

Unitarian Universalist Christmas

A sermon preached by Rev. Christine Robinson
On December 20, 2009

It happens most every year. Somebody, a Jewish somebody who knows that Unitarians don't believe in the divinity of Christ or a visitor somebody who attends a service and sees that we're a lot like the church of her childhood in some ways but very different in others, or somebody . . . somebody asks, Why do UUs celebrate Christmas? Since you're not Christians, what are you celebrating?

And, oh, Virginia, there are so many good answers to that question, besides that our children would disown us if we didn't celebrate Christmas! We'll be exploring them this morning, with the aid of some of the Christmas hymns and carols written over the years by Unitarians, and, true to our style, using a favorite Christian service format: the format of lessons and carols. Talk a little, sing a little; you know.

Using *Christian* service formats with *our* distinctive content tends to be the way we do things, and that is on account of our history, which goes back through the parish churches of New England to the Free Church movement in Europe, the Reformation, way back to the earliest arguments in the Christian church about the nature of God, humanity, and salvation. Those are three of the four most vital points of any theological system, and we dissented from the orthodox on all of them. We believe that God is one not three, that human beings have a core of good inside rather than being inherently evil, and that hell and damnation are figments of the worst of the Christian imagination. In spite of these longstanding arguments, our roots are in the Christian Protestant tradition, and, as unorthodox as our beliefs are, our way of living in two worlds tends to be that we keep the style and insert our own substance. So the first answer to the question, Why do UUs celebrate Christmas, is simply because we're a part of the Protestant tradition.

So we have children's pageants, Christmas Eve services, Christmas trees, gifts, extra charity projects, the whole bit. That's the style. But we are not celebrating a virgin birth, an incarnated divinity, or a savior of our souls. Rather we are celebrating a special season of the year in which we are living as we should, as all the great teachers of humanity have taught us, especially Jesus. We are celebrating the fact that every child who comes into the world is a sacred promise given to us to care for. We are celebrating peace: world peace, inner peace, family harmony. We are acknowledging the life of one great man and the myths that surround his birth. And we are celebrating the journey that takes all of us to Bethlehems: places where all things are made new.

Highly symbolic of the way we manage style and substance is hymn #228 in your book, "Once in Royal David's City." It's a haunting old tune, but most of the words have been changed to express what UUs celebrate in Christmas. Old form, new content. It speaks of many parts of the Christmas myth—manger, kings, angel songs—not as historical happenings, which they almost certainly were not, but as myths that point us to larger truths for our own lives. Let's sing it, so you can see for yourself. You can remain seated, but only if you sing out!

Hymn #228 "Once in Royal David's City"
Reading #616 "For So the Children Come"

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To me, the single most important theme of the season is its reminder that every night that a child is born is a holy night. This is the humanistic theme of our faith: that the beauty of Christmas is not that God came down to us in one special child, but that the divine is in every child, every person, even the lost, the poor, the humble. If the child who will bring such wisdom and peace to us could be born in a manger to stranded parents, whose birth is celebrated by the lower classes, that is the shepherds, and the foreigner, that is the Zoroastrian priests we call Magi—it just goes to show that the salvation and understanding we seek and need to make a better life and nobler nations could come from almost anybody. So it would be good, would it not, to take care of all of our children? See that their parents have enough money to care for them properly? That the schools that educate them are doing a good job? That their teen and young adult years are productive? So that when they reach the age of wisdom they will have something other than pain and anger to offer us? As someone once said, the birth of any child is God's sign that there is hope for humanity. Humanists would say that there is goodness and potential in every child. This theme, every night a child is born is a holy night, is a theme with a mission. And it is a theme with hope.

Unitarians have made quite a number of contributions to our American Christmas celebrations over the years. What would Christmas be without Scrooge and Marley, without “Do You Hear What I Hear?” without “Jingle Bells”? The authors of all those Christmas delights were Unitarians. Most important of all, perhaps, the author of the carol “It Came upon the Midnight Clear” was a Unitarian minister. Although this is one of the beloved carols of Christians, you'll note that this is not a carol about Christ. It is a carol about peace. Let's sing the first two verses of that carol, and then I will tell you about the story.

#244 “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear,” verses 1 and 2

Edmund Hamilton Sears, Unitarian minister, was a man who longed for peace. His longing was very personal; that is one of the reasons he could write such a beautiful hymn. He longed for peace inside himself, he longed for peace in his community, and he longed for an end of war. He wanted those things so much because he didn't have them.

Sears was apparently a high-strung man, verging always on a nervous breakdown, haunted by a sense of inadequacy as a minister. Indeed, he never really carried a full workload as a minister; his wife did most of what we would call the pastoral work—the calling, the meetings, the counseling. Edmund couldn't handle those things. If he lived today, he would probably be diagnosed as clinically depressed, as having some imbalance of brain chemistry that made it hard for him to concentrate, to rest, and to work. These days, he would have medicine to help him lead a normal life, but he lived before such things. So he had to always husband his strength and tranquility by long walks in the country, by working in his garden, and by writing.

Inner peace came hard to Sears, and yet, out of a rare experience of inner peace, he wrote a beautiful carol that now the world enjoys, and enjoys all the more because it is such a peaceful song to sing in a hectic season.

Sears also longed for peace in his community, and he didn't have much there, either. The people in his community were embroiled in arguments over two important

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things: over slavery and over the rights of women. Sears was an abolitionist and spoke out for women's suffrage. His congregation did not all appreciate his stands.

Now, Sears had his own handicaps and problems to think about, and perhaps another man would have said to himself, "I am just not strong enough to argue with my neighbors about national issues." But he didn't. He wrote and spoke and preached his conviction that slavery degraded human beings—slaves and owners alike—and degraded nations that allowed it. Sears longed for peace, but not at any price. He was willing to argue for what he believed, even when it caused conflict in his community. Sears spent his small strength fighting for abolition of slavery, knowing, perhaps, that sweeping the conflict among people under the rug does not bring peace, and that only justice can be the basis of lasting harmony.

Finally, Sears longed for peace in his world, which is to say, for an absence of war. And he didn't have that either, I'm afraid. The Mexican War was going on. Sears thought it was an immoral war and wrote articles trying to convince others of his convictions. If you read the third verse of "It Came upon the Midnight Clear," you can hear how discouraged he became about peace on earth.

Edmund Hamilton Sears, Unitarian minister, didn't see much peace in his time, but the Christmas hymn he wrote about peace was an important force in making peace on Earth one of the messages of Christmas. And probably, more than anything else he wrote in his life, "It Came upon the Midnight Clear" has been a force for peace in our world. For, when enough people hope for peace, then peace can come. Let us sing the last two verses of Sears' hymn, and pray for peace with our lifted voices.

"Winter Night" is a new Christmas hymn, composed within the last decade by an old friend of mine, and I am excessively fond of it. I think I would be even if I didn't know the composer, in part because it is such a nice change from the ding dong merrily-on-high school of Christmas music. This quiet hymn is a reminder of what is to come in Jesus's life, both his achievements and the cost to him of sharing his wisdom. It, too, universalizes Jesus's life: "Holy child, every child, your life will have its season." So will ours, yours and mine, and it won't always be joy, peace, and lightness. And even at Christmas, that's OK.

If one theme of a UU Christmas celebration is that every child is special, holy, and deserving of our care, or that from any child might come the words and deeds that will make our lives richer, deeper, and more just, then a second is specific to the child whose birth is actually celebrated: Jesus of Nazareth. The fact that we don't believe that this person was a part of the godhead does not mean that we don't revere his words, try to live by his lessons, and honor the sacrifice he made to his truth. At Christmas we honor Jesus, a man of whom it was said that he gave his life "to give light to them that sit in the darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." (Luke)

The last hymn we will sing is the old favorite, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." This, too, keeps the old tune and many of the old words, but is recast to appeal to UU values. It asks and answers the question, "For what do we long for at Christmas, and all through the year?"

For love: for health and satisfaction in all the relationships that bind us in families, churches, communities.

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For truth: for knowledge that we can rely on this marvelous unfolding universe; knowledge of this material world and how it works as well as understanding of the life of the spirit.

For light: the light that shines from within every child who comes into the world as well as the light that shows us a way in the darkness.

And for hope: for a better life, for a just and peaceful world, for a chance for all of our children, for health, for love. All of these things are available, if not always in the forms we would most prefer, but there is always hope and we would that we were always aware of that hope, at Christmas time and every time, throughout the year.