



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

A Festival of Light

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Welcome to winter! It's nice to finally be able to say that on many accounts. First, even though it's inconvenient and tends to bring out the worst in how people drive and treat each other on the street. I love the cold and the rain. I also love being able to look at the mountains when there is a break in the clouds and see them covered in snow. I love the fact that we have broken through the dark with the onset of solstice just 4 days ago. We will now begin to see longer days and shorter nights as we move through this season of cool days and cold nights.

Though the days are beginning to get longer the days are also grayer. There are more clouds in the sky and their shadows often lead to a dimmer even if it is longer day. This season gives us softer light for the most part and when we are lucky during the darkest of days when the rain is showering down upon us we see flashes of light from the sky in the form of lightning. Lightning that for me symbolizes that spark that we have in each of us. It is that spark of light that we pull upon during our dark times, our times when the world is cold and raining down upon us. It is a reminder that we have that spark in each of us to light up the sky. To bring light to a dark world.

I guess what I especially love about this time of year is that, for the most part, it provides "cuddle" weather. It's a time when lovers cuddle on the couch to keep warm, parents cuddle up with their children, and many others cuddle up under a warm blanket with a book, or with a warm cup of hot chocolate to watch a good movie.

This "cuddle" time whether it be with someone else or by ourselves reminds us to give of ourselves the gift of comfort. The gift of holding another, being held by another, or simply holding oneself in love and care. It is intimate care that we need, give and receive.

This brings me to what I believe is the spirit of Christmas is.

There are many ways to reflect on Christmas. In 2016, we can look very literally at the Christmas story. Reflecting on the story of the birth of Jesus, we hear the story of immigrants. We hear a story that expands just beyond the reading we heard a few minutes ago from the Gospel of Luke about families being registered based on their heritage and faith. We hear about immigrant families in Syria needing help. We hear about a young family trying to find their home, pregnant, poor, and without shelter or anyone willing to open their doors to them. Being left, if it wasn't for being housed in a barn, to die in the desert. This type of reflection will lead us to a call to action. A call that says to call our congressperson. A call that says raise money for Syria. A call that says become a Sanctuary for immigrants. A call that says do more!

Another way to reflect on Christmas is theologically. As UU's we can look at our Christian roots. We may tell the story as one that celebrates our history with little if any at all relevance to who we are as UU's today or may reflect on the Christmas story as it undergirds most of

who we are as UU's in our lives today. It may be a time to bring forth the good, the gospel of Jesus, and to preach his message of love and compassion for all, especially the oppressed.

Yet another way is to reflect on the person of Jesus a symbol of light in the darkness. Jesus revealed himself to the world during a time of great oppression as beacon of hope. The Jewish people of the time, though a recognized nation of Rome, were slaves to the Roman Empire. In this reflection we could look at the story of Christmas as a story of one that gives voice to the oppressed. A story of a man that unified for better or for worse the western world. We could see a model of justice and service to the less fortunate in our midst. A story that tells us not only to provide food, shelter, and clothing to the poor but also to assist them in building power in a way that balances the inequality in power dynamics. Power to resist authority. Power to resist the unjust laws. Power to resist systematic oppression.

I think all of these are healthy reflections on the Spirit of Christmas. They give us motivation to reflect and act to change the world.

Today, on this Christmas Day, I would like to share with you a reflection on Spirit of Christmas that is a bit different. I want to reflect on the part of the story of Christmas that involves a single image. I will ask you for just a moment to close your eyes and focus on that image. The image of the holy family in the nativity, just after Mary gave birth holding their new born baby. For most of us the instant, the flash, image that came to mind was the typical image we see in most of western culture. It was probably an image of a young white woman kneeling down over a food trough with a baby lying in it and a man standing behind her holding a lantern all surrounded by barn animals.

I'm going to ask you to dig a little deeper with this image. If any of you have been through childbirth you know this not what it looks like. I have been through childbirth twice. Well I didn't actually give birth but I did stand in support of my children's mother. From that experience, I can tell you that what we imagine as the nativity scene was not THAT image. When I imagine that scene this is what I see and maybe you do to.

First a bit of back story, I see a young poor middle-eastern couple with mixed African features, remnants of the times of Hebrew slavery prior to leaving Egypt. This couple would be exhausted and dirty from not only their travels but also their, at least, one night in a barn with the animals. During her labor, Mary, a 14 year old girl, is covered in sweat surrounded by midwives with Joseph, a 20 year old man, standing outside scared and alone. He stands and sits and cries over and over as he is listening to his betrothed scream in pain as she gives birth. Finally, after hours of labor, they hear the joyous calls of the midwives to the community that a baby has been born. The baby is washed and Mary is handed her new infant son. The midwives leave and a Joseph is ushered in to his betrothed holding his new perfect little son in her arms.

Now this is my nativity image. Mary laying on a mound of dirt and hay. She is still covered in sweat and probably blood etc. She is half clothed probably just wrapped in whatever fabric

they had available holding the baby in her arms. I imagine Joseph lying next to her, her head on his chest, his arm wrapped around her shoulder looking down at his baby, holding his betrothed, brushing his fingers through her hair. I imagine this new family cuddling and holding each other sharing a single moment in time that no two/three people could ever recreate.

This is what the spirit of Christmas is to me. It is that sacramental moment when people connect in an intimate way with others or their spirituality in a way that no words can express. It is a moment when we come together to share things that transcend sharable expression - when we move beyond the ordinary.

Jesus is often called the "Light of the World" because he brought light into a dark world. We celebrate him as a man, prophet, or deity because of what his message brought into the world. I want to, when we think of Christmas, take a step back farther into why we celebrate Jesus' birth. I want to celebrate Christmas because it celebrates birth. It celebrates the miracle of birth. It serves as a reminder to celebrate that each and every one of us a light unto the world. Christmas is a time when we remember that none of us ordinary.

I want you all to hear that. Not one single person in this room is ordinary. Every single person in this sanctuary, every single person outside these walls, every single person who has ever lived, lives now, or will ever live is a miracle. Each and every one of you is a miracle. Each and every one of you is a gift to a hurting world. The day you were born was a miraculous day.

This is what the spirit of Christmas is to me. It is a reminder that the moment you were born was a transcendent moment in time. It is a moment that changed the world. It is a moment when you came into being as light to a hurting world.

This is what the spirit of Christmas is to me. It is that time when we hold our family, friends, loved ones, and ourselves in an intimate way that celebrates not only the birth of Jesus but reminds us to celebrate the birth of every child in our midst. It is time when we celebrate and remind our children that they are loved and valued and miracles. This is something I particularly love about this time of year and the holidays of this season. In every tradition that celebrates this time of year a celebration of light there is a special focus on children.

This is what the spirit of Christmas is to me. It is a time whether we celebrate today and this week Christmas, Chanukah or Kwanzaa. We celebrate our children. We tell them they are miracles of light. Whether it be in Kwanzaa tradition which reminds parents that if they can give no other gift to give the gift a book to help their children learn and grow or in Chanukah where the celebration revolves around the playing dreidel. Both of these traditions center around light but also around children and community. They are a reminder that light brings about hope and miracles. They are both reminders that our children are light to the world.

This is what the spirit of Christmas is to me. It is this time of year when we celebrate every life in all its diversity. It is a time when we look without division for the light in the other and ourselves. It is a time when we reflect on the birth of every child and our own as miracles of creation that bring light into the world.

The spirit of Christmas is what we manifest in the world when we say Happy Holidays, Merry Yule, Happy Chanukah, or Joyous Kwanzaa to those around us at this time of year honoring that spark of lightning that resides in each of us and is ready to light up the night sky. The spirit of Christmas is a festival of lights that share with the world.