**A Great Groaning of All Creation:  
A Reflection on Advent**

**Presented at First Unitarian Church of Oakland**

**November 30, 2014**

**By Alex Haider-Winnett**

Friends, it is once again an honor and a privilege to be speaking with you today. As you can see, our regular ministers are not up here. I was joking with some friends that, this being the weekend after Thanksgiving, we are your left-overs; the ministerial equivalent to a Turkey and cranberry sandwich. But, nonetheless, it is good to be here.

Today is the first day of [Advent](http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/liturgical-year/advent/). In the Christian liturgical calendar, Advent is the season preceding Christmas. For the next four weeks, Christians everywhere will be preparing and waiting in hopeful joy for the birth of Jesus.

It is a time for reflection, anticipation and faith. If you are like me, you know something about hopeful anticipation. It seems like all we have been doing lately is waiting. Waiting for news. Waiting for results to come in. Waiting with hope that this time will be different.

October and November have felt like a constant waiting game. Anybody feel that way? That all we have been doing is waiting?

Some waiting is benign- waiting for bread to rise for Thanksgiving dinner. Waiting for the bus to arrive to get to work. Waiting for clothes to dry. These are opportunities to give simple prayers of gratitude. *I am thankful for food to eat, a job to go to and clothes on my back*. May we always be forced to wait for simple pleasures. To keep us grateful and humble.

Some waiting is complicated- Waiting for rain to come to quench the thirsty earth. Waiting for election-night results. Waiting to hear the President’s immigration reform announcement. For months many of the young adults in this community have been waiting to get weekly updates from a dear friend and mentor who has been struggling with cancer--and finally getting some good news. Waiting for good news in a time of difficulty can be an opportunity to give simple prayers of hope. *We really need something good to happen right now. Please let the tests come back clean. Please let people see the way of justice. Please let there be someone there who understands what I am going through.*

Some waiting is hard- Sometimes we are waiting for a miracle that may never come. Sometimes we are waiting for bad news. Sometimes we are waiting for the storm to pass over. This is an opportunity for a prayer for help. A prayer to turn to another and say, “*I am lost and I need your help.*” Unitarian Universalism will never promise you easy answers to your questions. We have no sacred texts or dogma to fall back on. We may dream of better days but there is no promise. And sometimes we have to join others who are building a new way. We must have faith in each other.

In traditional Advent hymns and literature, there is mention of “[groaning](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans%208:18-25)”. It is sometimes an anxious, uncomfortable anticipation. Whether we are Christian or not, most of us know the [Nativity story](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%202): Mary, large with child, on a donkey. Being led to Bethlehem--a hilly and desert-like area. I am sure there was some well-deserved groaning. And Mary coming to term but having to give birth in a stable. A new life coming into the world with groaning and screaming amidst the cattle and the hay. The waiting is hard but sometimes the creating is the most difficult part.

For the past few weeks, I was joining millions of people across the country waiting in nervous anticipation for the results from the [Grand Jury in Ferguson](http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_documents/ferguson-shooting/). To hear what would come of the months of waiting after Officer Darren Wilson shot and killed Mike Brown in the streets of Missouri and after the government allowed Mike’s body to lie in the street for four hours in the hot August sun. The people were groaning in anticipation. Would justice be served for Mike and his family? Hope was dim.

While we waited for news from Ferguson, Transgender Day of Remembrance came. That time when we remember the Transgender, Transsexual and Gender Queer brothers, sisters and kinfolk who were killed. And I thought about [Zoraida Reyes](http://blogs.ocweekly.com/navelgazing/2014/10/randy_lee_parkerson_zoraida_reyes.php) who was killed in June just down the road from where I grew up and [Brandy Martell](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/02/brandy-martell-california-transgender-woman-shooting_n_1471209.html) who was killed two years ago just five blocks from here. I thought about the countless people killed for the apparent crime of being alive and living their most authentic selves. When will they get their justice? I wait for a day when Transgender Day of Remembrance is no longer necessary. I pray for that day with my tears.

While we waited for news from Ferguson, we learned that there were more deaths of young people of color at the hands of our government--on average, 1 every 28 hours. Most shocking to people was the killing of [Tamir Rice](http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2014/dec/03/officer-who-fatally-shot-tamir-rice-had-been-judged-unfit), a twelve year old boy playing with a toy gun in Cleveland, Ohio. Despite having been told by dispatchers that the gun was “probably fake”, police fired on the boy immediately after leaving the patrol car.

After the death of Tamir Rice in Cleveland and exoneration of Darren Wilson in Ferguson, there was a great groaning of sadness, grief and anger. I don’t blame them. I am angry, too. I’m sad. I am frustrated. And confused. I am groaning in anticipating for something to change. I wait for a day when those who swear to protect and serve do so for everyone regardless of the color of their skin or the zip code they live in. And I pray for that day with my groans. And I know many of you did too. And you prayed for those days with your feet. You got up and [marched in the streets](http://bangphotos.smugmug.com/01News-2/Bay-Area/Oakland-reacts-to-Ferguson/i-qnrJMT2/0/L/OAK-FERGREAX-1125-65-L.jpg). In the name of love you stood, marched, rolled, and sat where you weren’t supposed to sit along with people who have been groaning for change for years. And there were those of us--including myself--who weren’t able to make it into the streets. But lit candles, cried, read blog posts, responded on social media, sat with someone and listened, made their prayers present in another way. All of these prayers joined with thousands of other prayers around the country. And they were so powerful that people noticed. And those prayers continue to get noticed. The birth of something new is coming. And we are preparing for it. And it isn’t coming quietly. It is coming with groaning and crying and shouting.

Friends, our faith doesn’t come easily. But it is powerful. People of all faiths and no organized faith came together the past week to help witness something new. A world where people are valued. A world where people get the justice they deserve. It happened in the streets of Oakland and Ferguson and New York and Seattle and Nashville and LA and Atlanta New Orleans and Northern Ireland and Palestine. It happened all over the world.

There are UU communities whose praying hands and hearts are full of good work. I am thinking of [Arturo Hernandez Garcia](http://standingonthesideoflove.org/immigration/take-action-in-support-of-arturo-hernandez-garcia-today/) in Denver who received sanctuary from the Unitarian Universalist church there when faced with deportation. I am thinking about the [UU church in New Orleans](http://www.latimes.com/local/abcarian/la-me-ra-antiabortion-fanatics-invade-a-church-service-20140723-column.html#page=1) whose worship was interrupted for the apparently audacious belief that women should be able to choose what happens to their own bodies. I am thinking about all the UU ministers and communities who have been in [Ferguson and St. Louis](http://youtu.be/ClNCaOHvFf4) working to support the residents and protesters there--serving as organizers, chaplains, medics and other important support roles. I am thinking of our very own [Sam Ames](http://blueboat.blogs.uua.org/2014/11/11/life-saving-torture-ending-rock-star-faith/) who went all the way to Geneva to tell the UN that conversion therapy of young Queer youth is torture. I am thinking about all the ways that our church communities have repeatedly stood for the those who have been rejected. And I am sending love to them. These are the communities that are praying new realities into existence.

Our faith calls on us to love the hell out of the world. By loving the world so much, it changes. And it starts by honoring the people in our communities. We as Unitarian Universalists, on our best days, say “You are the one we were waiting for. You are the most important person to walk through that door today. You are the answer to my prayers and I am so glad you are here.” And, maybe, for the first time in our lives, we heard that and actually believed it. And it changed us. It changed us in a way so radically that we can bring that change into the world. To care for those who have been rejected by society. To tear down the structures that abuse the world and its inhabitants. To believe that every person matters. That Black Lives Matter. And Women’s Lives Matter. And Latino Lives Matter. And Queer Lives Matter. That Poor Lives Matter. That Young Lives Matter. And Old Lives Matter.That Mike Brown’s Life Mattered. And Tamir Rice’s Life Mattered. And Zoraida Reyes’s Life Mattered. And Brandy Martell’s Life Mattered. And Arturo Garcia’s Life Matters. And that my life matters. And yes, your life matters, too. And what we choose to do with that life matters. I believe that. I really do.

As we move into the season of Advent. The season of preparation and anticipation, let us pray our dreams into existence. The ways we do it may be diverse. And they may not all look the same. And it maybe something as crucial and difficult as listening--actually listening to someone who is groaning in anticipation for a world different from this one. But whatever you do, this is a time for birthing a new world. And it isn’t going to happen without some groaning. And we are going to have to have faith in each other. Fatih in the fact that your life matters.

[Don’t forget. I love you.](http://youtu.be/E20PpEsU3oE) I really do. And I believe in you.