Once upon a time there was a family that had the tradition of opening one present Christmas Eve, and the remainder on Christmas morning. One year, the girl in the family, about age 8 or 9 and the grandmother in the family, about 60 years old, teamed up together and argued for opening everything Christmas eve. The family conceded – as the little girl was the youngest and the grandmother the eldest, it seemed right to honor their wishes. They enjoyed themselves tremendously Christmas eve and went to sleep satisfied. However, the next morning, when all that was left were a few presents brought by Santa overnight, it was a disappointment. A disappointment the little girl never acknowledged for she had argued so vehemently for the change. Nevertheless, the family never again opened all the gifts on Christmas Eve.

Part of the enjoyment of Christmas is the anticipation. Hanukkah, also, especially if you open a gift each night of Hanukkah. As I understand it, Hanukkah was not a very significant Jewish holiday, but has grown by its proximity to Christmas (which of course was timed to take advantage of the pagan Winter solstice celebrations). Hanukkah became popular in this country so that Jewish children didn’t have to miss out on the gifts other children around them were enjoying. I like the idea of drawing out the gifts for 8 nights of Hanukkah.

The religious holidays stand in contrast to the secular and commercial celebrations of them. The religious themes of this season – be they Pagan, Christian, Jewish or other – all honor this long history and ancient stories that remind us that we are a part of something bigger and more important than the small view and limited experience we have right now. There is a larger story in which we are embedded, and a longer history than our brief lives encompass. This larger context provides hope. For we know that there is something more …

The commercialization of holiday season is beautifully portrayed in the holiday classic, Miracle on 34th street. Alfred, the aspiring Santa says:

“A lot a bad ‘isms’ floating around this world... but one of the worst is commercialism. Make a buck. Make a buck. Even in Brooklyn it’s the same. Don’t care what Christmas stands for. Just make a buck.”

The presents – at this season - are symbolic of our relationships, our love – a representation of that affection, not an end in themselves. Just as the baby Jesus and the flaming chalice are symbols of hope. Tangible representations of a larger feeling. When we forget about what they symbolize and take them as an end in themselves, that’s when we get a little lost in the season. It’s not about the presents. It’s about the meanings we put to them - the love, and the hope, kindness and joy, the “lovely intangibles” as they are referred to in that classic movie I mentioned a moment ago.

But that doesn’t mean the presents aren’t fun, especially when you’re a kid. The anticipation of what’s inside a wrapped package is really quite appealing and even sometimes thrilling.
Eventually, the girl learned that the presents (from Santa) were hidden under her grandparents’ bed. She would often first go to sleep in her grandparents’ bed because it was next door to the kitchen where the adults would play cards late into the night. She loved to lie there listening to the laughter and chatter of the adults who loved her. She sometimes peeked under the bed to see the wrapped packages that would appear in the morning. One year, she saw these very long packages, and she spent her waking hours that night wondering what conceivable surprise they could contain. That they turned out to be skis for her aunts, for some reason did not disappoint her – she was satisfied to have the mystery solved. She loved her aunts and was happy that they got something so exotic – and imagined herself skiing someday too.

For children safe and loved, the holiday season can be filled with expectation and hope. The stories we tell our children of Santa Claus serve to heighten the excitement of the season, and increase the anticipation. Time has a different rhythm to it when we are waiting so intensely.

Their parents were early risers, but on Christmas morning they would always sleep in! The two brothers were not allowed to go downstairs, where the tree was, until their parents were ready. They would take 40 minute showers that morning, and then go downstairs to make coffee – an endless endeavor, and it seemed like hours to the boys that they had been waiting until finally released from their suffering and allowed to go downstairs.

Time feels different at different moments and stages of our lives. We can be thinking in the future or of the past and hardly notice the room we’re in while thinking our thoughts. “Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans” said John Lennon wisely. It’s a funny quip, but poignantly descriptive of our ability to disconnect with the reality that is while thinking about the future.

Of course there’s a limited practical use of that skill as well. Because what’s in the room, is not always loving and safe. The stories I’ve shared of Christmas memories are the kind we cherish. We also experience tragedy and heartbreak along the trajectory of our lives, and it’s rarely comfortable to be present to those realities. It can be more pleasurable to review the great memories or imagine brighter futures...

Hope, however, requires that first we accept what is. We must resist the headlong tumble into the next moment and fully realize this one. If we tumble forward without first accepting what is –ours is a shallow faith that doesn’t last or serve us well. It leads quickly to despair, once reality sets in.

Vaclav Havel, the Czech playwright and poet and president, wrote in Disturbing the Peace, that “hope does not consist of the expectation that things will come out exactly right, but the expectation that they will make sense regardless of how they come out.” That we continue to try to make sense of our lives and our world reinforces the hope we generate. In this way, it can become a practice. The practice of acknowledging what is and making sense of it, is practicing hope.

I don’t mean to say it’s easy, but that it’s possible. That we must practice hope in order to generate it may seem paradoxical. I find encouragement in the writings of Vaclav Havel who writes about his inner fears in Disturbing the Peace, which De shared with you this morning.

That we can practice hope despite our fears is encouraging to me. Vaclav Havel suggests that we can be present to what is, even as we look for the meaning and possibilities and take the risks necessary to build a different world.
The world wide protests that De spoke about, especially the Women’s March of January 21, is such an example of practicing hope despite our fears. He did not live to see how the world is in this moment of time, but I suspect it would be strangely familiar to him. I had not experienced in my lifetime the degree of division and vitriol that the last US presidential election raised – but that is not to say that it was not there... clearly, it was, or it couldn’t have surfaced so easily.

In fact, I remember speaking a local imam in Michigan in January of 2016 as the election was heating up. I was apologizing to him – or expressing my embarrassment and shame at the tenor of the presidential campaign and the ugly prejudices which were being spoken. But his response was, ‘no, this is good. It is being spoken. We knew it was there, but now that it has surfaced we can address it.’

And I realized that it was from my social location that I could be in denial, because I was not the target of xenophobic slights and insults and worse on a daily basis. As my friend, the imam, was originally from Pakistan and dressed differently and looked middle eastern, he was never able to deny the race and culture prejudice present in the population.

Last week in my sermon, I was trying to articulate how we can look for meaning and possibilities even in this painful present as women speak out against the abuse of power by men. And it is not always of course, men abusing women – we cannot tolerate the abuse of power by persons of any gender.

Just as the hashtag #Black Lives Matter meaning ‘black lives matter, too’, is an expansion and inclusion of all the lives that matter, even the ones which have been abused the most. Likewise, the hashtag #metoo is the calling out and public rejection of sexual harassment and violence perpetrated on women and includes the denunciation of abuse of all peoples in such ways.

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice anywhere” said Martin Luther King Jr. and that’s what these particular hashtags mean. We are saying that it is not okay to abuse anyone because of ethnicity or gender – and that includes those whose rights have been ignored the most. And it is the acknowledgement of racism and misogyny which often supports the violence in our culture.

Rev. Manish Mishra-Marzetti wrote a piece for a book which was featured in the latest UU World on intersections of these justice causes – it was explicitly about environmental justice – but how an intersectional lens to justice-making can be “unifying, impactful and spiritually transformative.” And that’s what we need to understand. I like to turn King’s words around and say that “justice anywhere is a threat to injustice everywhere.” Justice is not a limited quality, just as love breeds more love, justice creates more justice.

I was so encouraged by the great turnout yesterday for the Being a Better Ally yesterday. Dr. David Campt was here to work with over 60 people in this sanctuary about how white people can talk to other white people about racism.

At one point, though, he answered a question by saying that intersectionality - this linking of various identities or causes - is not helpful - that these issues must be treated separately - but he was warning about how we speak with others. So, if someone is not convinced that sexism is a problem, bringing that subject into a conversation about racism is even less helpful. However, in this liberal religious faith, which was Manish’ point in the article - if one’s primary concern is human rights, it can be helpful to look at environmental issues through that lens, as they are always linked, and we are not beginning from a place of skepticism. I’m sorry if that detour was meant primarily for those present here in the sanctuary yesterday. But it stood out for me yesterday.
The pressures of life around us can sometimes be great. Surrounded by all those “isms” that I speak of and that Alfred decries, it can be hard to be present to what is. We are susceptible to those pressures because we are so connected to one another and the larger stories around us. But that’s the good news – not that we capitulate to the pressures of consumerism or ableism or racism - but that we are connected, always. Even when we feel isolated, we are actually connected to others.

When we can acknowledge that reality, it becomes easier to resist unwelcome pressures and welcome the beneficial ones. That is one way of practicing hope that can lead to developing more hope.

Feelings of grief can overwhelm in this season – given the cultural celebration of home and hearth. If someone you love has recently died – or has been absent for some time – their absence can be the reality you must accept first before seeing the possibilities in it.

For years after her husband died, she would clean mushrooms for the community Thanksgiving dinner. She accepted his death and the fact that her children could not be with her at Thanksgiving, and volunteered at a community dinner doing something she does extraordinarily well – cleaning mushrooms. It sounds like a little thing, but you don’t know the pride she had always taken in her domestic skills. Though her beloved was gone, she remained connected to others in the community who for many different reasons were also alone for the holiday. And the memory of her husband was with her, and she could talk to her children by phone.

There is a larger story in which we are embedded, and a longer history than our brief lives encompass. If we can connect to a greater story, to others, to a longer trajectory of time, this larger context can inspire hope.

The glory of this season is that there are so many stories with which to connect – all of them meaningful – the returning light as the seasons shift, the birth of a baby, the miracle of lasting light, even the tale of Santa Claus – all these stories, true or not, have meanings in them which speak to our lives and our world – meanings which, if we let them in, can teach us hope as we make sense of things that are and imagine possibilities to come.

When we talk about something as elusive as hope – as that feeling of possibility – it helps sometimes to have something to look at or to touch that stands for hope. “Hope not made of wishes but of substance,” the poet writes. “Hope that has breath and a beating heart.” For many people, at this time of year especially, the figurine of the baby Jesus in the nativity scene is an embodiment of hope. For many of us, all year round, the flaming chalice, is a symbol of hope.

Whatever it is you’re still waiting for this year, whatever your touchstone, whatever your story, may it remind you of something larger, that greater meaning of the life which is.

I know from personal experience that it’s really best to wait for Christmas morning. Tumbling headlong into the next moment, opening the presents early, only leads to disappointment the next day. May we all learn to resist the headlong tumble into the next moment until we claim for ourselves awareness and gratitude of what is. Then bravely explore the unending possibilities it promises. We can practice hope while we’re still waiting for it to be our companion.
Benediction

Whatever your story this time of year, whatever your touchstone, the pinecone or the menorah or the flaming chalice, may it remind you of something larger, that greater meaning of the life which is. Can we let those stories in and let them offer us hope as we make sense of things that are and imagine possibilities to come. There is more love somewhere and by practicing hope, may that somewhere be right here and right now.

* Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.