**“Unitarian Universalists Who Created Christmas”**

**The Unitarian Church of Lincoln**

**December 6, 2015**

There are various misconceptions or lack of knowledge about Unitarian Universalists – even among Unitarian Universalists!

One of these is that we do not celebrate Christmas, which is the oddest thing, given the reality that if it were not for us, the holiday as we have come to traditionally observe it in the United States,

would not be quite what it is.

The Rev. Don Beaudreault

***Gathering of the Community***

**Ringing of Bell**

**Welcome and Announcements**

**Share the Care:** Worship Associates

**Prelude: “**Jingle Bell Boogie” arr. Marshall Trio

***Stating Intent***

**Chalice Lighting:** by G. Woods

Read by Barb Brant

**Opening words:** “Why Not a Star”

by Margaret Gooding

**Hymn:** #224 “Let Christmas Come”

***Time for all ages***

**Story:** “A UU Christmas Carol”

**Children’s Song: “**Jingle Bells”

***Deepening***

**Reading:** “little tree” by e.e. cummings

**Musical Interlude: “**Sheep May Safely Graze”

by J. S. Bach

**Sermon:** “Unitarian Universalists Who

Created Christmas”

**Offering and Offertory: “**Trio,” 2nd Movement.

by C. P. E. Bach

***Returning to Community: the work of the people***

**Sharing of Joys and Sorrows**

**Meditation**

***Integration and Release***

**Closing Hymn:** #244

“It Came Upon a Midnight Clear”

**Postlude:**

**Closing Words:** Robert T. Weston

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

***Stating Intent***

**Chalice Lighting:** by G. Woods

As we deck our halls at home,

Kindle candles against the dark,

Warm against the cold,

Let us bring the flame to our shared community,

To brighten our way together

And remind us of light yet to be

In our minds, in our hearts.

In our church, in our world.

**Opening words:** “Why Not a Star”

by Margaret Gooding (#621 SLT)

**Hymn:** #224 “Let Christmas Come”

***Time for all ages***

**Story:** “A UU Christmas Carol”

**Children’s Song: “**Jingle Bells”

***Deepening***

**Reading:** “little tree” by e.e. cummings

*little tree  
little silent Christmas tree  
you are so little  
you are more like a flower*

*who found you in the green forest  
and were you very sorry to come away?  
see i will comfort you  
because you smell so sweetly*

i will kiss your cool bark  
and hug you safe and tight  
just as your mother would,  
only don't be afraid

*look the spangles  
that sleep all the year in a dark box  
dreaming of being taken out and allowed to shine,  
the balls the chains red and gold the fluffy threads,*

*put up your little arms  
and i'll give them all to you to hold  
every finger shall have its ring  
and there won't a single place dark or unhappy*

*then when you're quite dressed  
you'll stand in the window for everyone to see  
and how they'll stare!  
oh but you'll be very proud*

*and my little sister and i will take hands  
and looking up at our beautiful tree  
we'll dance and sing  
"Noel Noel"*

**Musical Interlude: “**Sheep May Safely Graze”

by J. S. Bach

**Sermon:** “Unitarian Universalists Who

Created Christmas”

**Introduction:** I must say at the outset that my friend and colleague, the Rev. Don Beaudreault, created this service. I give him all credit for creating the epigraph on the Order of Service and finding the delightful e.e. cummings poem that you just heard as the reading. I will highlight all words he wrote to make sure you can determine which are his and which are mine. I really care about proper attribution.

That said, I also must point out that the writing of my thoughts is my own and will also be highlighted. Had I realized I was going to do this ahead of time, I might have arranged to make this a dialogue sermon with someone else reading Don’s excellent research.

Don was right on target when he points out that we not only do not know our history, we often do not know the context of that history. It helps to get to the original way of celebrating Christmas here in what is now the United States of America. Don offers this context:

Consider what it was like in America during the first two hundred years of white European settlement: most people did not celebrate Christmas. In fact, the Puritans suppressed such gaiety. In 1621, a year after the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock, Governor William Bradford discovered that some of the colonists had taken the day off, which he would have none of, and he ordered them back to work. Merry Christmas!

In Massachusetts from 1659-81 it was even illegal to celebrate the day.

It was only about 150 years ago that Christmas became an official public holiday in New England.

Why this attitude? Partially, it was because the Puritans could find no biblical basis for celebrating the birth of Christ on December 25th or any other day. They knew, too, that December 25th was the approximate arrival date of the winter solstice – which for them connoted a pagan ritual.

There was another reason. Those who did attempt to celebrate the day, did so with excess – including alcohol, food, mockery, begging, and even breaking and entering – some of which had its antecedents in other cultures, but taken to good old American excess!

Perhaps such extreme adaptations of ritualistic imbibing were in opposition to the extreme suppression of *any* expression of holiday mirth.

We can see to what degree the merrymakers took on by pointing out the words of one Anglican cleric who wrote:

*Men dishonour Christ more in the twelve days of Christmas, than in all the twelve months besides.* (Hugh Latimer)

So the thought was that it was better for society to ignore the holiday, lest misrule rule the day!

You notice that there is little comment on the Pilgrims’ celebration of Christmas. As I mentioned at Thanksgiving, the Pilgrims seemed to stay away from the Puritans and were more relaxed about a lot of things, mayhap Christmas also.

So who actually started celebrating Christmas. Don tells us:

In time, around the turn of the nineteenth century, church folk – particularly the Universalists began to hold church services on December 25. A Universalist community in Boston had a service in 1789.

The thinking of such spiritual celebrants was that if people were in church, they wouldn’t be carousing out in the streets.

It took the Unitarians another 11 years after the Universalists to call for a public observance of Christmas. As one writer says of our forbears:

*They wished to celebrate the holiday not because God ordered them to do so but because they themselves wished to.* (The Battle for Christmas, Stephen Nissenbaum, p.45)

In saying this, let us now turn to various aspects of the holiday, and how the Unitarian Universalists connected with them.

Don offers our part in the adoption of the Christmas tree, first adopted in the Alsatian capital of Strasbourg:

The Unitarians were the ones who first introduced the Christmas tree to the United States - in print! This occurred in 1820 when we published a German story about a Christmas tree in our literary periodical called “The Athenaeum.”

Back to Samuel Taylor Coleridge (an English Unitarian poet). It was 1798 and the Christmas season. The 26-year-old poet was vacationing in the German town of Ratzeburg, near Hamburg, when, on Christmas Eve, he saw the top of an evergreen on a table in one of the homes he visited. But what was of even more interest to him was the reality that it was the children who gave gifts to their parents, and not the other way around. Says he of the event:

*…there were eight or nine children, and the eldest daughter and the mother wept aloud for joy and tenderness; and the tears ran down the face of the father, and he clasped his children so tight to his breast – it seemed as if he did it to stifle the sob that was rising within him.*

*I was very much affected.* (*Ibid*, p. 199)

Eleven years later (1809) this account of that Christmas Eve was published in England, and 26 years later (1824) it was published for the first time in the official journal of the Unitarian Church in America, the “Christian Register.”

Coleridge’s story was picked up in part by another Unitarian, Lydia Maria Child, a novelist and abolitionist, who was best known at the time for her cookbook, The New England Frugal Housewife. Her story was published in 1830. (She is probably now best known as the author of “Over the River and Through the Woods.”

Then in 1835, the Unitarian, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, a well-known writer in her day, had her story “New Year’s Day” published. It has a very small reference to a Christmas tree and the presents that were attached to the tree’s branches.

As noted in our play, it was in 1835, too, that the Rev. Charles Follen, a German immigrant, Harvard professor, and eventually the minister of our church in Lexington, MA, set up a Christmas tree. At least this is the story told by another Unitarian – the English writer, Harriet Martineau, sister of the Unitarian minister of Liverpool, James Martineau.

Legend has had it – particularly in Unitarian Universalist circles - that Follen was the man who introduced the Christmas tree to America. So much for legend!

Isn’t it fascinating how often we don’t hear the full story about our forebears! I am always pleased to learn more.

Consider the music of Christmas. Don did in his study of “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear” and “Jingle Bells.”

Consider two famous Christmas musical pieces – one a hymn, the other a popular song.

The words to **“It Came Upon a Midnight Clear”** were written by a Unitarian Minister, The Rev. Edmund H. Sears while he served our church in Wayland, MA. The hymn was first performed in that church in 1849 and appeared in our Unitarian journal, “The Christian Register” on December 29th of that year.

The hymn was written when Sears was experiencing personal melancholy that was heightened by his concern for war in Europe and our own country’s war with Mexico. His words express the image of a dark world, filled with “sin and strife”:

*And man, at war with man, hears not   
The love-song which they bring:   
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,   
And hear the angels sing.*

Christian traditionalists have been critical of Sears’s hymn over the years, believing that it is quite unscriptural – saying, in fact, that there is never a mention of the baby Jesus.

Others have thought of it as an ethical song, not a hymn.

This is all rather ironic because Sears had one of the more conservative, mystical theologies of all the Unitarian ministers of his time.

One of his friends and church attendees was Lydia Maria Child with whom he shared some common beliefs concerning Swedenborgianism – a mystical Christian group that affirms there is no physical resurrection, but at the time of our deaths, we become angels or evil spirits. . .

The other famous musical Christmas piece, **“Jingle Bells”** (published in 1857) was written by James Pierpont, organist and choir director of the Unitarian Church in Savannah, GA where his brother John, was the minister. Their father John, minister of the Medford, MA Unitarian Church was a strong abolitionist and temperance advocate. . .

Now known as a Christmas classic, and one of the all-time best selling musical compositions, “Jingle Bells” was published with its original name “The “One Horse Open Sleigh” and was written for a Thanksgiving church service at the Unitarian Church in Savannah, GA. It was so well received that the children of the church sang it for the Christmas service.

This is one version of “Jingle Bells” composition. The other version has Pierpont writing the song in Medford, MA – and this story held up until 1969 when the Savannah Church claimed the distinction. At that time the mayors of both cities wrote rather testy letters back and forth, each claiming its domain as Pierpont’s place of composition. The people of Medford said – and probably still do – that James wrote the jaunty, jingly piece at the Simpson Tavern, a boarding house with the only piano in town.

Wherever it was written, let us claim it as yet another Unitarian Universalist connection with the American version of Christmas celebrating.

Pierpont went on to sire a number of songs and children. His songs included several that trumpeted the Confederate cause, but none gained fame. Nor did his children, although one of his nephews did – John Pierpont (J.P.) Morgan.

Perhaps not someone we wish to claim, and I have no data as to J.P. Morgan’s religious proclivities.

Indeed, there are many other connections we Unitarian Universalists have with this Christmas season, American Style:

Think of that classic poem, “the little tree” written by that UU e. e. cummings, the son of a Unitarian minister.

Think of Nathaniel Currier, of Currier and Ives fame and of all their wonderful Christmas scenes on all those millions of holiday cards.

Think of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and his stirring Christmas carol “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day” – which was his comment on the horrors of the Civil War and all wars.

Think of Thomas Nast, political cartoonist whose friendly face of St. Nick has become the quintessential, populist image of that legendary figure.

Think of that convert from Episcopalianism, Clement Moore, scholar and land conservationist, who is best known for his beloved “The Night Before Christmas.”

Think of that Brit who helped create an American, indeed, a universal aspect of Christmas, Charles Dickens. Would Christmas be Christmas without his “A Christmas Carol”?

Well, of course, Christmas and the other cultural and religious holidays that occur around this time of year would still go on here and abroad – without any of these Unitarian Universalist links. But how less rich in legend, poetry, song and image it would be.

So let us not be overmodest about out influence on a holiday that invites people to rise to their best selves, rather than continuing to plummet into the dark and cold character of this season of dark and cold. With respect, responsibility, and relish for the process.

So Be It! Blessed Be!

**Offering and Offertory: “**Trio,” 2nd Movement.

by C. P. E. Bach

***Returning to Community: the work of the people***

**Sharing of Joys and Sorrows**

**Meditation**

***Integration and Release***

**Closing Hymn:** #244

“It Came Upon a Midnight Clear”

**Postlude:** “The Holly and the Ivy” arr. Marshall Trio

**Closing Words:** Robert T. Weston

*This is humanity, that in “(our) heart and eyes has wonder; that can look upon the barren tree and see beauty; see mighty engines in the formless ore; atom-smashers in the flash of lightning, and truth on the other side of doubt fearlessly explored.*

Robert Weston

MUSICIAN NOTES

Julie Felzien plays in the flute and piano duo the Noteworthy Ensemble, Marshall Trio and is a piano soloist or accompanist every chance she gets. She has played for The Lofte Theatre in Manly, Pinewood Bowl rehearsals, church services, weddings and more. She enjoys teaching piano students of all ages (7 yr. to adult) and ability levels. New students are currently welcome in her piano studio in her home. Contact her at [(402)435-0806](tel:%28402%29435-0806" \t "_blank) or email at [itsallpiano@gmail.com](mailto:itsallpiano@gmail.com" \t "_blank).

Genevieve Randall is a free-lance flutist who performs regularly with the Noteworthy Ensemble, Marshall Trio and the Lincoln Early Music consort. She is also an announcer and Music Director for NET Radio, Nebraska’s NPR station, where she hosts The Verge and Friday Live. She holds a Bachelor’s Degree in Flute Performance from UNL and an Associates in Accounting from Southeast Community College. When not occupied with radio or music, she enjoys crochet, knitting, cooking and gardening.

Pance Zaev, a native of Strumica, Macedonia, began teaching clarinet at Nebraska Wesleyan University in the Fall of 2008. He served as a graduate teaching assistant for five years (MM and DMA) at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and studied with Dr. Diane Barger. He studied clarinet with Manol Janev at the Music and Ballet High School Center Ilija Nikolovski Luj in the capital of Macedonia, with Ivan Kocarov at Kiril I Metodij University in Skopje and with Dr. Patricia Shands at the University of the Pacific, Conservatory of Music in Stockton, California. Zaev enjoys teaching clarinet and saxophone students of all ages and levels. For upcoming performance events he can be contacted at: [zaevclarinet@gmail.com](mailto:zaevclarinet@gmail.com" \t "_blank).