

2023-12-24

Good morning and Welcome! Before lighting the chalice and starting the service, we have a prelude to set the mood. As our prelude, we'll start with a couple of movements of the Christmas Concerto by Arcangelo Corelli (1653-1713), the Italian composer whose writing inspired much of the music of J. S. Bach and the baroque period. I will play alto recorder and be joined by my daughter Kathy from California on violin and our church's past president, Ray Stone, on viola, starting with a short vivace movement that leads into the famous Pastorale.

Welcome all to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda. Our church, our community seeks to accept you as you are, honouring who you are, respecting who you love, and celebrating your presence with us in this space. We are a small but active congregation, founded as a Universalist church in 1880 and operating in an historic building built the following year in 1881. Following the tragic loss of our talented and popular minister, the Reverend Rodrigo Emilio Solano Quesnel, in a traffic accident last June, we are continuing with regular lay-led services while a search process for a new UU minister gets underway. In a small congregation like ours, there are important roles for all to play.

Here at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, we are bound together by our common mission to proclaim the good news, that faith, hope, and love, are accessible to all humanity – unconditionally – and this a legacy from our Universalist heritage. My name is Bill Baylis, and I am your service leader and speaker today. Our service would not be possible without the support of a tech team to resolve unanticipated technical clitches (as you may unfortunately witness!). Thanks to on-site techs Ray Stone and Sue Markham and to off-site ones Stuart Miller and Bobby Baylis.

[Remind everyone about the ongoing risk of online and telephone scams:
Never share any information about money, banking, login information, or personal information over the phone or online. The only exception to this is if the person you're sharing with is someone you trust and that you've known for years.
No one from the church will ask you for money with urgency over the phone or online]

Are there any announcements? [Invite participants to Unmute themselves]
Announcements...

The title of this service, given on the morning of Christmas Eve in 2023, is

A Very Merry Unitarian Christmas

As I will attempt to justify, to a surprising extent, Unitarians have made this season into the festival we now celebrate here.

Consider: what does Christmas mean? It means, of course, the mass of Christ, the celebration of the birth of a Palestinian prophet named Yeshua, or Jesus. But what exactly does *that* mean? Historians have no idea what time of year Yeshua was actually

born. The early Christian church celebrated his birthday in April at first (recognizing the rebirth of nature in the spring), and then in June for a while, close to summer solstice, before finally settling on a strategy of co-opting yule and winter-solstice celebrations. The first December Christmas wasn't celebrated until around 380 CE.

In the last 200 years, Christmas has been radically transformed -- and Unitarians have been at the forefront in much of the transformation.

These days, in the western Christian tradition, we celebrate December 25, tomorrow, as the birth of Christ, while in Russia and much of the East, the orthodox Christmas this season is celebrated on January 7, 2024, a day after Epiphany in the West. [Note added in proof:] However, we can now celebrate the recently announced decision this year of most parishes in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (as well as many other orthodox churches) to move their Christmas celebrations from January to December 25 in order to join the Roman Catholics and to distinguish themselves from the Russian Orthodox Church.

To start this service with joyful enthusiasm, let's sing **Joy to the World**, often attributed to Georg Friedrich Handel (1685-1759), and certainly with an energy similar to choruses of Handel's Messiah. Its origin has been disputed and its lyrics altered, as I will mention below. We can sing our 3-verse Unitarian version, **#245 in our hymnal**, *Singing the Living Tradition* (Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993). After a brief introduction by our brass trio, in which I, playing a copy of a 16th C. trombone called a "sackbut", am joined by my daughter Evelyn on French horn and her husband, Tyler Somer, on modern trombone, please join in singing with us when I switch to the Clavinova and we drop the key by a half step to get to the tonality in our hymnal.

Wikipedia reports recent research on this carol and has found what it believes is the original version. English nonconformist Congregational minister and hymnist [Isaac Watts](#) is now credited with the first publication of the carol in 1719. It is based a Christian interpretation of [Psalm 98](#). Watts writes of heaven and earth rejoicing at the coming of the King. But he didn't write it to be a [Christmas carol](#): the lyrics are not about the [Virgin birth of Jesus](#), but rather about Christ's [Second Coming](#). Stanza three, an interlude that alludes to Genesis 3:17-19 rather than to the psalm text, speaks of Christ's blessings extending victoriously over the realm of sin. The cheerful repetition of the phrase "far as the curse is found" has caused this stanza to be omitted from some hymnals, but the line makes sense and is joyful when understood from the New Testament eyes through which Watts interprets the psalm. Stanza four celebrates Christ's "rule over the nations." The nations are called to celebrate because God's faithfulness to the house of Israel has brought salvation to the world.

The author Kimberley Debus of **Beyond the Fringe**, the commentary on our hymnal and its selections, discusses the rationale for the three-verse version chosen (June 3, 2017) for **Joy to the World** in our hymnal *Singing the Living Tradition*. She writes,

"I have now become overall less critical of the Hymnal Commission that put together *Singing the Living Tradition*. I've grown to understand the reasons for

decisions they were making at the time, even if we judge by different standards 25 years later.

“The ones who decide these things realized that there’s no other place in the Christian liturgical calendar to examine the second coming of Christ, [so] they plopped [readings from the Book of Revelation](#) and other apocalyptic texts into these few weeks between Christmas Eve and Epiphany. Thus, the season is as much about the first coming as the second coming.

“And the second coming, for those who aren’t hip to this stuff, is about predicting when the Messiah will come back to earth to rule as sovereign over all, to bring heaven back to earth, to build a new Eden. This is about the kingdom of heaven and the sovereignty of Christ.

“And so, I do have some appreciation for the Hymnal Commission’s attempts to remove the language of Empire – rulership, lordship, sovereignty, etc. – because in general, it’s a bad thing and has led to millennia of bad behavior. You see, the language of Empire turns some people into other/foreigners/unsavory/worthy of subjugation; and while it’s rife in the Bible, we often can understand that language as reaction to political events on the ground (because let’s face it, the Israelites and Judeans had a lot of problems being oppressed and/or exiled by other nations)... and we can see that stopping that chest-beating in our modern language helps build bridges between our divisions.

“All that being said, this entire song is about the idea that (Revelation 21:3b) “He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them” [which] means sovereignty and rulership.”

And here’s the moment when Debus shares her own epiphany about this carol:

“You see, I was all set to finish up the argument saying “this second coming business is what the song means and that’s how we understand the second coming, this whole ruling the world stuff.” And then I read that entire passage from Revelation and realized that “they will be his peoples” is the only line in this passage that has any hint of empire – and that may not be what this means at all.

“We have had centuries of interpretation that say the second coming will be Jesus Christ the King ruling over all, that we forgot to look back at the text. He won’t rule over them, he’ll dwell with them.”

Wow.

So... here are our hymnal's adjusted lyrics as we sang them:

Joy to the world! The Word is come:
let earth with praises ring.
Let every heart prepare a room,
and heaven and nature sing, and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven, and heaven and nature sing.

Joy to the earth! Now gladness reigns:
let hearts their songs employ,
while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
repeat the sounding joy, repeat the sounding joy,
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
nor thorns infest the ground.
Let righteousness its glories show
as far as love is found, as far as love is found,
as far, as far, as love is found.

Suddenly that feels a LOT closer to the Revelation passage, as well as [Psalm 98](#), on which the lyrics are based, and [Psalm 8](#), which is often paired with the Revelation text in the lectionary.

Stirring, uplifting lyrics, but not a typical Christmas carol. Less about his birth than his second coming.

To leave the debate about the interpretation of this song, let's move on to the Unitarian Advent song from last week: **Let Christmas Come**, by Unitarian Minister Dr. John Hanly Morgan (1918-2018), who served as minister in Flint, Michigan; as well as in South Bend, Indiana; and in Charlotte, NC; before moving to Canada and serving as minister in the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto, ON from 1960-1973, as well as Vice-president of the (U. N.) World Peace Council and president of the Canadian Peace Congress.

Hymn 2: **#224 Let Christmas Come**

Now we can light the chalice, followed by the traditional Advent hymn **#225 O Come, O Come, Emmanuel**, Verse 1 in our hymnal, with its Universalist emphasis on Love, together with the lighting of the Advent Wreath.

Music

Beyond monophonic chants, there is little written evidence of Christmas music before the 14th century. The music staff was introduced in stages starting in the late 7th c. First just as accents above the text at a height indicating the pitch and a shape, its movement. A ruled horizontal line was added to give a better idea of the vertical distance and thus pitch. More lines, up to 11, some in colour were also added in the 11th century: red for F and yellow for C. The yellow line was then dropped and the red line became black, giving the familiar two-staff notation. The accents became neumes or notes, some with stems and some without. Solid squares and diamonds were used as note heads. Then open (unfilled or white) notes were introduced. Finally, by the 15th and 16th centuries, a precursor of modern notation, with harmonization indicated by ligatures (several notes on a single stem) had been developed.

To give you some sense of the sound of this early pre-15th c. music, Ray, Kathy, and I will play a couple of short trios: **Quen a omagen da Virgen** from *Las Cantigas de Santa Maria* by Alphonso X, El Sabio (1221-1284) and **Mariam Matrem Virginem** by an anonymous composer and printed in *Llibre Vermell de Montserrat* in the late 14th C. These can be expressive, but they seem bare compared to more modern harmonization with its abundance of major and minor thirds, the presence of which was largely missing before the end of the 15th C.

The first Christmas celebrations began in the 4th c. AD as an adoption of Winter Solstice celebrations to welcome the return of the sun with decorations of evergreens to praise continuing life in mid-winter. Christmas now means we put a tree indoors, and we decorate it. It was a practice in Germany, brought to the United States in the 1832 by a Unitarian with a passionate devotion to the cause of liberty, **Charles Follen** (1796-1840) who emigrated from Germany to Pennsylvania to avoid persecution, founded a church, and became a Harvard Professor. "Follen has left us a legacy of social action based on the principle of freedom. It's a principle that we continue to test ourselves against," said Lucinda Duncan, minister of the Follen Community Church of East Lexington, Mass., the church that Follen founded in 1839.

Initially some families hung the tree upside down from the rafters, but that practice was vetoed by homekeepers who found it messier than when the tree was installed right-side up. Other evergreen decorations were also added, even if frowned upon by the church as being too pagan, and the custom stuck.

Follen was not the first person in America to have a Christmas tree. Decorated trees had been seen in Pennsylvania in the 1820s, and there are reports that Hessian soldiers fighting for the British during the Revolution set up Christmas trees in their encampments. But there is good evidence that Follen was the first person to bring the decorated tree to New England and, after he set the example, the custom spread. The year the National Christmas Tree Association projects sales of 37 million trees. Some families hung the trees upside down from the rafters. To this day, the Follen Community Church commemorates his introduction of the Christmas tree by lighting a tree (right side up!) on its front lawn as well as selling Christmas trees in the lot across the street to raise funds for church programs.

And according to Minister Duncan, the church also strives to remain true to Follen's example as a social activist, an example that showed no sign of diminishing as Follen matured. As a new American, Follen took up the fight against slavery as ardently as he had once fought against the

injustices of European despots. His uncompromising abolitionist principles once lost him a job as pastor of All Souls Church in New York City, and his outspoken stand against slavery at a time when abolition was still highly controversial, even in Massachusetts, may have ended his teaching career. Harvard did not renew his professorship in 1835, but did offer to employ him as a German instructor, at a reduced salary. Supporters, including his wife and the abolitionist poet John Greenleaf Whittier, later said that it was his outspoken views that cost him his Harvard position.

Relieved of his teaching duties, Follen became a free agent. He wrote, preached, and lectured widely, traveling as far afield as Chicago. In 1839, he received an invitation to preach to a small congregation in East Lexington, Mass. Follen accepted, but left after a short while to take a more lucrative position as tutor to a family in Watertown. To fill his position, he recommended a young renegade Unitarian minister named Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Follen returned when the congregation came up with the money to hire him full time and to build its own church. He designed the octagonal church which still stands, laid out so that the minister would not be elevated above his parishioners. Tragically, Follen did not live to preach in the church that now bears his name: the Follen Community Church of Lexington, MA. He was killed in 1840 at the age of 44 in a fire on board the steamship Lexington while crossing Long Island Sound, on his way to the dedication ceremony for the church he designed.

"He was really a man who left a mark on this congregation," said Rev. Duncan. "He had a vision of a free Christian church where all people could come and speak their minds. It was an idea that was way ahead of its time."

To celebrate such evergreen decorations at Christmas time, let's sing **Deck the Hall**, #235 in our hymnal. This is a 16th C. Welsh melody with lyrics, cleaned of drinking references, by Scottish musician Thomas Oliphant in 1862. The tune was evidently used by Mozart (1756-91) in his violin sonata in G, K. 301/293a (1788).

Christmas also means dashing through the snow in a one-horse open sleighs. It means bells that jingle, and laughing, all the way. That's the song "Jingle Bells," known initially as "The One Horse Open Sleigh" written by James Pierpont in 1857, probably the most popular of all Christmas songs, even if written more for Thanksgiving celebrations. James Lord Pierpont was the organist and music director at the Unitarian Congregation in Savannah, Georgia, and his brother, John Pierpont, Jr. (1819-79), was a minister there.

Jingle Bells is not in our hymnal, but we all know it well. Let's sing a verse.

In addition to "Jingle Bells," other Unitarian Christmas songs include "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" by the popular American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-82), written upon learning of the serious injury of his son in a Civil War battle, "Watchman Tell Us of the Night," by John Bowring, and "Do You Hear What I Hear?" by Noel Regney. Longfellow, Bowring, and Regney were all Unitarians. Additionally, "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear," is by the UU minister Edmund Hamilton Sears, as discussed in the service last week.

Christmas is more than decorations and song, It is stories and traditions. For example about when Old Ebenezer Scrooge's heart opens up to compassion and joy. Charles Dickens, in 1843, published *A Christmas Carol*, and Christmas has never been the same since. Prior to Dickens story, the celebration of Christmas had died down somewhat. There were family gatherings, but with little special meaning, nothing exceptional. Dickens changed that. Charles Dickens was a Unitarian.

In Dickens' tale, Scrooge confronts his past, when as a young man, his need for money -- that is, we suppose, his need for security or status -- caused him to lose his fiancée, Belle. He is shown the present reality of joy in gatherings of families, whether they are poor like Bob Cratchit's or relatively well off like Scrooge's nephew Fred. Then he is brought to an awareness of his own impending death. It's not that Scrooge had explicitly believed himself immortal. It's just that he had pushed the fact that life is temporary out of his mind. In pushing away death, he had pushed away life, for the two are inseparably linked.

Dickens' novella received immediate popular and critical acclaim, and almost as immediately shifted the way that Victorians celebrated Christmas. Over the next years, Dickens received hundreds of letters from complete strangers "writing all manner of letters about their homes and hearths, and how the *Carol* is read aloud there, and kept on a little shelf all by itself." *A Christmas Carol* was regarded as a new gospel. Critics noted that the book was, in their experience, unique in that it actually made readers behave better.

A Christmas Carol remains the most widely read-aloud book. It is still theatrically performed in various venues around the country every year. It has been made into numerous movie versions. Other popular Christmas tales such as *It's a Wonderful Life* and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* are but re-workings of Charles Dickens' Unitarian gospel. "According to historian Ronald Hutton, the current state of observance of Christmas is largely the result of a mid-Victorian revival of the holiday spearheaded by *A Christmas Carol*." The Christmas social gospel of generosity, gratitude, and the joy of family gathering is fundamentally Unitarian.

Christmas also means the message of Peace on Earth, to all goodwill. In 1849, just a few years after Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol*, a Unitarian minister, Edmund Hamilton Sears, wrote the words to "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear." With the war in Europe and the US war with Mexico weighing on his mind, Rev. Sears wrote a carol that urges us to hear the angels sing of peace on earth, to all goodwill.

The Gospel of Luke tells of angels proclaiming Peace on Earth -- but for most of the history of Christendom, that has been taken as referring to a private, personal peace. Few imagined that peace on earth actually meant we should stop killing each other!

Rev. Edmund Hamilton Sears, however, was at the vanguard of a movement to understand peace on earth in social, community terms – instead of merely a personal, private peace. He called us to task for not heeding the angelic call to peace:

"Beneath the angel strain have rolled two thousand years of wrong,
and man at war with man hears not the love song which they bring,"
he decried.

His lyrics raised objections from a number of Christian conservatives of the time. Many people said, contemptuously, that Sears' hymn was just the sort of thing you would expect of a Unitarian.

Yes, indeed it is.

If Christmas season today is a time when our hopes turn to ending war and truly bringing peace on earth, it is because a Unitarian minister wrote a song inviting us to imagine the day:

"when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling,
and the whole world give back the song which now the angels sing."

This is our holiday. From the Christmas tree, to the jingling bells, to the Scrooge story, to the message of peace on earth, Unitarians have had a hand at making Christmas what it is today (and tomorrow)..

Let's finish by extinguishing first the Advent wreath, using the Advent words for Christmas, then the extinguishing of our chalice, followed by the closing hymn, namely the first verse of **Silent Night** #251 and **We wish You a Merry Christmas!**

Merry Christmas to all, and we look forward to the New Year and our first Sunday Service of 2024 on January 7.