

## A Unitarian Christmas

Sunday, December 8, 2013

## A Unitarian Christmas

Led by Rev. Steven A. Protzman

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First Reading A Unitarian Christmas by Tracy Springberry<sup>1</sup>

Second Reading Don't Mess With Christmas by Garrison Keillor<sup>2</sup>

*Although Garrison Keillor told Unitarians to leave Christmas alone and celebrate some other holiday, Christmas as we know it today would not exist without Unitarians. Together we'll learn about how this holiday really began in the mid 1800s after Unitarian Charles Dickens wrote "A Christmas Carol".*

Garrison, Garrison, Garrison,

I suppose that since it is the holiday season and you've given Unitarians a lot of free publicity I should be more forgiving but honestly! With your little tirade about Christmas and Unitarians you make Ebenezer Scrooge look like a saint! Not only are you worthy of the title humbug, you are also clearly uninformed about Christmas. Most of the Christmas holiday as it is now celebrated in this country was inspired, created or revived by Unitarians. If you truly wish to celebrate Christmas properly as a Christian, I suggest you get rid of the Christmas tree, do not give any gifts, and under

no circumstances invoke the name of Santa Claus. I also recommend that you refrain from singing most carols (if you do sing Silent Night, kindly sing it in German to be truly authentic) and perhaps you might even want to wait until the spring to celebrate Christmas since Jesus wasn't born in December. I've got a better idea- why don't you take a hint from Ebenezer Scrooge (a Unitarian wrote *A Christmas Carol* by the way- hands off- it's ours!) and discover some good will in your heart for your fellow human beings, including Unitarian Universalists, from whom you could learn a lot about the real meaning of this season.

Sincerely,  
Steven

P.S. Would you please use the noun Universalist along with the adjective Unitarian when you make fun of us? We merged 52 years ago to become Unitarian Universalists!

Without Unitarians, Christmas as we know it today would not exist. In western culture in the early 1800s, the celebration of Christmas had all but died out. Janet Wood writes that: "At the beginning of the Victorian period the festival of Christmas was in decline in England. However, once the religious tension in England had eased around the 1820s, the upper class of British society began to worry that the celebration of Christmas was dying out and efforts were made to revive the holiday. As a result, the singing of Christmas carols --which had all but disappeared at the turn of the century-- began to

thrive again, and the first Christmas card appeared in the 1840s."<sup>3</sup> At the same time in history, a dramatic change was happening in western culture. The Industrial Revolution created a new class of people who became wealthy from the manufacturing industries. For many of them, all that mattered was making as much money as possible. This new class was known for its cruelty and lack of compassion towards the working people who created the new wealth and worked in the factories. Because of greed and a lack of laws regulating wages and working conditions, many people became part of the lower class. The average working person now lived in extreme poverty, had no power over their destiny and struggled to survive.

Out of this period of exploitation and cruelty, a young author named Charles Dickens emerged who used the written word to call for social change. Dickens was raised as an Anglican but struggled with Christianity because he'd witnessed the cruelty of the wealthy and seen the hypocrisy of people who called themselves Christians but failed to live the gospel message. Dickens traveled to Massachusetts in 1842 and met William Ellery Channing, a famous Unitarian minister. Dickens discovered that Unitarianism was, in his words, "a religion which has sympathy for men of every creed and ventures to pass judgment on none; who would do something for human improvement if and when it could; and would always practice charity and toleration."<sup>4</sup> Upon his return to England, Dickens became a Unitarian. In 1843 his most celebrated work, *A Christmas Carol*, was published and it became wildly popular immediately. It was also published in the United States and helped influence the revival of Christmas in this country as well as in England.

There had been a long tradition of not celebrating Christmas in the United States, which began with the Puritans. The Puritans knew that Christmas is a holiday that has strong pagan roots and that the bible doesn't reveal Jesus' date of birth nor does it command Christians to celebrate his birthday. There was also too much fun being had for the dour Puritans- too much eating and drinking and merry-making. Then, too, it was argued that since the Catholics, Lutherans and Episcopalians celebrated Christmas, Puritans could not. So to the Puritans, Christmas was both pagan and popish! Puritan minister Increase Mather found Christmas nothing but "mad mirth...highly dishonorable to the name of Christ." In 1651, the General Court of Massachusetts declared Christmas illegal: "Whosoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas and the like, either by feasting, forbearing labor, or any other way...every such person so offending shall pay for each offense five shillings as a fine to the country." This law was repealed in 1681 but the Puritans continued to discourage the celebration of Christmas until it became a Federal holiday in 1870.

In 1776 George Washington crossed the Delaware River on Christmas night and surprised the Hessian troops, "who in blissful ignorance of local custom had supposed that there could be no fighting on Christmas Day and had given themselves over to revelry." The Rev. William Bentley of Salem, Massachusetts, in a diary entry for Tuesday, December 25, 1810, wrote that "Christmas has a public service in the morning for Episcopalians and in the evening for the Universalists. Our Congregational churches stand fast as they were from the beginning," by which he means, ignoring the day.<sup>5</sup> The revival of Christmas also has roots in a theological revolution that took place in this

country. During the Enlightenment as scholars began to reinterpret the bible, a gradual split over doctrine occurred in the Congregationalists, who were the spiritual descendants of the Puritans. By 1805 the split was complete and the liberal branch of the church became the American Unitarians. From their beginning, the Unitarians were social reformers. They were eager to use every opportunity to help shape moral character, especially in children, and they believed Christmas could be used to help teach generosity and care for others. Unitarians were calling for the public observance of Christmas by about 1800, following in the footsteps of the Universalists, who openly celebrated Christmas from their beginnings in the late 1700s.

In the first reading, Tracy Springberry wrote that: "In the 1800s, the Unitarians were trendsetters. They were well educated, often wealthy and had access to and control of the media. Christmas, the Unitarians believed, could be a holiday to promote their values of generosity and charity and social good, and would be a wonderful way to build these values, particularly in children. It was Unitarians who wove together Santa Claus, Christmas trees, gift giving around the tree, a focus on charity and peace and goodwill toward all to create the Christmas that the majority of Americans celebrate today."<sup>6</sup> Lois told us about Charles Follen, the Unitarian who introduced the Christmas tree in America. Follen was a German immigrant, Harvard professor, an ardent abolitionist and eventually the minister of our church in Lexington, Massachusetts (now known as the "Follen Church"). One Christmas he invited several colleagues to his home where he had put up a tree lit with candles and covered with ornaments as he remembered from his childhood. One of the

guests later wrote, "It really looked beautiful. The room seemed in a blaze, and the ornaments were so well hung on, that no accident happened, except that one doll's petticoat caught fire." One of his Unitarian guests, Harriet Martineau, wrote about the experience and in a short time, middle-class Americans were celebrating Christmas by putting up Christmas trees.

"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. The story is told that James was not a teetotaler and when he was a young man, stored liquor in the basement of his father's church! Apparently others did so as well - in fact, they were some of the elder Pierpont's church parishioners, much to the minister's dismay. One Sunday, upon arriving at church, the church-goers found a little note tacked on to the church door that read:

*There's a spirit above, and a spirit below, A spirit of love and a spirit of woe. The spirit above is the spirit divine, The spirit below is the spirit of wine.*

Most believe that James wrote this humorous note. Definitely a pk: preacher's kid! Now known as a Christmas classic, and one of the all-time best selling musical compositions, "Jingle Bells" 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.<sup>7</sup> A number of popular Christmas carols were written by Unitarians including "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow; "Watchman Tell Us of the Night," by John Bowring; and "Do You Hear What I Hear?" by Noel Regney. In 1849, a Unitarian minister, Edmund Hamilton Sears, wrote the words to "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear." With the war in Europe and the US war with Mexico weighing on his mind, Rev. Sears wrote a carol that urges us to hear the angels sing of peace on earth and goodwill to all. Sears was part of a movement to understand peace on earth in social, community terms – instead of merely a personal, private peace. His lyrics raised objections from a number of Christian conservatives of the time. Many people said, contemptuously, that Sears' hymn was just the sort of thing you would expect of a Unitarian.<sup>8</sup>

We also owe our stories and images of Santa Claus to Unitarians. In 1823, Clement Moore, a Unitarian professor of Oriental and Greek literature at Columbia University wrote a poem to give parents a vision of what he believed Christmas should look like. The result was "The Night Before Christmas." Moore wrote the poem for his own children, basing his image of St. Nicholas in the poem on the fat, jolly old Dutch handyman who used to work on his family's estate. By chance, the poem was published in a New York newspaper (in Troy, NY), and circulated widely in the popular press for many years, spreading the image of a red-coated Santa Claus driving a flying sleigh pulled by eight reindeer. Thomas Nast, a popular political cartoonist and Unitarian helped developed and promote Santa's image, drawing a picture of him for Harper's Weekly every year from 1863 to 1886. He was the one who showed Santa keeping records of good and bad

children, and was the first to locate Santa's workshop at the North Pole, poking fun at the British, Russian and Scandinavian explorers who all were competing to be the first to reach the pole.<sup>9</sup> Locating Santa at the North Pole also sent a message that he existed for all the children of the world.

The revival of Christmas reflects a larger 19th century Unitarian concern with social conditions. Like their counterparts in Europe, our Unitarian ancestors sought to return Christianity to its roots as a religion that followed the teachings of Jesus, rather than being a religion about Jesus. They believed in salvation through the life well lived rather than through a personal piety that was often indifferent to the suffering and struggles of others. This theology is very evident in the work of Charles Dickens. Michael Timko writes that: "All Dickens's novels reflect the central ideas of nineteenth-century Unitarianism: the belief that Jesus was a human being who exemplified a truly religious life; the rejection of materialism and the doctrine of necessity; the rejection of a God of stern judgment; a disdain of theological controversy; the rejection of dogma; an inclusive rather than an exclusive religion; and an emphasis on doing good works. In *A Christmas Carol*, without once mentioning Jesus, Dickens shows it is possible to experience a conversion--not necessarily based on a specific religious experience--but a personal regeneration that leads one to help others. With Scrooge's transformative change of heart, Dickens illustrates that his readers, too, can be converted from a harsh, complacent, selfish worldview to one of love, hope, and charity and, like Scrooge, can again become part of the human community. For Dickens, that was the true meaning of Christmas."<sup>10</sup>



Tracy Springberry writes that: "Publication of *A Christmas Carol*, by Charles Dickens, brought charity to the forefront of Christmas. This story is steeped in the Unitarian theology that how we treat each other deeply matters. At Christmas we make sure that all children receive gifts, that the food banks are full of food, and that at least for these few weeks people everywhere are cared for." This is the meaning of Christmas for us as Unitarian Universalists. But it is a meaning that isn't limited to a few weeks of the year. Ours is a faith that believes in the potential of humankind to redeem itself and that like Scrooge, as long as we're alive, it is not too late. At any point in our lives, even in the midst of our own suffering, loss or struggle, we can take our rightful place as generous, compassionate, loving human beings who can ease the suffering of others and are willing to commit ourselves to caring for all of life and working for peace and justice in our world. We can choose at any point to, as a transformed Scrooge says, to honor Christmas in our hearts and to try to keep it all year. "And it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us!" So Mr. Keillor, get over it, stay over it and let Unitarian Universalists celebrate Christmas as we see fit, singing Silent Night with our words- it is, after all, our holiday! Oh, and Merry Christmas!

## References

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**Previous Sermon: *"Deck the Halls"***

**Next Sermon: *"You Shall Know the Truth"***