



A Holiday Celebration: Now More than Ever

Sunday, December 20, 2020, on Zoom

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Songs: “Deck the Hall,” with audio of UU Church of Corpus Christi choir; “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” with 12 households on Zoom; “Silent Night,” “Angels We Have Heard on High.”

Piano, live: “December, Christmas” by P. I. Tchaikovsky; Sonata in G major, Op.14, No.2

(Allegro), by L. van Beethoven; “Lo, How a Rose e’er Blooming,” trad. German carol, 1600s;

“O Tannenbaum” and “Linus and Lucy” by Vince Guaraldi, “The Christmas Song,” by Mel

Torme and Robert Wells. Trumpets, video: Gordon Gerwig & Tom Goff, “Let there be Music.”

Also: A Nativity Pageant, and slideshow of members’ recent photographs of holiday cheer.

Message by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones

Good morning! It’s good to be with you on this December day. This is our holiday celebration service which we hold every year on the third Sunday of December. Of course, our December *this* year is different from anything we could have imagined a year ago. No matter how many years any of us has been alive, this holiday season is unlike any that we have ever experienced before. This Christmas comes at the end of a year full of loss, worry, confusion, and chaos. We know that in times of crisis and sadness, familiar traditions and rituals can be reassuring. Rituals connect us and provide a sense of continuity from past to present to future.

There are some traditions in which I haven’t participated personally for several years, like attending the “Nutcracker” ballet, watching “A Christmas Carol” enacted on stage, or sitting on Santa’s lap in a department store—that was more than several years ago! Even though I seldom do such things anymore, it’s always reassuring to know that such traditions have continued! In this pandemic time, however, social distancing and confinement have disrupted many of our seasonal expectations, pastimes and rituals—such as gathering with friends, singing or attending concerts, traveling, sharing meals, or coming to events here at UUSS. We miss one another. We miss the opportunities for a warm hug or a handshake of good cheer.

Among all other kinds of loss this year, we have lost the reassuring patterns many of us have relied on to work our way through the season, not to mention the rest of the year. Last spring, the President of our Unitarian Universalist Association sent out a pastoral message a few weeks after the pandemic-related closings had begun. The Reverend Susan Frederick Gray advised us to remember that we don’t have a script for this crisis. None of us has ever had to respond to a pandemic before. We are learning as we go, learning and doing at the same time. This goes for congregations and school districts, for families and businesses, and for government leaders and public health professionals.

So, without the usual routines to follow this year, we must be guided by the values that we share with one another. We must practice care, show patience, and reach out in all the ways that we can. In addition, we must make time for joy. We must use our creativity and resilience to celebrate the same values now that we have gathered in person to sing about or tell stories about in more ordinary December seasons.

I’ve been thinking about this: how we have become so familiar with the stories of the holiday season that it’s easy to miss that they hinge on unmet expectations, they center on a

disruption of the usual and familiar. Many of the stories we enjoy are those about expectations that have been turned upside down.

Consider the New Testament story of Jesus' birth. In theological terms, the Nativity story reveals the presence of Divine Love amid human life. Traditional Christians believe that the birth of Jesus was God's way of taking on human form. Jesus was God's disruption of human history and human expectations. Less traditional people see Jesus not as God, but as a rule-breaking prophet, a love-preaching messenger who was truly inspired, perhaps inspired by God. In either case, the surprise of the story is that this messenger did not come from a royal family, but a poor one. This leader, who recruited followers to preach divine love and human dignity, came **not** from the ruling class, but from a marginalized ethnic and religious community. He was born in a shed, not a palace. The meaning of such upended expectations is that every person is worthy of care and compassion: you, me and everyone. It's as simple as that.

This message has been repeated in many ways over the centuries. A notable version appeared as a television special in 1965. That is, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. It was created by cartoonist Charles Schultz. Watching the show year after year has been a reassuring ritual for many of us.

In the story, poor humble Charlie Brown goes looking for a tree for the kids' Christmas performance. He is drawn to a scrawny and short evergreen tree. Its few frail branches are nearly bare of needles. For his underwhelming selection, Charlie Brown is ridiculed by other kids. "You've *ruined* Christmas, Charlie Brown," he's told. He feels that way himself. But the quiet Linus reminds him, and everyone, of the essence of the story that brings them together at the season. It has nothing to do with a glorious tree or a perfect performance. Then Linus lays his own blanket under the tree. With just a few decorations, the kids give the tree a sparkling makeover. Actually, it's their perspective that is made over—as they learn and explore new possibilities near at hand. Given an unwelcome turn of events, they come to appreciate how simple it can be to honor the season.

A similar message is revealed in one more story I'll mention. It's another American classic, what I call American scripture. Of course, I mean *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. First published by Dr. Seuss in *Redbook Magazine* in 1957, it was broadcast on TV in 1966. It's another annual television ritual. Movies have been made of it, and greeting cards, and clothing like this Grinch necktie. (I wear it only once a year.) In the story, the unhappy and resentful Grinch looks down in anger on the joyful townsfolk of Whoville—he looks down from his Grinch cave, up in the mountain. He schemes to take their joy, to steal it. He puts on a Santa Claus disguise and sneaks into every house in Whoville. He pilfers their presents and swipes the stockings hung by the fireplace. On Christmas morning the Grinch looks down on Whoville with glee, expecting a horde of downhearted Who's. But no! They have joined hands in a big circle of neighborly affection, going round and round, humming and singing. The Grinch had expected that *they* were expecting material goods to make their Christmas happen. But the Grinch hadn't stopped the Who's from celebrating at all. Their creativity led them to find other ways to enjoy it. In spite of any disappointment they might have encountered in the morning, they were able to affirm their connections with one another. In the absence of presents and stockings on Christmas morning, they decided to make the day special in a different way.

So here we are, December of 2020. For many of us, the familiar ways of doing the holidays seem to have been stolen by the Grinch. At least the Who's of Whoville got to hold hands and sing together--we can't even do that! But with creativity we can find other ways to celebrate our values and renew the spirit of the season.

In the familiar stories of the holiday season, it is in the ways people of goodwill choose to act in the wake of the disruptions where we find the simplicity of the message of the season. With courage and creativity, we can renew the message of human dignity, human care, and human community. This message can stretch from our hearts and homes to people all over the world. It's a message we can widely share, but it cannot ever be taken away from us.

In this most unusual December, in this year of disrupted expectations, may we find and create new perspectives on the holiday season. Let us learn and explore new possibilities close around us. Let us find ways to celebrate, for we need a holiday celebration this year more than ever. Amen.

Introduction to the Celebration

And that is what we are doing today: celebrating in ways both familiar and unexpected for us. We'll have a Nativity Pageant created by UU religious educators and ministers, and revised for use on Zoom. Before we sing the final Christmas carol, we'll watch a slideshow of pictures of holiday decorations and friendly faces provided for our enjoyment by several households in the congregation. But right now, we'll sing a Zoomed-up version of "The Twelve Days of Christmas." We've done this for several years, and the tradition began many years at the UU Community Church of Sacramento. Enjoy!

Pastoral Prayer by Rev. Lucy Bunch

Dear Spirit, Great Mystery that has blessed us with Life, help us to feel grateful. Help us to keep our hearts open and receptive. We give thanks in this moment for lungs that breathe in and out, for hearts that beat, for bodies that work. We give thanks for family, for friends, for those who have supported and sustained us in body or in spirit.

We give thanks for those whose lives have touched ours and are now in our memory. For all those people who came before us, who—flawed or damaged as perhaps they were—loved us into being, shaped us into who we are now. We remember with gratitude.

We give thanks for those among us who care about the common good, and make choices beyond their personal preference or needs. For those who sacrifice for the good of all.

We give thanks for this coming holiday/gathering, however we will spend it. We give thanks to be alive, to be able to mark the day – to hold memories of holidays past and dreams of future celebrations.

We give thanks for this community – for the ability to be together today, imperfect as it is. We are grateful to share this space, and feel the connections among us.

Thank you, Great Spirit, for this gift of being alive, despite the challenges, despite the losses and the disappointments. Remind us to let love be our strength and our commitment to each other and to the world. Blessed Be