

Seasonal Wisdom for These Times
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

“The Winter Wedding” by Caitlin Matthews

Good people all this happy tide,
Consider well and bear in mind,
All that strong love for us can do
When we remember our promise true.

Now love itself stands in this place
With glorious beauty and pleasant grace;
To welcome us with open heart
And raise up welcome in every hearth.

Whatever life on us bestows,
Love’s mantle round our shoulders goes
Remembering this day’s delight,
To bring us help and mercy bright.

When darkest winter draweth near,
The light is kindled without fear;
Love sparks at Midwinter so deep,
This blessed time in our hearts keep.

When coldest winter draweth near,
Turn we to joy and make good cheer;
Remembering our vows so strong,
We raise our voices in this song:

Drive darkest want and need away,
Remember we this happy day.
Call love to witness, everyone,
And dance beneath the winter sun.

“For So the Children Come” by Sophia Fahs, Unitarian religious educator (1876-1978)

For so the children come
And so they have been coming.
Always in the same way they come—
Born of the seed of man and woman.
No angels herald their beginnings
No prophets predict their future courses
No wise men see a star to show
where to find the babe that will save humankind.

Yet each night a child is born is a holy night.
Fathers and mothers—sitting beside their children's cribs—
feel glory in the sight of a new life beginning.
They ask, "Where and how will this new life end?
Or will it ever end?"
Each night a child is born is a holy night—
A time for singing,
A time for wondering,
A time for worshipping.

Sermon

One of my favorite personal rituals during this season is quite simple. End of the day during the week or two before Christmas... the tree – each year the best tree ever – trimmed and lit in our living room... the house quiet... I simply sit for awhile in our rocker, just sit, maybe take a sip of eggnog – the room dark except for the lights on the tree.

A peaceful moment. A moment that somehow helps me feel connected to over six decades of Christmas trees and Christmases, first as a child growing up, then a young adult returning home, then a parent in our own home, now parent and grandparent, awaiting the return of our own young adults and their offspring... as the generations turn. Reflective peace.

Often with a poignant edge, as I remember my own grandparents and parents who once were such a part of our holiday celebrations, yet now long gone. Or in the case of my mother not so long gone as, sitting before the tree, I recall her passing just five years ago, two days before Christmas, mere hours before Christmas Eve.

When my reflections go in that direction, I might recall Charles Dickens admonition for those of us “as we grow older” to welcome all the old aspirations and memories, “welcome alike what has been, and what never was,” even welcome or freely bring to mind the losses, those who are no longer with us, any sadness or regret, to welcome it all to the Christmas hearth.

And then I re-discover that it is a beautiful thing, a heart-opening exercise to welcome it all. Perhaps this is true for you too.

Now, I’ve titled this sermon “Seasonal Wisdom for These Times”. And by “these times” to begin with (though not to end with) I mean these personal times, whatever that might mean for each of us.

For it seems to me that whichever seasonal holiday or holy day we each celebrate at this time of year, year after year, the season offers an opportunity, as I’ve just begun to describe, to plumb personal depths we may in the rush of days the rest of the year too often ignore.

Indeed, I find that simply the experience of shorter days, lengthening shadows, deepening nights, draws my attention inward, invites me to a more contemplative frame of mind, a frame of mind more suited to re-discovering or re-connecting with realities and values that represent some of the most important dimensions of my life.

And as someone who grew up celebrating Christmas and who celebrates Christmas still, albeit in a somewhat mystically humanist way, it is the images of

Christmas that for me most directly and naturally offer useful symbols of these dimensions: the values and realities that I hope guide my life.

For example: I have inherited the nativity scene that was always set beneath our tree as I was growing up. So when I read or hear the story of Jesus' birth, it is that cardboard barn and those ceramic figures of Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, the kings, the animals, and the baby, that come to my mind's eye. The scene touches me deeply partly of course because of these personal associations. But over time the scene depicting this ancient story has taken on broader or deeper meanings, at the center of which is this: Thinking of the manger as my heart, this heart that I can choose to open, open to love, open to a spirit of peace, open to goodwill – just as the manger in the story was open to baby Jesus with his parents Mary and Joseph.

If all that this season were to do is to open my heart a little wider for a little while to more love, more peace, more goodwill, then this would be enough – wisdom enough for me, and also wisdom enough for these times in which we all live.

Now, interestingly, celebrating the birth of a holy child is not particular only to the Christian tradition, was in fact nothing new two thousand years ago. So something universal is happening here, some universal hope expressed through such tales at other times and other cultures, through myths of a “child of wonder” born (often in a cave, something like that stable)... born to in some way save humanity – whether the Egyptian Osiris, Persian Mithras, Phrygian Attis, Celtic Mabon.

The Roman poet Virgil in his Fourth Eclogue imagined that a “new race descends from the heavens above... through a child who's born... under whom the first race of iron shall end and a golden race rise up throughout the world.”

In our own time and out of our own Unitarian Universalist tradition we are reminded by the reading we heard earlier from the religious educator Sophia Fahs that in the spirit of all these ancient cultures and traditions, “each night a child is born is a holy night.”

Which, in turn, means that through such prophecies or poetic reveries, whether Egyptian, Persian, Celtic, Christian, or Unitarian Universalist, can rise an undying spark of hope, hope a light we naturally rekindle during this season, hope itself a sort of wisdom, hope which can keep us going in a dark time – personally as well as politically.

As for the actual lighting of fires or candles at this time of year? This too we know far predates the Christian era. Peoples in the northern hemisphere have for millennia celebrated at this solstice time of year, made merry to ward away the dark, and lit bonfires to invite back the sun.

It is a kindling of light in the midst of this darkest season of the year, whether kindling a candle or a fire at the hearth, which can serve as a reminder of other sorts of lights we can choose to kindle in our lives and in the world.

Think of the Hanukkah menorah in this spirit.

The menorah, with one additional light kindled for each of the eight nights of the festival, serves on one level simply as a reminder that light will return, that light is stronger than darkness. But in the context of the story behind Hanukkah, the Jewish struggle against their Persian oppressors, we are further encouraged to remember that the light of a victory over oppression is not automatic, that we must be bearers of lights of courage, of freedom, and of justice in any struggle against oppression or discrimination of any kind – whether by virtue of race, gender, religion, country of origin, whatever form discrimination and hate and oppression might take.

So, just as there are universal messages of wisdom within the particular celebration of Christmas or Solstice, so too with Hanukkah. Jew and non-Jew alike can be inspired by the universal message hidden within the very particular story and history behind the kindling of Hanukkah lights.

But lest all this sound too serious, there is another side to this season's festivals: the feasting, the fun, the laughter, the exchanging of gifts. This too of course goes way back – to, for example, the Roman Saturnalia, followed at the New Year by Kalends. The fourth century writer Libanius describes Kalends this way (as cited in *The Winter Solstice* by John Matthews):

The impulse to spend seizes everyone...

People are not only generous themselves,
but also towards their fellows.
A stream of presents pours itself
out on all sides...

The Kalends festival banishes all that is
connected with toil, and allows everyone to give
themselves up to undisturbed enjoyment.

From the minds of young people it
removes two kinds of dread:
the dread of the schoolmaster and
the dread of the pedagogue.

The slave also it allows, as far as possible,
to breathe the air of freedom....

Another great quality of the festival
is that it teaches men not to hold too fast
to their money, but to part with it
and let it pass into other hands.

(translated by C. Miles)

Sounds pretty good! And is there another sort of seasonal wisdom here? Yes indeed. The wisdom that reminds us we need sometimes just to let go of ordinary cares, to simply have fun, to enjoy one another's company, and to give with as free a hand as we can, all of this helping us to remember that life is about more than serious matters of work, of status, of achievement.

Well, with all this in mind, yes I too will enjoy some feasting and fun, but as I sit before our Christmas tree, or as I sit in one of our vespers services here in a darkened Meeting House, or as we light a menorah with our Jewish daughter-in-law and our son and their "child of wonder," I will find myself slowing down, entering moments of quiet contemplation even as the rest of the world often seems to be running at breakneck pace, rushing, shopping, partying.

Slowing down and moved to prepare the manger of my heart for more love, more peace, more good will.

Slowing down and, to mix the metaphor a bit, moved to continue to strive to be among those who seek:

...to make a world in which there will be no room at the proverbial inn of life for war;

...no room at the inn for discrimination or hate;

...no room at the inn for sexual harassment and abuse;

...no room at the inn for those who would despoil the living systems of this earth which give and sustain our lives and all lives.

Slowing down and remembering that though the natural life-giving light of the sun will return with no help from us, the life-giving struggle against hate and oppression requires our shared effort, our kindling with love and kindness the lights of freedom, respect, understanding, justice.

Beginning of course within our most intimate circles of family, friends, and neighbors. For it is within these circles of love that we live each day, which means it is within these circles of love that we can practice the multiple seasonal wisdoms of love, of peace, of goodwill, of freedom, of respect, of understanding – taken all together, seasonal wisdom for these times and all times, seasonal wisdom that can become a year-round gift we share with one another *and* give to the larger life in which we all live and move and have our being.

All, further, with the wisdom of hope, hope that may sometimes seem to have no ground to stand on, may often appear to have little evidence to support it, but the wisdom of hope a necessary, undying, unquenchable light.

Finally, returning to the not incidental piece of wisdom that it is also important for the health of our souls and of our lives to enjoy, to have fun with family and friends, to put aside for a time our usual cares and concerns, whether personal, professional, or, God help us, political.

Happy Hanukkah!

Blessed Solstice!

Merry Christmas!

So may it be. So must it be. Amen.