

Christmas Eve 11:00 a.m.

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 24 December 2006
Chip Roush

OPENING WORDS

*“While visions of sugar-plums danced in [our] heads,
And [ma] in her ‘kerchief, and I in my cap,
Had just settled [down] for a long winter’s nap.
When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,
I sprang from the bed to see what was the matter.
Away to the window I flew like a flash,
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash...”*

*And what I saw there
was the Spirit of Life,
clamoring for my attention.*

*For the next sixty minutes,
and for the rest of our lives,
let us be about opening the gifts
of attention and compassion
and hope in the absolute miracle of life.*

FIRST READING

The gospel of Mark was the first gospel written, probably around the year 60 of our common era. The gospel of Luke was written ten or fifteen years later. It has much of the same material as the earlier work, but unlike Mark, it includes a story of Jesus’ birth. This is Luke 2:1, 3-19, in the King James translation:

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.

SECOND READING

Christine Robinson is the Senior Minister of the First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque. This is adapted from one of her Christmas meditations:

May these moments of quiet lead us to the heart of the season, which is peace. May we breathe deeply of peace in this quiet place, relax into its warmth, know we are safe here, and let us open our hearts to the evening's story. Like the wandering couple, may we find that from our greatest trials issue forth our greatest joys. Like the harried innkeeper, may we find ways to be of help to others. Like the lumbering beasts, may we be silent witnesses to the unfathomable glory of life. Like the shepherds on the hill, may we know that we need never be afraid. Like the journeying wise, may we always have the courage to follow our stars. Like the angels, may we cry peace to a troubled world.

THIRD READING

Mattie Stepanek was born in Washington, D.C., in 1990, with a rare form of muscular dystrophy. He was three when his older brother died, and Mattie began writing poetry to express his feelings about his loss. Mattie wrote several books of poetry, and appeared on many television programs, before his death in 2004.

In December, The dark sky of nighttime Comes very early. And as soon as the daytime And then the sunset are all through, There are lots and lots of Christmas stars. We see them everywhere In the sky with the moon. It is a present from Heaven in the sky To real live people Who look up. That is so special.

FOURTH READING Robert Fulghum is a Unitarian Universalist minister who has written several best-sellers, including the book in which the follow story is found, *All I Need to Know, I Learned in Kindergarten*.

A Sunday afternoon it was, some days before Christmas. With rain, with wind, with cold. Wintersgloom. Things-to-do list was long and growing like an unrepentant mold. Temper: short. Bio-index: negative. Horoscope reading suggested caution. And the Sunday paper suggested dollars, death and destruction as the day's litany. O tidings of comfort and joy, fa la la la la!

This holy hour of Lordsdaybliss was jarred by a pounding at the door. Now what? Deep sigh. Opening it, resigned to accept whatever bad news lies in wait, I am nonplussed. A rather small person in a cheap Santa Claus mask, carrying a large brown paper bag outthrust. "TRICK OR TREAT!" Santa Mask shouts. What? "TRICK OR TREAT!" Santa Mask hoots again. Tongue-tied, I stare at this apparition. He shakes the bag at me, and dumbly I fish out my wallet and find a dollar to drop into the bag. The mask lifts, and it is an Asian kid with a ten-dollar grin taking up most of his face. "Wanta hear some caroling?" he asks, in singsong English. I know him now. He belongs to a family settled into the neighborhood by the Quakers last year. Boatpeople. Vietnamese, I believe. Refugees. He stopped by at Halloween with his sisters and brothers, and I filled their bags. Hong Duc is his name – he's maybe eight. At Halloween he looked like a Wise Man, with a bathrobe on and a dish towel around his head.

"Wanta hear some caroling?" I nod, envisioning an octet of urchin refugees hiding in the bushes ready to join their leader in uplifted song. "Sure, where's the choir?" "I'm it," says he. And he launched forth with an up-tempo chorus of "Jingle Bells," at full lung power. This was followed by an equally enthusiastic rendering of what I swear sounded like "Hark, the Hairy Angels Sing." And finally, a soft-voiced, reverential singing of "Silent Night." Head back, eyes closed, from the bottom of his heart he poured out the last strains of "Sleep in heavenly peace" into the gathering night.

Wet-eyed, dumbstruck by his performance, I pulled a five-dollar bill out of my wallet and dropped that into the paper bag. In return he produced half a candy cane from his pocket and passed it solemnly to me. Flashing the ten-dollar grin, he turned and ran from the porch, shouted "GOD BLESS YOU," and "TRICK OR TREAT" and was gone.

Who was that masked kid? Hong Duc, the one-man choir, delivering Christmas door to door.

I confess that I'm usually a little confused about Christmas. It never has made a lot of sense to me. It's unreal. [Never mind] Santa Claus, I've been a closet cynic at heart. Singing about riding in a one-horse sleigh is ludicrous. I've never seen one, much less ridden in one. Never roasted chestnuts by an open fire. Wouldn't know how to if I had one, and I hear they're no big deal anyway. Wandering Wise Men raise my suspicious, and shepherds who spend their lives hanging about with sheep are a little strange. Never seen an angel, either, and my experience with virgins is really limited. The appearance of a newborn king

doesn't interest me; I'd just as soon settle for some other president. Babies and reindeer stink. I've been around them both, and I know. The little town of Bethlehem is a pit, according to those who have been there.

Singing about things I've never seen or done or wanted, dreaming of a white Christmas I've never known. Christmas isn't very real. And yet, and yet... I'm too old to believe in it, and too young to give up on it. Too cynical to get into it, and too needy to stay out of it.

Trick or treat! After I shut the door came near hysteria – laughter and tears and that funny feeling you get when you know that once again Christmas has come to you. Right down the chimney of my midwinter hovel comes Saint Hong Duc. He is confused about the details, like me, but he is very clear about the spirit of the season. It's an excuse to let go and celebrate – to throw yourself into Holiday with all you have, wherever you are. "I'm it," says he. Where's Christmas? I ask myself. I'm it, comes the echo. I'm it. Head back, eyes closed, voice raised in whatever song I can muster the courage to sing.

God, it is said, once sent a child upon a starry night, that the world might know hope and joy. I am not sure that I quite believe that, or that I believe in all the baggage heaped upon that story during two thousand years. But I am sure that I believe in Hong Duc, the one-man Christmas choir, shouting "trick or treat!" door to door. I don't know who or what sent him. But I know I am tricked through the whimsical mischief of fate into joining the choir that sings of joy and hope. Through a child, I have been treated to Christmas.

EVENT {*The Twelve Days of Unitarian Universalism*, written by Tarsa & Roush}

On the first day of Christmas, my UUs gave to me

One god instead of three

Most Christians believe in a three-part god: the father, the son and the Holy Ghost. They are therefore called Trinitarians; and I am a Unitarian because I think God is one. I believe that Jesus was the Son of God in exactly the same way I am, and in the same way that we are each a child of God.

Two faith traditions

The ideas that “god is one” and that a loving god would not create a hell have been around virtually since Jesus’ time. Of course, both were considered heresies, punishable by death for most of that time. It wasn’t until the 18th and 19th centuries, here on the shores of the United States, that each became a respectable—at least, non-deadly—faith tradition. In 1961, the two movements joined, and formed the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.

Free conscience

Our tradition is noncreedal— you don’t have to agree to believe in any particular statement, in order to join our congregation. Now, it is not the case that you can “believe anything you want,” but rather that you are free to believe whatever it has that you DO believe, whatever your conscience tells you, from deep down inside, whatever gets you through, in times of turmoil and struggle. And we’ll all walk together, in free association.

Four calling pagans

Besides our roots in the Jewish and Christian traditions, we also find inspiration in other sources— like pagan, Wiccan and other earth-centered spiritualities There is no hell! This is the Universalist side of our heritage. I don’t think we can know about any potential afterlife, but I do think we need to work together to create our heaven, or suffer in our own hell, in this lifetime.

Six women preaching

The first woman minister in our country was Olympia Brown, ordained by the Universalist Church of America. We UUs have also been the first to ordain an out gay man, an out lesbian, and an out transgendered person. Plus, there are now more woman ministers than men in the ranks of UU religious professionals.

Seven principles

We do not have a creed, but we do have some principles that most of us affirm and promote, including the worth and dignity of every human being and that all life is part of an interconnected web.

Eight members voting

When our ancestors arrived on these shores, they didn’t find any bishops or other church hierarchies in their bibles, so they did without them here: they decided that each congregation could make its own decisions. So, instead of someone telling us who will be our minister, and when he or she will leave, the congregation chooses who will be our spiritual leader. (thank you again for choosing me, by the way!)

Nine humanists

Another vital part of our religious tradition is our humanism. Humanists do not believe in any supernatural beings. Some, more secular, believe we are entirely responsible for creating a better world for our children; Others, the “religious humanists,” believe that there may be a natural spirit, or lure toward goodness, though it is still our responsibility to listen and act with that spirit. Several Unitarians signed the original Humanist Manifesto, in 1933, and many UUs have signed the subsequent second and third versions.

Ten syllables

Not only does “Unitarian Universalism” have ten syllables, the longest word in the dictionary, *antidisestablishmentarianism*, comes from our tradition. Originally, there was no separation between church and state, and peoples’ tax dollars went straight to the established churches. Unitarians benefited from this, as they were one of the established, approved groups. Universalists were not, nor were other traditions, like Judaism and Catholicism. Eventually, dis-Establishmentarians sued to end such favoritism, and anti-disestablishmentarians worked to keep that system functioning. Fortunately, the dis-Establishmentarians won.

Eleven souls transcending

Some of our spiritual ancestors were Transcendentalists, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller. They affirmed the validity of our direct experience of the sacred; and valued intuition over dogma.

Twelve Transylvanians

Transylvania was the first and so-far only Unitarian kingdom, when John Sigismund declared himself a Unitarian. However, like his mother, Queen Isabella, he explicitly forbade any religion from persecuting others. His Edict of Tolerance, in 1568, encouraged Catholics, Protestants and Unitarians to live together in peace.

HOMILY How many of you have ever celebrated Christmas with a tree decorated with real candles? How many have celebrated Hanukkah, and seen candles lit in a menorah? How many of you have celebrated a winter solstice, with a yule log, or with a fire in a cauldron?

I attended my first solstice service last Friday night. It was a marvelous ritual, very beautiful and deeply satisfying. When the children, representing the Maybon and the Spirit of the South, lit the cauldron, and fire leapt up so that the light really did return to our circle, I was touched in a very deep place. I felt my body celebrate the return of radiance. Later, in a conversation after the ritual, we were speculating about whether the ancients really believed that lighting fires would “remind” the sun, and bring it back once more.

At least one person thought it was disrespectful of our ancestors to think that they were that simple. Surely they knew that the sun would return— it had every other year, hadn't it?

Another person pointed out that they had performed their rituals every year, so of course the sun came back. That just proved the efficacy of their rites, not that the sun would come back without them.

Perhaps it was a bit of both— they probably did expect the sun to return, but they went ahead and performed their rituals to the best of their ability, just in case. And, after all, it was a reason to throw a party, and feast and drum and dance all night.

I eat pork and sauerkraut every New Year's Day, for good luck. I know that it doesn't *really* matter, and yet it is my family custom, and it makes me feel good to do it. So maybe the solstice rituals accomplished the same thing for our past relations.

And yet, maybe it *does* matter. Not about the return of the light: it cannot matter whether or not we light a solstice fire, or celebrate Hanukkah or Divali or Christmas. Planetary physics ensures that we'll have longer days after the solstice. But maybe it does matter to **us** Maybe, besides decorating the tree, or breaking out the menorah, or casting a correct solstice circle, maybe we have to prepare a place in our hearts for the radiance to return to.

Maybe we need people like Hong Duc to remind us of the magic regenerative powers of **celebrating** these midwinter holidays.

In our last reading, Robert Fulghum was in a negative, short-tempered mood. Then Hong Duc showed up, and reminded him that, no matter how awful the newspapers appear, joy and hope are still possible in our world. All we have to do, is participate.

Fulghum wrote: “‘Where's Christmas?’ I ask myself. I'm it, comes the echo. I'm it. Head back, eyes closed, voice raised in whatever song I can muster the courage to sing.”

We're it. The days will get longer, whether or not we light bonfires. But the only way our world will get more joyful is if we act to create that joy.

The only way the world will have more hope is if we act in hopeful ways— if we raise our voices in whatever songs we can muster the courage to sing, and if we act to create justice in whatever ways we can muster the courage to act.

As the Reverend Robinson wrote, "like the harried innkeeper, may we find ways to be of help to others." "Like the wandering couple, may we find that our greatest joys issue forth from our greatest trials. Like the lumbering beasts, may we be silent witnesses to the unfathomable glory of life. Like the shepherds on the hill, may we know that we need never be afraid. Like the journeying wise, may we always have the courage to follow our stars. [and] Like the angels, may we cry peace to a troubled world."

Whatever role is ours, this year, let us take it up with glad hearts and rejuvenated wills.

{walk over to Kevin, shake his hand, and say, "Merry Christmas, and Happy Holidays to you. Pass it on."}
{do the same to one person in the congregation, and another...}

{passing of the peace}

So may we be.