, were not in a position to create the circumstances that life presents to us right now. Not that there weren't things that each of us might have done differently, but we are not personally the ones who are specifically responsible, for example, for making the stock market crash, inflation impacting our budgets, or the housing market taking a downturn. None of us personally squandered \$50 billion dollars in a Ponzi scheme, starved the children of Africa, or fueled the crisis in the Middle East. Yet, those things are all realities, they affect us, and we are now faced with having to deal with the fall out in our own lives.

We are a culture of people trained to be and rewarded for being analyzers and problem solvers, more accustomed and acclaimed for doing than being. We are programmed for taking action, getting it done, and being fiercely independent and self-reliant. Now, we find ourselves in unfamiliar territory. Things are not as we wish they were. Maybe we discover ourselves feeling frustrated and powerless. Scared. Trapped. Angry. It zaps our energy and resilience.

And, when we can't focus our anger on what's not right "out there," when there's really nothing we can personally do to make things different RIGHT NOW, it can be tempting to turn our focus, and our feelings of frustration and impatience and anger, onto the situations around us – our family, ourselves, our community. Now, not only are we not happy with the way the world is working, we may not be too happy with things and people around us, with our relationships, with ourselves, with our friends.

Nature gives us examples of dealing with tough times. Some seeds cannot germinate unless they are frozen. Others require the scorching temperatures of forest fires to release their growth potential. Tough time can feel like a trial by fire, certainly. Tough times can bring out the best in people, and tough times can bring out the worst in us, as well. Fear constricts us, making life seem smaller. We may feel tired or short-tempered, touchy or raw from trying to cope with the stresses we find life throwing our way. Sarcasm and cynicism may creep around the edges of our thoughts, into the way to talk to our friends and loved ones. In this challenging time of our lives, in the dark of the year, we may feel that our life has taken a dark turn, as well.

When we are frightened or scared, we sometimes withdraw into ourselves, not wanting others to know that we are not feeling hopeful or that our life is not the well-ordered, in-control model that we think they think we possess. Paradoxically, it is in times like these, just when we think we don't want to be around others that we have greatest need for each other. This community, each of you, your commitment to each other in Fellowship, creates a place where all of us can be loved, welcomed, and embraced, even when we're not perfect, even when life isn't what we'd hoped.

Where fear constricts, love makes openings and softens life. Choose love. While it isn't always easy, it's important for us to be kind and gentle with ourselves and with one another. Make time for each other. Listen. Try again. Reach out, especially when you don't think you feel like reaching out. Remind each other that we are loved and loveable. Trust what is good. Say, "I love you." I love each of you. Even if you are new here. Even if I don't know you very well. Even if I DO know you very well – I love each of you for the gift you are to me and to this community. When you're scared or unsure of what to do next, remember to choose to act with love. And, when you don't, try again. Ask for help.

The poet, Mary Oliver, in "When I Cried for Help" in her book, *Red Bird*, writes:

Where are you, Angel of Mercy?
Outside in the dusk,
among the flowers?

Leaning against the window or the door?
Or waiting, half asleep,
in the spare room?

I'm here, said the Angel of Mercy.
I'm everywhere—in the garden,
in the house, and everywhere else on earth—so much asking,
so much to do.

Hurry! I need you.

Each of us can be "Angels of Mercy" to one another. None of us is here because we are perfect. We're here because we're on a life journey full of joys and sorrows, questions and answers and we don't want to make the trip alone. Because we know that it's better when we go together.

The poet asks the Angel of Mercy to hurry. Sometimes, it's challenging for us to be patient and wait and see what will happen. We want results NOW! We want

gratification immediately. It's hard to have faith and hope when you can't see the light at the end of the tunnel – when you aren't even sure what tunnel you're in! Nature teaches us about the importance of patience. The cycles of the seasons of nature take their own time. Imagine standing over your tulip bulbs, tucked away in the moist earth of a chilly December, and screaming at them, "Hurry up! I want flowers NOW!" Or politely asking the sun if it would mind coming up 15 minutes earlier or later tomorrow morning, because you've got plans. Aint' gonna happen.

We hope that the uncertainty of this time in our lives won't last long. We hope that things will be right again soon. But, there isn't always something we can actually do to make that a reality. Sometimes we do just have to wait and see. Nature teaches us about the cycles of things, and we can find comfort in remembering that, sooner or later, things will change. Hope tells us that things will change for the better. The great author and social commentarian Studs Terkel, who died in October at age 96, leaves us with this wisdom, learned from his own experience of living through the Great Depression of the 1930's: "La esperanze muere ultima. Hope dies last. Without hope, you can't make it. Don't blame yourself. Turn to others. Take part in the community. Once you become active helping others, you feel alive. And as long as we have that hope, we'll be okay."

Nature is a guide for our hope, as well. We know that the days will lengthen, that the temperature will rise again, that the Earth will be renewed before us. Things will change, because that is what things do. We find hope when we remember the creativity, adaptability, and tenacity of people, ourselves included, and how we will adapt and learn and create a way for ourselves and for others. Spring will come again, perhaps not exactly like last spring, or the one before that, but filled with flowers and beauty and possibility. And, we will have to find a way to hold onto our vision of the possible future while we wait and cope with where we are today.

A Jewish folk tale tells the story of a great king, some say Solomon himself, who yearned to be consoled during the challenging times during his rule. Calling together his trusted advisors, he asked them to search the land and find a talisman engraved with words that could comfort and reassure him. One of the advisors returned to him with a ring, engraved with the words "This, too, shall pass."

While we, too, wait for this to pass, let us be renewed in our confidence that we can deal with what comes our way, not because we can do it all ourselves, but because we have the support and encouragement of a beloved community that cares for us and wants us to be happy. Must be confident that you can deal with whatever comes your way, not only by yourself, but with the support, love, and input of a caring and embracing community that cares about you and wants you to be happy.

So, let's move into a time of meditation now. Let's move into the heart of winter, and share this time in a guided visualization:

Meditation: Entering the Heart of Winter

Questions at the end of the meditation:

Now, I'd like to invite you to consider these questions, for a moment: What is waiting, hoping, inside of you to be born? What is gestating, taking form and coming to readiness inside you in this season?

Now, I'd like you to stand up. Turn and face one of your neighbors, one of the people who share this journey with you in this community. I'd like you to share one of your hopes with them, and listen as they share one of theirs with you.

In times of darkness, we can create our own light, by reaching out and being a light of hope and encouragement to each other.

May you be blessed in this holiday season