On August 9, an unarmed black teenager, Michael Brown was shot and killed in Ferguson, Missouri during an encounter with a white police officer Darren Wilson. For the next 107 days, Brown’s family waited. They waited for justice and they weren’t alone. People took to the streets, sometimes in violent confrontation with the forces of law and order. They were joined on social media and in houses of worship by prophetic voices decrying the killing of black men. The nation waited. Last week, the governor of Missouri declared martial law and readied the National Guard as he waited. The longer it went the more it seemed that we would go on waiting for justice even after the Grand Jury’s decision had been heard. How much longer do we have to wait? How many more black men will it take? How many more hearts will be broken while we wait?

Today marks the beginning of Advent, the time when our ancestors waited for the end of darkness and the beginning of light. In this lunar cycle the days grow ever short while darkness hits its zenith. It is a time of waiting and preparation for an inevitable change that we anticipate with open hearts and quiet assuredness. It is a time of hope that no matter how terrible things can be, there will be brighter days ahead; that just as surely as the world turns, the forces of peace and love will transform evil and oppression into justice and freedom.

This is a universal longing and one that energizes all the religious and wisdom traditions that Unitarian Universalists count as sources of our prophetic vision of Beloved Community.

Our Judeo Christian roots provide a spiritual practice of waiting for a Messiah who will be sent by God to deliver his people from suffering and oppression. Christians believe that the Messiah came once and they await his return to finish the task of establishing God’s kingdom on earth. Jewish
people are still waiting for God to fulfill the promise of a Messiah who will redeem the house of David with a benevolent reign of peace and justice.

Our humanist roots teach us that humanity holds the keys to both oppression and justice. As rational beings we will ultimately understand that we have a better chance to flourish as a unified people than as adversaries over limited resources. This is an evolving consciousness that moves us toward a kinship on earth that one day will reject devastating wars and brutality.

All of these teachings remind us that despair, while in itself a legitimate emotional response is not an ultimate answer of truth and meaning. Even in the dark night of our soul we plant the seeds for renewal. We remember the importance of not turning away even when suffering feels so heavy and unbearable. In this place we are made to wait, unknowing, with only hope to hold on to.

Liberation theology grounds that hope in the belief that God, Spirit of Life, Ultimate Meaning is inevitably on the side of the downtrodden and oppressed. Black Liberation Theologian James Cone delivered a provocative lecture at the Harvard Divinity School in 2007 called Strange Fruit, The Cross and the Lynching Tree. In his lecture, he claimed that just as God suffered on the cross through Jesus Christ, God suffered on the lynching tree in solidarity with the black man.

As a young black man growing up in Arkansas Cone was well aware of the terrorizing effect of lynching, especially among black Christians who identified so viscerally with the crucifixion of Jesus as the center of the gospel of Christ. The chain and noose are lasting symbols in the American psyche of the horrors of institutional racism. As Cone said, the prison bars of mass incarceration and bullets of police brutality are the new symbols of systematic oppression of black people.

These are very disturbing images that Cone uses to liberate Christianity from a sanitized version of its own narrative. The story of Jesus the
Messiah starts with a miraculous virgin birth and ends with a heinous death at the hands of institutional power.

The Christian concept of the Messiah is a paradox: a God-anointed king who is rejected and killed, but whose voluntary death is a triumph over forces of evil and an unfailing sign of hope for humankind. The mainstream Jews were expecting a warrior king like their beloved King David, who would fight power with might. The Christian sect instead embraced a Messiah who loved his enemy and met his fate with non-violent resistance.

In spite of temporary setbacks ultimate salvation of humanity will be accomplished here on earth not on some supernatural heaven. Liberation occurs here in this realm through the collective actions of us mortals who are sickened by the continuing state of oppression and choose to resist with love rather than might.

Redemption comes at a profound cost with deep and sincere repentance. Advent is not just a time of waiting for something to change, but to make that change first and foremost in our own selves. What Ferguson has shown us is that America has yet to do the internal reconciliation and truth telling that releases God’s love and forgiveness of our national sin. Cone said that “Those who still benefit from the structural inequalities in the American justice, economic and educational systems want mercy and forgiveness but not repentance and reparation. They want resurrection but not the cross.” They want to move on, while the black people are still being lynched.

That’s why these last 15 weeks have been so important for us as a nation. Michael Brown’s death has stirred our attention and made us reflect that we can’t simply move on as if things are just fine. The Grand Jury made it clear that our laws enshrine enormous discretionary power on our police and law enforcement officers. We have outsourced our fear of chaos and disorder to people who we blindly trust will do the right thing. If they feel afraid they are expected to shoot with deadly force. We are a nation of laws and the rule of law allows fear to rule.
The shadowy figure of a terrorist can easily morph into all Muslims, or immigrants, or a 12 year old black child with a toy gun. When our society confronts our fears with lethal military-style weapons, even in our homes, we move further into hate and separation and away from peace and love.

In our second reading of the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus’ disciples ask him “The kingdom - on what day will it come?” Jesus said “It will not come by watching (and waiting for) it. They will not say: “Look, here!” or “Look, there!” Rather the kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it.”

In this version of Jesus as the mystical teacher, he is directing our attention to a reality that is already here but completely invisible. In other words, open your eyes, see the world from a new perspective, expand your consciousness to a way of living that is completely different from what you are used to.

Imagine the scenario where you are looking out your window at night trying to see something outside. You could turn on an outside light and shine it down on what you see. Unless you use a lot of light dispersed over a wide area, all you really can see is the thing you are looking at. But if you turn off the light in your room and let your eyes adjust to the dark, you can not only see the dim light that is reflecting off your subject, you can also see the context and surroundings that envelope the subject.

Jesus, the mystical teacher is telling us to stop fixating on those objects of the mind like power, might, superiority, exceptionalism. Instead, focus on the greater context that surrounds everything - our interdependence and bonds of kinship. “It is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it.” Love surrounds us, but when we cast it to the shadows, we only see fear and separation, the monsters of our imagination.

How fitting then, that Advent comes during the darkest time of the year when we are called to adjust our consciousness; to go in the dark and
discover the hidden connections with all of humanity that surrounds us and permeates us. I am reminded of a Wendell Berry poem:

To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.
To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,
And find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,
And is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.

Berry is telling us that to know the dark we must leave our own light behind and go without sight. That runs completely counter to our comfort zone. He is calling us to experience the unknown with our entire being rather than relying on our senses and our preconceived certainties. Darkness in and of itself is simply the absence of light, but because we can’t see in advance what we are getting into, we must face our fears of sudden surprises. In a sense, it is the lack of control and the need to really bear down and focus which makes us uncomfortable about darkness.

Love and fear are both spread upon the earth, but if we are looking for one and not the other that is what we will see. Our fears are in the light and our love is in the shadows. But it doesn’t have to be that way. We can choose to stay safe in the light of our fears or we can venture together into the invisible realm of love that can’t be seen but blooms and sings.

Rather than waiting as a passive exercise, this is an active form of waiting in which we experience the unknown by letting go of control and accepting our stumbles and errors. We acknowledge that we as a collective society still have a long way to go in realizing a Beloved Community in which everyone’s life is afforded equal reverence and dignity. A Beloved Community in which we share power across racial and cultural differences. It is worth waiting for. It is worth the costs that it will take and the discomfort it will cause because injustice to one is an injustice to all.

Earlier we lit the first candle of the Advent wreath to represent hope—that spark of belief that we can build what we dream, that our lives can be better, that none of us are ever truly lost. Look at that candle as it flickers
proudly. Commit it to memory and remember that this morning we were all focused on that same dream. All over this country, right now in thousands of houses of worship Advent candles are joining together the hopes and aspirations of millions of people who dare to look into the dark.

Remember that love surrounds us even in times like these when peace and true justice seem so far way. It is spread upon the earth. Let it enter your soul and guide you toward the collective space where our interconnections and shared humanity melt away our fears of one another. We have a lot of work yet to do to dismantle racism and oppression. Let us keep our spirits focused on the dream, while we take each step together one at a time for however long it takes.

May it be so, and may we all be the ones to make it so!