



Waiting

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community. We explore each theme in worship and in our newsletter; in covenant groups, guided writing sessions and Wednesday evening programming; and in our community outreach ministries, our literary journal and programs, and many other opportunities. The December theme is Waiting.

Waiting has, perhaps justifiably, been given a bad rap. It conjures up time wasted in waiting rooms with dog-eared magazines, in traffic jams where the air is choked by exhaust, or in long lines as we queue up to claim some new possession or experience.

But wait. What about the kind of waiting that is less about taking our turn than it is about taking our time and less about arrival than it is about awareness? It is *this* waiting – the quiet, patient kind that turns our hurried world on its head – that calls for our attention in the cold and darkening days of December.

A few years ago, a young freelancer wrote an article about illegal Central American immigrants hopping freight trains in Mexico to reach and cross the U.S. border. When a picture editor told the journalist her story needed a dramatic photo, she headed to a Mexican train yard with her camera to hop a boxcar with the immigrants.

For seven days she waited for the right train and the right moment. Some of the trains moved too fast, others were too empty. Some weren't headed to the border; others moved through in the middle of the night. For a week she waited, passing the time by photographing the immigrants waiting with her. Only at the end of the week did she realize she had all the photographs the story needed – not images of the heart-stopping leap onto the train nor of the clattering journey down the tracks, but images of the immigrants' long, hot and hungry, often dangerous wait in the train yard.

Waiting can be as difficult to practice as it is to photograph, but it has as much to do with going someplace new as it has to do with sitting still. We might dismiss it as an annoyance, a petty passivity or undesired delay. But waiting is about preparing ourselves for something different. Waiting is about learning to see and listen so attentively that we will know when something fresh and providential comes along.

It can be challenging to experience this kind of waiting when we know how the season's stories all turn out. We already know not only who is about to be born but also when and where. We already know that though the Maccabees had only one day's oil, it would burn for the

requisite eight-day watch. And certainly we know that the longest night, on winter solstice, will inevitably be followed by longer days to come.

And yet, for all our knowing, the invitation of this season and its stories is to enter a deeper kind of waiting – to wait without knowing exactly what we're waiting for. It is a kind of faithful listening, an attentiveness to possibilities we may not even yet imagine. Surely, for all our knowing, the world still contains enough mystery, enough uncertainty, enough proleptic promise that we too in the 21st century can take up this kind of faithful watch.

Can you hear the child's quiet voice of hope born outside the inn? Can you see a guiding star in the night sky or hear the host of voices singing praise for a new day and a new order? Can you light the lamp of your faith even though you fear it will run dry before your watch is through?

This is the waiting we are called into as people of faith. This is the waiting that is required not only in this season but also as we work year round for justice, as we hope tirelessly for peace, and as we live day by day into the promise of beloved community.

"[T]he work of peace and justice, like the work of the Seed within, is one of patient waiting," says Quaker Douglas Gwyn. "Patience is an active condition of the spirit. It can march; it can demonstrate; it can live in jails. It can survive the long haul of transformation."

So we are called to wait and to watch on our feet, in the long haul of transformation.

Karen Hering
Consulting Literary Minister

Waiting Resources

BOOKS

Reaching Out, by Henri Nouwen, a perceptive exploration of befriending emptiness as a practice of the spiritual life.

Room, by Emma Donoghue, a potent and darkly beautiful novel narrated by a five-year-old child raised captive in a single room with his mother.

MOVIES

Field of Dreams, the 1989 feature film about an Iowa farmer who builds a baseball diamond in his fields and waits for the Chicago Black Sox to come and play in it.

STORY ON-LINE

Thomas Potter and John Murray: <http://www.murraygrove.org/pottermurray.html> The historical account of 18th-century farmer Thomas Potter, who faithfully waited 10 years for a minister who would preach universalism in the chapel he built in New Jersey.