



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister  
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

---

## “’Tis the Season”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

A sermon delivered on December 6, 2015

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:  
a time to be born, and a time to die...a time for war, and a time for peace. Ecclesiastes 3*

*Winter is the time for comfort, for good food and warmth, for the touch of a friendly hand  
and for a talk beside the fire: it is the time for home. Edith Sitwell*

*There must be always remaining in every life, some place for the singing of angels,  
some place for that which in itself is breathless and beautiful. Howard Thurman*

### Sermon

This is the time of year, the season, when various religious holidays symbolically remind us of hope. The legends, myths and stories, whether real or not, show us that even in darkest of times, new hope can be born.

Hope can be born in the rededication of the Jewish temple after the Maccabean defeat of a Roman army. Their hope was realized by the new-found freedom to practice their religion.

Hope can be born as the Earth moves in its great circle around our planetary center and source of life – the Sun. Hope for all Earth’s creatures and plant life is realized in the lengthening daylight.

Hope can be born in the birth of a baby, whether in a straw-filled manger, a Section 8 apartment, or an exquisite million-dollar mansion, a baby who will rise and lead us to peace in our time and in our world.

Hope can be born with every candle we light to chase away the dark.

Even so, it is hard to be hopeful in our time and in our world.

My heart breaks for all the families who have lost loved ones as a result of war, terrorism, racism, gangs, and other sources of violence. My heart breaks for the immigrants and refugees who are displaced and seek shelter, like Mary and Joseph long ago.

I wonder if our world suffers from a form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. How could we not when every day we receive news of one human atrocity after another. In response, many of us become numb to these events, or become angry and violently strike back, or suffer broken hearts in despair.

I despair to understand how some people can place so little value on human life. I despair to understand how some can cloak indiscriminate killing as a religious act that would please a God.

I despair to understand how some of America's political leaders consider it acceptable for every-day people to carry assault-style automatic weapons and high-capacity ammunition clips.

We live in dark times. We live in a cold and cruel winter world. //

This is not the sermon I expected to deliver today. I wanted to focus on joy and wonder and this magical time of year when anything seems possible, including miracles. But this was the sermon that wanted to be written. This was the sermon that felt my tears of sorrow and heavy heart. And I confess, I don't feel that anything magical or wondrous will happen anytime soon. I imagine many of you feel similarly lost and fearful that humanity will not find its way back to love and peace.

A first responder to recent events in California, Lt. Mike Madden of the San Bernardino police department, described the scene he encountered when entering the regional community center. He described the awful juxtaposition of the smell of gunpowder, flashing emergency lights, blaring alarms, spraying sprinklers, and bloody human bodies contrasted against the colorful Christmas tree and festive holiday table decorations. For him, everything that Christmas symbolizes—peace, hope, and goodwill toward all—brutally was destroyed and defiled by the violence, hate, and death wrought upon innocent employees and guests by a couple determined to terrorize.

This horrendous juxtaposition isn't limited to San Bernardino. It illustrates our entire world. We who desire peaceful coexistence, we who want respect for all people no matter what their religion, skin color, sexual orientation, or beliefs about gun control, we who wish for the lion and the lamb to rest beside one another, we live beside those who do *not* desire these things. Despair comes easy; the peaceable kingdom seems impossible.

The late Howard Thurman, theologian, civil rights activist and friend of Martin Luther King Jr, writes about despair and hope in this passage from his book, *Deep Is the Hunger*.

There is a strange irony in the usual salutation, 'Merry Christmas,' when most of the people on this planet are thrown back upon themselves for food which they do not possess, for resources that have long since been exhausted, and for vitality which has already run its course. Nevertheless, the inescapable fact remains that Christmas symbolizes hope even at a moment when hope seems utterly fantastic. The raw materials of the Christmas mood are a newborn baby, a family, friendly animals, and labor. An endless process of births is the perpetual answer of life to the fact of death. It says that life keeps coming on, keeps seeking to fulfill itself, keeps affirming the margin of hope in the presence of desolation, pestilence, and despair. It is not on accident that the birth rate seems always to increase during times of war, when the formal processes of man are engaged in the destruction of others. Welling up out of the depths of vast vitality, there is something at work that is more authentic than the formal discursive design of the human mind. As long as this is true ultimately, despair about the human race is groundless.

We cannot live despairing of our future. We cannot give up on humanity. We cannot let evil win this battle. We cannot let hopelessness fill our souls. In this very, very dark and cold time of the

year and this very, very dark and cold season in history, you and I need the holiday and holy day messages of hope more than ever.

It is not delusional or irrationally optimistic to maintain our hold on hope. Hope encourages us to act. If we have hope, if we believe a situation *can* change, then we work to make it change. Without hope, we have no motivation to bring about the change we wish to see.

We need to believe miracles and magic can happen.

We need to believe that what we do matters and makes a difference.

We need to believe that we can overcome the dark forces of human nature and that we can liberate the forces of light.

Even as we grieve our losses in Paris, in San Bernardino, and elsewhere, we need to celebrate the holidays. We need to light candles to chase away the dark.

I want to share with you a poem by E.T. Buehrer, a Unitarian minister. It was probably written in the 1960s, but it was put to music and published in 1983 in a small Unitarian Universalist Association hymnal, *Celebrating Christmas in Song: Thirteen New Carols*. The poem reflects an earlier time of war and social upheaval and seems appropriate for our time now.

Poets, tell the ancient story,  
sing the universal song;  
Take from war its cruel glory,  
speed love's triumph over wrong.  
Hate belies it,  
Doubt denies it  
Peace on earth, good-will to all!

Calm the angry pride of nations,  
stay the threat of holocaust.  
Let all peoples' lifted voices  
call for peace, lest earth be lost  
Fear rejects it,  
Hope expects it  
Peace on earth, good-will to all!

Prophets, speak with greater power;  
leaders, mark your mission clear,  
Match the challenge of this hour,  
rid the world of hate and fear.  
Faith believes it,  
Love achieves it  
Peace on earth, good-will to all!

Love achieves peace on earth. Love means good will to all. These are messages we sing, these are messages we send on holiday cards. These are messages we can make real in our lives because love doesn't require buying presents for people who need none. Or spending money we don't have. Or buying presents for ourselves because advertisers tell us more will make us happy.

Instead, love requires our *presence*, spelled with a CE not a TS. Love requires us to spend time, not money.

This holiday season create some new traditions and spend time with people you love—whether family, friends, or from among your larger UU family. Spend time over a meal, time going for a walk, time playing a game, time baking cookies, time watching a movie, or time helping someone needing your assistance. Find time and spend it well, together or alone.

Let's treasure our time, knowing that random acts of terror might cut it short.

Let's remember to be kind, compassionate, forgiving, and especially loving, so that we lighten someone else's darkness.

Let's remember that happiness comes from what's inside us, not outside in prettily wrapped packages.

Let's remember that hope is the message of Hanukkah, Solstice, Christmas, Kwanzaa, and the New Year.

Let's remember that in time the sun *will* chase away the dark.

Let's remember to help make it so.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. What holiday or holy day memories, traditions, or rituals make this season special for you?  
What might make these holidays difficult or unwelcome for you?
2. How might seasons, holidays, and anniversaries mark time for you? What helps you keep track of passing time and encourages you to live life fully now?
3. If you could be granted a wish or prayer during this holiday season what would it be? What can you do to help make that wish or prayer come true?