

Being Ready for the Holidays



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How do you prepare for the holidays? This year I have tried to be really intentional about how I am going to enter the holidays and evaluate what works and what doesn't. I could probably tell you more what I am not going to do, what I don't like about the holidays than I do, but that is too easy and not very helpful in being intentional about living.

I like sorting through what I call my pre-holiday decorations. There are some really neat things that I can put out that brighten my days. I was talking to my spouses, Ron's brother on Friday and he was asking if we were ready for the holidays. "Not yet", I said "and you?" He told me that, the day after Thanksgiving, everything with a harvest theme comes down and gets packed

away and then the Christmas stuff comes out, including trees fully decorated and placed in 3 rooms of the house. They are ready”.

I doubt I will go to that extreme but I do like putting away harvest themed stuff and putting out wintry stuff. The plan is to do that today after church. Then next week Friday or Saturday, I will decorate the tree and put up other stuff. The tree I use is named Ollie, Ollie the second, actually. Ollie the second, came to live at 42 Country Lane over 15 years ago. He is a Norway pine and is a live tree for year round but I think he enjoys being decorated as every November he seems to go through growth spurt of new green limbs.

I had Greenfield Group this week, it is a minister's study group. In the morning and evening we hold a worship service at one of these a colleague had us sing Hark the Herald Angels sing with all the gusto and enthusiasm we could muster. Some of you know that is up there with my most favorite of Christmas Carols and something about singing that with 20 of my UU colleagues began to put me in the mood for the holidays. Also the other day, I went through the stack of CD and pulled out all the Holiday Christmas themed ones. So there is something about music that helps me prepare for the holidays. Though I have a confession, I grow to intensely dislike the lighted singing Snow Man that is in the Common about the 15th of December and wish I could find the

on-off switch for it. Is that being ready for the holidays or being like the Grinch, which of course is also part of being ready for the holidays? I mean of course that it is important to recognize the Grinch part of ourselves. The part that says I want no gifts, I want no part of shopping, I want no part of partying, leave me alone says that Grinch part of ourselves. However I suspect we are really saying leave me alone until love can be shared with all creatures.

One of the ways that I get ready is thinking about all the celebrations that occur this time of year. Was I reading the other day that over 27 different cultural and or religious celebrations occur in the month of December? This is way neat! Today we know our Jewish friends and neighbors will be gathering to light their Menorahs and Hanukkah candles. This is an interesting celebration for them, we think of it as a Jewish Christmas because there is gift giving and joyous gatherings and sharing of food and drink, but in actuality it is an important time to remember their heroes and heroines who at great sacrifice stood up to an oppressive regime. This is a time for them of renewal of faith and of coming together openly to practice their Jewish religion. This is a time for them that honors the bravery of rebels and that acknowledges loss and hope for a reunited peoples.

Of course the pagan/wiccan religious practitioners, and we, who are of an earth based or Goddess spiritual bent, are excited to know that the wheel/cycle of the earth is shifting once again and the days will become longer again. We will light the yule log in anticipation of the growing light and returning season of light. We celebrate the cycles of living and dying. Of expansion and contraction. Of the change and transformation that is possible.

For our Christian friends and neighbors this season is called Advent. It is a time of anticipation of waiting, for the birth of a child as the symbol of rebirth, and of the presence of God/the divine on earth. Each week of Advent from the Sunday after Thanksgiving to Christmas Eve a candle is lit. Each candle symbolizes some important aspect/ characteristic/value of life. Last week the candle of hope was lit. Hope in the highest ideals and aspirations that life can bring. Hope to find strength in times of trouble. Hope that new ways can be found. This week the candle of love will be lit. Love, tenderness, kindness, affection and forgiveness.

It is not without notice that between last week when the candle of hope was lit and this week when a candle of love will be lit another horrific mass shooting occurred. The airwaves and papers were full of hate and ignorance. The rhetoric to register Muslims, the rhetoric that Muslims are waging a war on Americans, the language of hate and prejudice was everywhere.

My heart longed to hear about the victims and the survivors, my heart longed to hear the stories of courage in the face of terror as people protected one another until the hell was over. Of course I am curious about what led this couple to engage in the horrific act, but not at the expense of losing my humanity, nor of painting a broad brush of labeling all Muslims as terrorists. Hope is a gift that we must cultivate, it is a mindset that is ours to develop and ours to carry into the world. I do not feel better at hearing a politician say that they will wage war against any who threaten us. I feel hope when I see that the survivors could gather for times of prayer and support. I feel better when I read a column from a high school girl in the Sentinel and Enterprise yesterday who tried to explain her Muslim faith as she told us of her religion teaching love for all humanity, and her frustration and fear of being labeled a danger and menace to society. The Dalai Lama was recently quoted as saying that terrorism is a problem caused by humans and thus humans' problem to fix. Prayer he said will not fix terrorism, working for peace within and our families and society is the action to take. We cannot pray to God for intervention without taking action to build a more just and peace-filled world.

It is not without notice that between last week and this the 16th anniversary of the Worcester fire occurred. This fire you will remember led to the death of six firefighters. You may also know

that the young woman who was living in the Worcester Cold Storage building with an abusive addicted man, was able to reconnect with relatives who had distanced themselves from her and that a few months after the fire she gave birth to a child who is being raised by her with the help of these relatives. Between hope and love the world was ready to accept her and her child.

It is not without notice that many people responded kindly and generously with gifts of goods when we made known the theft of the electronic equipment from the 15 West Youth. I could lose hope that a theft would occur right under our noses, as a group was setting up in the main hall for a 24 hour Alcahthon. But I chose instead to think of the generosity and kindness extended to us. Beginning with Officer Kochinski who responded immediately and who checked back with us last week to see if he needed him to follow-up and also to the Mayor who said let him know what we need, to those who gave and of course to Pat Robinson who immediately sprang into action putting out the word and getting things replaced. I could lose heart and hope but instead I chose to think of the love extended, I trust that these feelings of love and hope will help me in being ready for the holidays.

I also find that reading, sometimes frivolous reading about the holidays is way to get into them. Because facts are not always important in getting ready for the holiday, I am going to

offer you a quiz. Will you please turn to your neighbor and see if you can come up with the answers? Ready, set go.

1. Do all the gospel stories have a nativity narrative?

Hint the gospels are books in the bible- Matthew Mark Luke and John.

Answer Mark and John do not

2. When and where did the Shepherds and Wise men meet?

Answer: they do not

3. How did the shepherds find the manger?

Answer the angels gave some indefinite directions

4. By who was the celebration of Christmas considered a punishable offense? What was the punishment

Answer: the General court of Massachusetts – penalty being locked in the stocks.

Let's hear your answers

Well the holidays are here, I hope you take some time during fellowship to talk about your most favorite part of the holidays and what you do to get ready.

As you go forth from here, I hope you will experience the wonder of the holidays and that you will share this with us in the weeks to come.