



Christmas/Holiday Traditions

First Church Leominster UU Service

December 11, 2016

CHALICE LIGHTING

We are grateful for the religious insights; ceremonies, traditions and customs which bind us together and inspire us to strive for peace and goodwill among all people. We hope that one day love will overcome misunderstanding, ignorance and hate.

We light this chalice to proclaim the flame of connection to all creation.

OPENING WORDS

If we fill our lives with things and yet more things, if we feel that we must fill every moment that we have with activity, when will we have the time to make the long, slow journey across the burning desert?

as did the wise men and when will we sit

and watch the stars, as did the shepherds

or when will we brood over the coming of the child as did Mary,

when will we have the time to make the spiritual journey?

For each of us, there is a desert to travel, a star to discover and follow and a being within ourselves to bring to life.

Rev Douglas Furbush

*OPENING HYMN: **Let Christmas Come #224**

RESPONSIVE READING: Rev. Alfred Cole

We have a promise to keep which we made long ago in the silvery light of a star at the manger of a child.

EARTH HAS RESOUNDED WITH THE HARSH CRIES OF HATE AND OUR HAND HAS BEEN RAISED AGAINST OUR NEIGHBORS.

We have a promise to keep, for that song of peace and goodwill from the midnight skies is faint and far away.

WE STILL SEEK OUR NEIGHBOR ACROSS THE FROWNING WALLS OF FEAR, FOR DEEP IN OUR HEART IS THE HUNGER FOR PEACE

One again across the long years sounds that sweet old song, and from our haunted sleep we awake to listen and bow down.

HOW LONG O MESSENGER OF PEACE, SHALL WE KEEP YOU WAITING OUTSIDE THE CLOSED DOORS WHERE PEOPLE TRADE THEIR SOULS FOR POWER AND GOLD?

Your dream, O Messenger of Peace, shines in our hearts today. The light from your star streams into our souls and hope is born anew.

DAY BY DAY THE LIGHT SHALL GROW. AND YEAR BY YEAR THE SHADOWS SHALL FADE AWAY.

Voices of peace and goodwill, long stifles the bitter cries of hate, sound again.

THAT MIDNIGHT SONG OF LONG AGO SHALL FALL UPON THE EARTH LIKE THE GENTLE MANTLE OF THE SNOW

CANDLES OF JOY & CONCERN:

"throughout our days and lives we encounter events, people and circumstances that perplex, pain or empower us. We find that sharing our joys and concerns brings release, support and strength. This morning i am inviting anyone, who cares to, to come forward to light a candle. You may do this in silence or with words and /or prayers being offered up as you light the candle."

REFLECTION AND PRAYER (spoken and silent)

INTERLUDE

READINGS: Some Holiday customs and traditions explored.

Over the years the symbols and even some of the meanings of Christmas and the holidays have grown and changed. But there can always be a Christmas response to our difficulties. It can't make all our or the worlds troubles disappear, but we can be the dreamers and doers if all year long we shed light on suspicion and hate, cover cruelty with the warmth of assurance and compassion, are generous in the face of narrow selfishness, bring peace to places of bitter dispute. The human heart created Christmas and it is only the hope of the loving human heart and spirit which can sustain it.

Today we are going to examine some of the familiar traditions and rituals.

Literally Christmas means Christ mass or the mass of Christ but even before the Christ Mass the month of December was a time of many other celebrations

from ancient lands and times and people. Thus it was not unusual for the church fathers to choose December 25 as the date of the birth of Christ. Although there has long been controversy over the actual date- December 25 has been commonly accepted at least as the date to gather. It fits well with a host of other winter celebrations too.

Where do the traditions and rituals for Christmas come from ? They come from a long line and very diverse heritage. Jewish, pagan, Roman, Greek, Persian, Egyptian, German, Spanish, Mesopotamian, English and Christian customs come from all parts of the world.

It probably all started with darkness and cold and food running low and candles and flames, and evergreen trees and holly and mistletoe and singing and dancing to chase away the gloom and then to celebrate when the earth shifted yet again and new life and new birth blossomed yet again. The traditions are rich and fun and important in many ways to many of us.

LET US SING 1 VERSE OF

*CAROL: **oh come all ye faithful see booklet 1 verse**

READING: Advent

No one knows for sure but it is a good guess that the advent wreath had its beginning in the pagan fire wheel ceremony. This closed circle or wreath is symbolic of eternity and was used to symbolize the everlasting flow of time and world without beginning or end. The use of an Christian advent wreath originated a few hundred years ago among the Lutherans in Germany. Made usually of evergreen it was either suspended from the ceiling or placed on a table. Four candles, the first three are usually purple the fourth usually pink, the center one white were lit each week of the four weeks before Christmas with words said

during the lighting. A fifth candle was placed in the middle and lit on Christmas eve signifying the end of waiting for the son of god/the Christ child to be born.

There are hundreds of words and rituals that have been written to mark the four weeks but the usual formula is to light one candle for remembering. Remembering those no longer with us. the 2nd is lit for sharing- sharing ourselves, sharing with one another and sharing love. the 3rd is for hope. Hope for health, prosperity, happiness and peace between all peoples. The 4th is for love. Love and compassion being the highest moral value we can manifest. And the 5th for Jesus- the Christ child the joy and possibility manifest in new life.

There is a tale told by the Unitarian Universalist Rev. Duncan Littlefair, that may or may not be true about how the Advent wreath tradition came to be in our time. In a small German village the people were too busy with their daily work to stop and think about the upcoming Christmas day. The busyness had led the villagers to see the time only as an extra burden and as bringing on too much labor and work to enjoy and appreciate. The mayor set aside one day for each of the four weeks before the actual day for thinking about the true and important meaning of Christmas. The first week the mayor lit a candle and encouraged people to think about the meaning of the upcoming Christmas. The second week he lit another to encourage the people to rethink Christmas not as a burden but instead as a joyful and festive time. The third week he suggested that they gift somebody outside their immediate family, and then on the fourth week to reflect on the great joy they experienced by gifting and being gifted by another. No matter the beginning, the advent wreath reminds us to think beyond our busy times and busy life, to remember those around us who are in need and to be generous in heart mind and spirit.

*CAROL: **o come, o come emmanuel see booklet 1 verse**

READING: holly & ivy & poinsettia

All people but in particular the Ancient pagan people brought greenery inside during the winter months. The tradition of decorating and celebrating by using greenery, ivy and pine and holly to decorate homes came from that time. Holly is an evergreen plant and was revered by the early Anglo-Saxon, Celts and those in cold climes. A Christian legend states that holly first grew where the feet of Christ touched the earth. Another was that the crown of thorns the Jesus wore was of holly, whose berries originally white turned red on his forehead when he was beat and whipped at the time of his crucifixion.

The poinsettia is also a traditional Christmas plant coming to the United States from Mexico. There is a lovely legend that a young boy or girl was praying fervently to receive a gift that they might bring to give to the Christ child and suddenly the weeds they were standing upon changed in the lovely poinsettia. This lovely poinsettia, far from the traditional red is from Greeley Summers, a former member of the congregation who has moved away but who was here last night with his wife Mary for the concert and he brought this gift to us.

Wherever the traditions come adorning and decorating our homes and sacred places with greenery is a lovely tradition.

*CAROL: LET US SING **the holly & the ivy** see booklet

READING: Let me tell you about the Christmas tree

Once upon a time in the united states Christmas was celebrated without a decorated tree. During the revolutionary war Hessian soldiers had decorated pine boughs as part of their winter ceremony, but it was not until 1832 the Christmas tree became a part or our holiday celebrations.

A Unitarian minister and German refugee named Charles Follen was serving the church in Lexington Ma. He had been living in the states for several years but at Christmas time something seemed to be missing for him. One day as he was strolling down a street surrounded by a pine forest, he suddenly knew what it was.

When he got home he asked his cook to be careful opening the eggs that she used while cooking, and to crack them as evenly as possible, and to keep the pieces for him. Next he purchased many small candles and small candle holders and candy and barley sugar and bright colored paper, ribbon small dolls and small figurines. He painted the egg cups gold, and filled them with sweets, he cut out paper shapes and tied string around the figures and put candles in holders. The day before Christmas he walked into the forest and carefully dug up a tree roots and all, put it in a huge tub and brought it home and set it up in the parlor. Forbidding anyone to enter.

The next day in secret, he prepared the tree. Filling its branches with lovely surprises of candy and candles and the paper decorations and the egg shells holding treats.

It was then that he remembered that during his childhood in his native Germany his father had done a similar though smaller ritual by decorating the boughs of an evergreen.

On the morning of Christmas Rev. Follen and his wife gathered all the children outside the closed parlor door. They then went into the room and lit all the candles on the tree and stood ready to watch the delight on the children's faces as they were invited to enter the room and see the brightly lit Christmas tree.

By 1856, the tree was so popular a Christmas ritual that President Pierce had one put up in the White House and in 1923 President and Mrs. Coolidge lit the first national Christmas tree on the White House grounds. A tradition that continues to this day.

Thus the practice of decorating a tree began from the humble beginning of taking in an evergreen bough, to the elaborate tradition we now enjoy of decorating and lighting our own Christmas trees.

*CAROL: Sing together now 1 verse of **o christmas tree** **see booklet**

READING: the crèche

The placing of the crèche in one's home and as we do here at First Church is a tradition that grew out of the story of the birth of Jesus. Two thousand plus years ago a family came to Bethlehem to be enrolled in a census. During the visit to Bethlehem the mother Mary gave birth to her son, Jesus. His birth was said to have taken place in a place where animals were sheltered. His birth was attended by his father Joseph and was witnessed by angels, and shepherds, sheep, and cows and donkeys and chickens and common folk. Jesus grew up to become an extraordinary man, a healer, a teacher, a preacher, a prophet, a person of astonishing compassion, and Jesus has influenced our society and many others since his humble birth and his pain filled crucifixion.

The crèche always depicts that first family and his humble beginning in a little town.

*CAROL: LET US SING **o little town of Bethlehem** **see booklet**

READING:

Betsy will you share the other story of the birth of Jesus. a Latin infancy gospel: the birth of Jesus

*CAROL: SING 1 VERSE OF **away in a manger** **see booklet**

READING: Christmas cards & caroling

As Christmas approaches we turn from decorating and readying, to celebrating and reaching out to others. The custom of sending Christmas cards is one way to reach out. The earliest known holiday card was printed in Germany in the 1400's. Those Germans sure knew how to bring in Christmas didn't they? Trees and cards and Kris Kringle. The card that started the trend though was not the one in the 1400's but one printed in 1843 in London for Sir Henry Cole. It read

“Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.” In 1875 the first cards were printed in America, in Boston. They were elaborate and expensive. The custom continues with billions of Christmas cards being exchanged each year. Along with Christmas cards came another tradition of going from house to house singing Christmas Carols.

The earliest carols were ring around dances accompanied by singing. Troubadours and wandering minstrels first toured the villages of Italy but the custom spread throughout France, Germany, England and beyond. The Carolers were frequently rewarded with food and drink.

But early Carols were sung as part of the church liturgy to illustrate the birth story of Jesus to a people who did not read the bible and who learned the book of Luke and the nativity story through singing.

During the Puritan reign in the 17th century the tradition of caroling was not allowed but by the 19th Century and the late 1800’s the tradition came back again and has expanded in all areas.

Please now joining together in holiday song let us sing. 1 verse of

*CAROL: **we wish you a merry christmas** **see booklet**

READING: no review of the traditions of Christmas would be complete without telling the story about St. Nicholas

In some culture’s, the story of St Nick is about a bishop who lived over 1500 years ago. He was rich and used his wealth to help the poor. He wanted to do so in secret and without leaving his name. Once upon a time the story tells, there were three girls who could not be married off because their father had no money for their dowries. The legend is that Bishop Nicholas heard of their plight and decided to help them out. And to avoid being seen, Bishop Nicholas, or so the story tells us, dropped three bags of gold, one for each of the three girls down the fireplace. The bags of gold landed in each of the daughter’s shoes which had been

left on the hearth to dry from the wet snow. Supposedly, this is where the tradition of leaving an orange, tangerine, or gold covered coins in the toe of your stocking comes from.

Leaving a piece of coal in the toe of a stocking is a threat to all of you to behave or risk not being gifted at all. So you better be nice and not naughty

The picture we have in our mind of Santa Claus came for the 1822 poem Clement Moore , 'The Night before Christmas: A visit from Saint Nicholas'. St Nicholas as the robust and jolly and kindly figure in that poem was drawn by the illustrator Thomas Nast published each year in the Harper's Weekly from 1863 - 1902. It is the picture we still hold on to.

and now let us sing 1 verse of **joy to the world** **see booklet**

READING: the exchange of gifts.

The custom of gift giving comes from many sources. One is that Santa Claus/St Nick would bring gifts to children in need. But mostly the custom of giving gifts comes to us from the bible story of the Magi who brought gifts to the baby Jesus. According to tradition, King Melchior from Arabia brought gold, a symbol of a king's wealth and position, Balthasar, King of Ethiopia brought frankincense, symbol of a high priest's position and Gaspar King of Tarsus, brought myrrh, a symbol of medicine and representative of Jesus' healing powers. Both myrrh and frankincense were also used in burial rites symbolizing that Jesus would die recognized as King.

Although it is told that the Magi did not arrive until the 12th day of Christmas January 6th the story of their arrival is told as part of the nativity story.

Stephanie is going to tell you about the Queens who came too.

"the queens came late. But they came, they were there.

The Queens Came Late

But the Queens Were There

The Queens came late, but the Queens were there
With gifts in their hands and crowns on their hair,
They'd come, these three, like the Kings from far,
Following yes, that guiding star.

They'd left their ladles, linens and looms,
They'd left their children playing in nursery rooms,
And told their sitters: "take charge for this
is a marvelous sight we must not miss"

The Queens came late, but not too late
To see the animals small and great
Feathered and furred, domestic and wild,
Gathered to gaze at a mother and child
And rather than frankincense and myrrh
And gold for the babe, they brought for her
Who held him, a homespun gown of blue
And chicken soup – with noodles too
And a lingering, lasting cradle song.

The Queens came late and stayed not long
For their thoughts already were straining far-
Past manger and mother and guiding star
A child a-glow as a morning sun-
Toward home and children and chores undone.

Let us now sing 1 verse of

*CAROL: **we three kings** **see booklet**

FINAL REFLECTION: .

Christmas has been the celebration of the birth of a child believed to be a savior and god come to earth. His birth is recognized by millions as a divine birth and life. To those who believe that Jesus was extraordinary but a very real human being, Christmas still remains a festival of light and love. This is true in part because Christmas is for children, those we are, those we have and those who we have ever been and will be. The birth of one child stands for the birth of all children as precious beings. We see the potential and the divinity in each child born. Our children save us from closing our minds to new wisdom and from losing the zest for living. Children bring the gift of expectation wrapped in the certainty of growth and change. Christmas reminds us the "every night a child is born is a holy night." The miracle in every birth is cause for celebration. Christmas is a sign of promise. It is the storage space for memories and annually recovered rituals. The tree, candles, cards, the music, St Nicholas, all our ritual gatherings are special and a rich part of our heritage and history. So we celebrate the miracle of life, the hope for our children, our grandchildren, our homes, this church, the city, the country, the world. The miracle and magic that each and every one of us is.

OFFERTORY

*DOXOLOGY

"all people that on earth do dwell,

Sing ye aloud with cheerful voice;

Let hearts in exultation swell,

Come now together and rejoice."

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE: (all in unison)

"we extinguish this flame but not the light

Of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again"

STORY & SONG: Mark is going to share with us the story of the carol "it came upon the Midnight Clear" written by a Unitarian minister who served in Lancaster Mass. Edmund Hamilton Sears.

1 VERSE OF **it came upon the midnight clear** **see booklet**

BENEDICTION: these words are from my student internship supervisor, the Rev. Eugene Widrick.

The darkness of the year comes upon us.

And then Christmas.

The festival of light.

The celebration of a single birth,

The celebration of a single star,

The celebration of a single hope.

And the light Shineth in the darkness.

Go forth and be light the shines on all.

May it be So.

POSTLUDE: Judith Gordon.