

The Longest Night

Readings: 'Winter Meditation' by Patricia Fagnoli
'Winter's Cloak' by Joyce Rupp
'Just Delicate Needles—' by Rolf Jacobsen
'Chalice Flame Contemplation' by Samuel A. Trumbore

This is a season where so much of the natural world seems to pause. The deciduous trees have lost their leaves. The lakes and rivers start to freeze over. Many animals hibernate or otherwise move more slowly in this season. When there is snow, it muffles the sound and everything is just a little quieter than usual, everything feels a little calmer than usual.

And yet, we know that in this season when external signs might make us think of stillness and calm, there is much happening below the surface. There is life teeming in trees without leaves and ponds with a thick coat of ice, or on the snowy days. Deep in the soil, seeds are germinating, preparations are soon underway for the expansive green that awaits us in the spring... beneath the surface, life is still teeming, new life is beginning.

This year, for me, this germinating darkness is not metaphor or a posture to borrow from the natural world. I am literally creating new life. I am quite literally a chamber of gestation. As many of you know, I am pregnant. In my womb there is a new life taking shape. Masses of cells have organized themselves into organs and limbs. This almost-baby, this 23 week old fetus that I carry with me, kicks and moves and listens and grows. I am not consciously managing the process... and yet it unfolds and a new life will emerge this spring, reminding me of all the hard slow unseen work happening around me, the results of which I will not make themselves known until later.

In this solstice season, we remember that we need the seasons of darkness, the seasons of quiet, the seasons when the external work slows so we can take up the internal work necessary to continue to live lives of integrity, service, and joy. We learn this from nature. We learn this from the pagan traditions that mark this turning of the year. We learn this from other wisdom sources, like depth psychologist Carl Jung, who reminds us 'One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.' We learn this from our experiences, from the dreams that take shape in our minds during the night. May we all bring consciousness to this time of darkness.

In her beautiful poem Winter Grace, read by Gordon earlier, Patricia Fagnoli writes,
'truth is found in silence,
how the natural world comes to you
if you go out to meet it,
its icy ditches filled with dead weeds,
its vacant birdhouses, and dens
full of the sleeping.
But this is the slowed-down season
held fast by darkness
and if no one comes to keep you company
then keep watch over; your own solitude.
In that stillness, you will learn
with your whole body

the significance of cold
and the night,
which is otherwise always eluding you.'

This time of darkness is an invitation turn downward, to turn inward, to seek solitude, to attend to the depths, to learn with our whole body the significance of cold and the night. Perhaps you have internal unfinished business – grief or loss, heartache, sadness – that needs your attention this season. Let us make time for it, beginning in our gathering today and knowing that the real, true deep work will require much more time than today.

This morning, let us engage this season of outward darkness and dormancy and inner transformation. How might you slow down this winter, this dark season? What might you seek to cultivate, to germinate, to create in this darker, slower season? What do you hope might emerge in your life and in our world when the green returns this spring?

For the rest of this morning, our service will flow differently than it usually does. I am speaking less and leaving more time for silence. When I am done speaking, I am going to invite you into a time of silence. It will be longer than the silences we usually keep in our worship together. I invite you to take smooth breaths. If a mental image is helpful to you, I invite you to visualize a sprouting seed or a tree with deep roots, remembering all that must happen below the surface for a growth and stability and strength to be possible. I invite you to reflect on what you hope might germinate in your life in this time of darkness, how you might make room for more stillness and the quiet transformations that stillness makes possible.

The silence will first be broken by a chant. When the music starts, please stay seated, you are invited to join in as a sung meditation.

Then we will return to a time of silence. Perhaps you will want to return to the same thoughts you used in the last silence. Perhaps you will try something else. Perhaps you will have discovered what you hope will germinate and can breathe on that word, breathing in peace or strength or stillness, breathing out what it is you hope will grow within you in this time of darkness.

Then, we will have a ritual. When I invite you, anyone who wishes to can come forward and plant a seed in this pot of earth. For some, moving our bodies and planting a literal seed can be a way to signal intention to plant the metaphorical seeds we have just reflected on. Others might not wish to participate. If you plant a seed, you may do that silently or you may speak aloud a word or phrase that describes what you hope might germinate in your life in this dark season. If this ritual does not speak to you, please continue your quiet breathing, thinking, and visualizing.

After that, we will have more silence, ended by two readings, -- a poem and a guided contemplation of our chalice flame. When that ends, our contemplative time will end and we will all sing our joyous closing song together.

This is all an experiment. I welcome your reflections after the service on how having so much silence in the service felt to you.

Now I invite you into a comfortable posture. I invite you to slow your breathing. I invite you to attend to the darkness. I invite you into the possibilities for growth and transformation in this season.