

# Mission Moments

## SIGNS OF THINGS TO COME

Even before Advent begins, there are “signs” everywhere that the holidays are approaching. Signs give us direction, a sense of where we are, and a sense of where we are going. We search for signs of God’s presence to help us comprehend a complicated and often confusing world. We desire certainty amidst uncertainty and yearn for the known among the vast unknown. We crave assurance that the future will be better than the present.

Our sacred scriptures speak of people in every generation seeking signs. And yet these same scriptures remind us that when we can trust in the midst of uncertainty, in that place where there are no signs pointing us in any direction, faith flourishes in a deep and profound way.

Take a moment and reflect on the stories we will hear this Advent season. Each story is full of twists and turns, unexpected events in which our spiritual ancestors are asked to take huge leaps of faith and are required to trust in the face of life’s most challenging situations. They receive a few signs along the way—a few visitations, a couple of dreams, but even then, they must find ways to interpret God’s presence and make the best decisions they can, often with cloudy information and little support.

Life is unpredictable and while we look for signs of things to come, there is actually little we have control over and few things we can know for sure. Ultimately, God is Mystery, and we are invited to enter that Mystery fully. This is the heart of the Advent journey, the great Mystery being born among us anew each year.

In her poem, “Mysteries, Yes,” Mary Oliver says  
Truly, we live with mysteries  
too marvelous to be understood....  
Let me keep my distance, always, from those  
who think they have the answers.  
Let me keep company always with those who say  
“Look!” and laugh in astonishment,  
and bow their heads.

Perhaps this Advent season we should relinquish our needs for signs and simply let the Mystery be. Maybe we should heed Mary Oliver’s advice and keep our distance from those who think they have the answers. Let’s embark on an Advent journey, keeping company with those who embrace the Mystery in great reverence and those who truly “see” and laugh with joy.

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## MAKE READY

There are no beautiful canticles from Mary or Zechariah in this week's reading from the Gospel of Luke, not even the child leaping for joy in Elizabeth's womb in recognition of the salvation that is approaching. In this second week of Advent we actually hear from Elizabeth's child much later on, a grown man bursting onto the scene from out of the wilderness, proclaiming a message of repentance. John tells us to take a good hard look at our world and ourselves. The hour is at hand, the time has come, and he warns, for a radical change of heart and mind, a dramatic course adjustment, a renewal of our spirits—a conversion experience.

### OUR GRACE-FILLED COVENANT

"See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me.... The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight--indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts." (Malachi 3:1)

Throughout our history, the United Church of Christ has affirmed relationships that reflect the grace-filled covenant into which God invites us. As the body of Christ, we seek to be both incarnational and transformational in a spirit of holy love.

The Christmas Fund for the Veterans of the Cross and the Emergency Fund, administered by the Pension Boards on behalf of the United Church of Christ, is now in its 110th year of "serving those who serve the church." This annual offering, one of four UCC Special Mission Offerings received each year, supports ministries to lower-income retired clergy and lay employees as well as to active clergy facing unforeseen financial crises. Your gift to the Christmas Fund is an expression of covenant. Through this ministry of giving, we covenant in Christ's name to show love, compassion, and care to elderly pastors who receive thank-you gift checks at Christmas; to widowed spouses who receive pension supplementation to bring their retirement income to a level where they can live with dignity; to clergy families struggling with a chronic illness who receive health premium supplementation; to others, like the lower-income pastor who, this past summer, received a special gift to provide a little extra in these difficult economic times; and to the many individuals—lay and ordained—who receive some type of ongoing ministerial assistance.

The theme of the 2012 Christmas Fund Offering is 12-12-12: Twelve Days of Bringing Gifts. We invite you to covenant with us—and with thousands throughout our beloved church—in bringing your gift to this vital ministry that touches the lives of so many. Your heartfelt gift can and will make a difference.

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## Look Forward

We're bombarded with all sorts of news, much of it bad, from more sources now than we could have imagined a few years ago, all of them keeping us in touch with what's happening around the world, along with the commentary of pundits who tell us what it all means. So much information about the suffering and injustice of the world coming at us 24/7. It makes you want to run out to the wilderness in search of better news, a word of hope, something to come that's worth preparing for, and what you need to do to prepare for it.

### PROCLAIMING GOOD NEWS HERE AND NOW

"So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people."  
(Luke 3:18)

The good news that John the Baptist proclaimed, and on which we focus in this season of the church year, calls us to look forward to the promise and possibilities of the present and the future.

For 110 years, the Christmas Fund for the Veterans of the Cross and the Emergency Fund has been a tangible means of proclaiming good news, here and now, to those who have devoted their lives to the service of the United Church of Christ. This annual offering, one of four Special Mission Offerings received each year in our church, supports ministries to lower-income retired clergy and lay employees as well as to active clergy in times of financial crises. Gifts to the Christmas Fund bring joy and gladness--in the form of a Christmas thank-you check to an elderly annuitant; as pension supplementation to ministers who faithfully served small congregations that could not afford to pay adequate salaries, and now find their retirement incomes are not enough to meet their basic needs; as emergency assistance to a family faced with mounting medical bills; as health premium supplementation to a retired couple; as a special gift to a lower-income active minister or annuitant to help out in these tough economic times; as ongoing ministerial assistance to many individuals--lay and ordained--throughout the course of the year.

This year's Offering focuses on the theme 12-12-12: Twelve Days of Bringing Gifts. The gift you bring to the Christmas Fund is an offering of love that can and will make a difference in the lives of those who have served and those who continue to serve the United Church of Christ.

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## MOVING WITH MARY'S SONG

Let's assume for just a second that the account of Elizabeth and Mary's pregnancies is literally true. By all accounts, Mary was a young teenager at the time—awkward; hormones raging; body growing in fits and starts into adulthood, mind following reluctantly along. Any middle schooler will tell you—it's not easy being Mary. Then, on top of all that, she discovers she's pregnant? By the Holy Spirit? The angel says, "don't be afraid," and at first Mary responds to this astounding news proudly, almost defiantly—"Here am I"—and then . . . she flees. And far away, too. From Galilee to the Judean hill country--50 miles or more. Remember, she's just a kid.

According to the angel, Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, is also pregnant, even though she is quite elderly. Mary immediately bolts (no word of Joseph here) to be with her cousin. Just her greeting is enough to stir Elizabeth's womb, prompting her baby to kick (for the first time?). A bond is forged, and Mary stays for three months until just before Elizabeth's baby (John, who becomes the herald of the Christ) is born.

Why? What did Mary find there that she didn't have at home? Elizabeth offered extravagant welcome and no judgment. Perhaps because of her own experience, she could relate to the young cousin on her doorstep. Whatever the case, Elizabeth clearly offered a safe space to Mary, a place of joy, affirmation and support.

Out of this safe space Mary is able to sing a song of praise, often called The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), that is one of the most stirring passages in all of scripture, simultaneously a song of thanksgiving and praise and a cry for justice.

So, if we want to empower others both to sing praises and call out for justice, let us learn from these two women: they pick up the clues that angels leave; they offer hospitality without judgment or recrimination; they do not hesitate to sing out in joy but link their song to cries for justice.

When we are non-judgmental, when we are attentive to providing a supportive environment, when we (elders) allow young voices to find their place, and when we (of Mary's age) seek out the counsel of older persons, we can discover settings across generations in which both poems of praise and cries of justice can emerge in beauty.

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## Who is This Child?

When do parents think one-way, and children begin to think another? Just about the age that Jesus was when he was lost and found in the temple by a distraught Joseph and Mary. Most of the time, adolescents are as self-assured and unflappable as Jesus was when he was finally found. How could Jesus, being fully human as well as fully divine, pass from childhood through adolescence to full adulthood without experiencing some transitional tension? Like Jesus, we have a choice: to grow into more spiritually mature adults, coming to terms with who we are and what we are called to do, but also deepening our relationship with God and maturing in our faith.

### QUESTIONS OF FAITH AND BELIEF

Wouldn't you like to have been there? Wouldn't we all like to have been there in the Jerusalem temple while the 12-year-old Jesus sat among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions?

Yes, asking those learned elders questions. We don't know what kinds of questions Mary's son asked. Was he only seeking clarification from the learned men of the temple, or was he challenging their pious orthodoxies? Today's scripture doesn't tell us. But the teachers obviously took Jesus' questions seriously, letting him participate in their dialogues for three days until his parents found him there.

Not only Jesus, but all twelve-year-olds should be taken seriously. After all, they're seventh-graders, and we often include boys and girls of that middle school age in our confirmation classes. That course of instruction lasts many months, not just three days. And as the confirmands study the Bible and the history, beliefs and practices of the United Church of Christ, there is ample opportunity for listening and asking questions.

We in the UCC take this rite of passage for young people to full, mature Christian faith very seriously. The UCC provides curriculum resources to support local church confirmation programs, including a general guide to faith formation, a 17-minute video, and a gift book designed to be a keepsake for confirmands. And our Book of Worship includes an Order of Confirmation.

We'll never know what questions the 12-year-old Jesus asked the teachers in the temple. But there are 12-year-olds in our congregations who have their own serious questions of faith and belief. Let us pray that we can make our confirmation programs worthy of their deep concerns.

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