

Comfort and Joy
Rev. Linda Thomson
First Unitarian Congregation, Toronto
Sunday, January 18 2026

The hustle and bustle of December is behind us. Perhaps you've taken down your lights and decorations. Packed away the wrapping paper and ribbon. All of the holiday cookies and treats are gone and you're back to meals that aren't appetizers. All that's left are memories of time spent with friends and family.

Perhaps your December was filled with festivities or maybe your life is more like my husband's and mine - holidays are sort of quiet at our house. We did keep one of our traditions this year - we watched the 1951 version of A Christmas Carol, with Alistair Sim as Scrooge. There are many versions of Dickens' tale on film, and this one is our favorite. The story also features the hymn "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen", from which I took today's sermon title.

There can be a lot going on in December, even if it isn't all celebratory in nature. There are people to contact in order to catch up at least once a year. There are usually more opportunities to get together with folks, even for a quick visit. Perhaps there's shopping and gift giving, or looking for really good bargains at sales. Most of us will make some attempts to hold on to the traditions and routines that remind us of the past and make the present a pleasant memory, as well.

Yes, yes - I know we've moved on to 2026, to January. In my experience, that rush of energy in December leaves folks just a little exhausted or maybe even a bit down in January. It doesn't help if we've made resolutions about our fitness or diet or whatever and then unfortunately forgotten to keep them after a few days. After all, who wants to get up and brave the cold and icy streets to go to the gym? Or take a brisk walk? Did you know that research shows that by now in January, over 50% of folks have given up their resolutions? And that 90% will by the end of February? So, if you've let yours go, know you are not alone.

It doesn't help when we realize that perhaps we have nothing on our calendars to really look forward to until warmer weather arrives. No big holidays or special events. No plans for fun distractions, perhaps. I certainly understand why Canadians look for warm places to visit in the Winter months! February may only have 28 days, but it sometimes feels suspiciously like it has 85.

In my experience, the time when we need comfort and joy the most is AFTER the holiday season. Maybe we feel more isolated and alone, when we don't have the holidays as an excuse to get together or the weather is truly an impediment to going out. Perhaps we feel let down at this time after the high anticipation and excitement of

December. The change just hits us a bit more firmly in January. We know we are entering the rest of winter, the time that feels like a long slog until Easter and the promise of Spring.

And, we know more about the impacts of the winter blues, of seasonal affective disorder, where the continuation of grey, overcast skies seriously impacts some people's ability to feel happy, comfortable, or joyful. Experiencing this shift in our minds and bodies can add to our sense of ennui or vague dissatisfaction as we check off the first days of the new year.

So, how do we find and maintain a sense of comfort and joy as we move into 2026?

Self-care is a popular mantra these days. Seeing a sense of wellness and fulfillment manifested seems to be a popular focus of attention by the media and certainly by marketing executives. There are seemingly thousands of products, approaches, programs, and steps you are encouraged to start, buy, use, and follow to live with a sense of fulfillment.

But, there have been approaches to spiritual development and wholeness that have been available for centuries, long before product lines were available to make the pursuit of wellness a rather faddish endeavor.

One of the places to start on your pursuit of comfort and joy is to find a spiritual practice that speaks to your soul, is easy and meaningful for you to follow, and that you intend to continue practice. There are prayer practices, arts and music practices, movement practices, exercise practices, body practices, things indoors and outdoors, things alone and with others that can draw your attention to your inner self and help you build a better relationship with your soul as you engage in your preferred method of connection.

And notice, please, that these are practices, not perfections. Practicing sometimes looks like getting it really close to ideal and sometimes not being able to gather your attention to focus for more than a couple of minutes. This is a joy of practice, you actually don't have to be perfect for it to work! Do the best you can, with sincerity, on a regular basis. Commit yourself, enter into your search of self, and see how it goes. Be gentle with yourself and congratulate yourself for trying - and trying again - to build your effort to match your intention.

I'm sure you're familiar with the statement that "God helps those who help themselves" - originally from the ancient Greeks but made popular by Ben Franklin's Poor Richard's Almanac. While not a Bible verse, it certainly reflects a common understanding of how we work together in cooperation as humans with Divine assistance. Our spiritual connection provides grace and hope in the possible, we provide the initiative. And it is also said we are the hands of the Divine intention in the world.

So, if you find yourself with the winter blues, the best strategy is to find ways to connect with yourself and others, reach out and make yourself available in the world, and give up trying to control things you can't control. Find your encouragement and inspiration, then get your hands and heart and mind in motion to live your blessings.

Make yourself a part of a community of people who are as committed to being whole and congruent and engaged as you intend to be. Your participation in this congregation speaks to your understanding of the importance of community in helping us create full and fulfilling lives. I believe that there is only so much we can know about ourselves in isolation. It is in relationship to others that we come to understand that people can be different from us, can hold different opinions, value different outcomes, practice different lifestyles, or support different causes and still be good, sincere, wholesome, and engaged members of our community. They can be our friends, they can help us see alternatives and options, and we can celebrate each other's victories and mourn each other's losses.

At times when our lives feel chaotic or uncomfortable, one of the ways we try to get things back in focus in our lives is to attempt to exert control. We want to make sure everything is being handled in the way that makes us most comfortable, we want to feel like we have the power to make things go right (according to our expectations), and we want people to do what we think is right and proper and good.

The bad news of this strategy is that there are so very many things in life we cannot control. None of us will set tomorrow morning's temperature or determine the amount of snow that will fall. We will not be able to predict or manage all of the actions of people around us. Often, we find our expectations frustrated and we feel disappointed in life or other humans.

The good news is that if we focus on what we can control, we open the door to greater satisfaction, joy, and ease. We are best served by acknowledging that most things are out of our control, and therefore, we can give ourselves permission to stop constantly worrying about them, attempting to strong-arm them into our way of being, and expecting results that will meet our specific expectations.

Stoic philosopher Epictetus said: "Some things are in our control and others not. Things in our control are opinion, pursuit, desire, aversion, and in a word, whatever are our own actions. Things not in our control are body, property, reputation, command, and in a word whatever are not our actions."

When we are unhappy, when we are convinced that nothing will ever change, or we are unsure of what to do next, it's good to do an inventory of what about the situation is something we actually can control. Then, plan to start taking small, but meaningful, steps in the direction of your goal.

The things you can't control? Start by realizing that worry will not make these things move into the sphere of your control. Then start taking small, but meaningful, steps to let go of worry and replace it with messages that remind you of what's yours to manage and what belongs to others.

A friend of mine has recently shared her frustration in dealing with her sister, who seems to consistently make choices and decisions not in her personal best interests. The sister discounts and rejects suggestions to take more productive or healthy actions. Then, she needs to be "bailed out" by her siblings and helped to get her life back in order. My friend shared how this scenario has played out all of their lives (both are in their 70s) and how exhausted she feels when she realizes it's happening again.

She has found a book by Mel Robbins, titled "The Let Them Theory" which "emphasizes personal empowerment through her focus on the concepts of "Let them" and Let me." She suggests that individuals need to relinquish control over others and focus on their own growth and happiness, emotional well-being and personal development.

The "let them" aspect advocates for emotional detachment from situations beyond one's control. "Let me" is about shifting one's focus to upholding our own self-accountability, staying in integrity with our own emotional and mental boundaries.

Talking about her experience reminded me of some wonderful advice I got early in my 20s when I was working with a senior county extension agent in Oregon. Extension agents work with the agriculture community to provide education, support, and problem-solving input to farmers, ranchers, and gardeners.

The fellow I worked with was about to retire, and he had various sayings posted on the walls around his desk. 50 years later, I still remember two that return to me in challenging situations - one is about what you can expect for your money: Sure, we can get you oats. If you want clean, first quality oats, it's going to cost you. If you're looking for a lower price, we can get you oats, too, but you'll have to wait until they come out the other end of the horse. The second is this one about dealing with tough situations: Never try to teach a pig to sing, it will only frustrate you and annoy the pig - which is attributed to Robert A. Heinlein in his book "Time Enough for Love."

I have to admit, there have been times when I've attempted to form porcine choirs of highly reluctant hogs. I have been humbled more than once in my futile attempts to inspire, force, push, encourage, demand, or threaten people to change. Life is a lot easier when you quit trying to do this.

When you're frustrated, pray for patience or reassurance. Remember that progress comes, gradually and in its time, as you take positive steps toward the future. It is the small steps we take in the direction we wish to go that make all of the difference. It

helps if we practice them regularly and review our options to make sure we remain on track.

The hymn God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen probably dates back to the 1500's, though it has certainly changed over the years. The first printed version appeared in 1760, but it became most popular after being published in a compilation of hymns and melodies in 1833. Some believe that Queen Victoria's great love of carols helped popularize with people of that age and through the years to us today.

In the 1700's, the term "rest" was used differently than it is today, so if translated for 2026, the lyric would actually be "May God keep you in contented spirits, folks." I wish for you great comfort and joy as we travel through the winter months, and may the Divine keep you in contented spirits.

Amen