

“Putting Christmas Away”
December 30, 2007
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Bruce A. Bode

Call to Worship

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather on this last Sunday of the calendar year.

Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to seek that which is permanent, and to serve integrity, beauty, and the qualities of life that make it rich and whole.

Through this hour breathes the worship of all ages, the cathedral music of all history, and blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

Meditation & Period of Silence

Let us enter our period of silence and meditation this morning with this Christmas prayer by Grace Crowell titled, “This Would I Keep”:

This would I keep forever in my heart
Among the things the ruthless years may leave;
The glad excitement, wonder, and delight
Of Christmas Eve;

This would I hold untarnished through the years,
Although the roads I take may lead me far:
The radiant molten glory of the light
From one white star.

And oh, to keep the breathlessness, the thrill,
The heart’s swift running out to meet surprise,
Never to lose entirely the light
Of childhood from my eyes;

Never to lose the Christmas morning joy,
And never the quick bright eagerness to give –
God, someday let my spirit keep the shrine
Of Christmas while I live.

“PUTTING CHRISTMAS AWAY”

Introduction

Like so many aspects of our lives, Christmas comes in three parts: There's the anticipation and build-up to Christmas; then, the celebration of Christmas itself; and, finally, saying goodbye to Christmas ... wrapping up Christmas ... putting Christmas away until next year.

My simple message today on this Sunday following Christmas is to pay a little attention to this time of saying goodbye to Christmas – not to by-pass this time or to hurry through it.

So I'm glad we have this service where we can take a little time to say goodbye to Christmas, where we sing some of the Christmas carols *after* the event, after Christmas.

I remember being struck by this backward look at Christmas in a previous church where I worked. There, the choir director had us singing “Silent Night” not only before Christmas, and not only on Christmas Eve, but also on the Sunday morning following Christmas. And so being a bit curious, I asked him why he did this. He replied:

“One should not leave Christmas too quickly. There's something right and meaningful and important about singing and hearing ‘Silent Night’ and the other Christmas carols one more time. You need to savor Christmas even as you bid it adieu.”

The difficulty of saying “goodbye”

The feeling and the sensibility is, of course, different looking back at Christmas than it is in the build-up to Christmas and on Christmas Day itself. But this, too, is part of Christmas, part of the Christmas season.

Saying goodbye, of course, is not easy, for we don't know what will change in our personal lives or in our planetary life by the time Christmas comes round again. And will Christmas come round again ... for us ... for our loved ones ... for our species ... for life on our earth? We don't know for certain.

And aren't all goodbyes an anticipation and a rehearsal for final goodbyes?

In this regard, a little poem by Emily Dickinson comes to mind that relates to saying goodbye to a loved one at the time of death:

The Bustle in a House
The Morning after Death
Is solemnest of industries
Enacted upon Earth -

The Sweeping up the Heart
And putting Love away
We shall not want to use again
Until Eternity -

(#1108, Franklin edition)

“The Sweeping up the Heart/ And putting Love away” ... don't all goodbyes have a little of that in them?

And so difficult thoughts and feelings are stirred as we say goodbye to an event or to a season. All the more reason, it seems to me, not to hurry through this time, but to see if we can stay in this moment, to stay with the time of putting Christmas away, to stay with Christmas even as we wave “goodbye” to it in the review mirror.

Memories of Christmas past

If we are willing and able to live with feelings related to loss and the fear of loss, then this time can also be a time of counting what we do love and of being appreciative for what we have experienced.

As I was preparing this little meditation, I had the opportunity to re-count some of the lovely times of this season right here in this sanctuary this Christmas season.

One of these highlights was the lighting of the Advent candles by our children and young people and observing the seriousness with which they took their role ... which was enhanced by the lovely stole they wore as they processed to the front of the sanctuary for the lighting and recessed back again after the lighting. Such a simple and yet lovely thing to behold!

Then another delightful event occurred for me during the Children's Christmas Eve Candlelight service. That service took place this past Monday, Christmas Eve, at our 5:00 p.m. service, a service at which many young children were present, and all the hum and buzz that goes with that.

Then came the moment for the lighting of the Christmas candle. And I was saying, “Now, children, watch carefully as we light the final candle of the Christmas season, the Christmas candle itself.” By this time most everyone had quieted down and were paying attention, but still there were a couple of young children fussing about. And so I leaned into the microphone and said, “Shushh.” As I did, I saw a little three-year old girl who was facing backwards and wiggling in the arms of a parent suddenly whip her head around and face the candle. And then all was quiet while the candle was lit.

And then, a third highlight of this season is the moment I always wait for in the Christmas Eve services. It's the moment when all the necessary words have been spoken and all the necessary songs sung, and when, finally, all the lights can be taken down.

Then, again, there is silence, and everyone with a candle waiting to be lit. But no candle has yet been lit ... all waiting ... pure anticipation. And then the ushers come forward and light their candles from the Christmas candle, and then the lighting of the individual candles begins, the candlelight being passed from hand to hand, person to person, the light spreading from the front of the sanctuary to the back, and the familiar strains of "Silent Night" beginning to be played and then the words sung. That's a time I always wait for.

Happy Christmas

And I'll mention one more highlight of the Christmas season that took place here at the church.

This was earlier during the Holiday Decorating Party on Friday, December 7. The whole sanctuary was full of youngsters and adults making various ornaments. And over in the front corner of the sanctuary by the piano a group were singing Christmas carols with accompaniment provided by Paul Becker, Gary Forbes, and Lee Goldhammer. And we really got going on John Lennon's song, "Happy Christmas" ... sang it over and over ... a great time.

In a couple of minutes, to conclude our service, we will have a chance to sing that song again. And in preparation for that, let me acquaint you with a little web research I did on the song, "Happy Christmas."

I found some people complaining that this song is just an anti-war protest song that should not be mixed in with Christmas. But, of course, the idea of "peace reigning throughout the world" is not exactly alien to the Christmas season.

Anyway, this song was written by John Lennon and Yoko Ono in their New York City hotel room in October of 1971, and recorded on the evening of October 28 and the morning of October 29 of that same year, and then released in the United States shortly thereafter, just before Christmas, though not in Great Britain until the next year.

The words of "Happy Christmas" were related to billboards advertisements that John and Yoko had put up in 1969 in eleven major cities throughout the world, cities such as: New York, Tokyo, Rome, Athens, Amsterdam, London and Toronto. The words, protesting the unpopular Vietnam War, read: "War is over! (If you want it.)"

Thus, the background vocals of the recording, "War is over, if you want it, war is over, now!" are taken directly from this 1969 billboard advertisement. In the original recording these background words were sung by the children of the Harlem Community Choir, who were brought in to sing for the recording.

This recording begins with a barely-audible whisper of Christmas greetings by John and Yoko to their children. Yoko whispers, "Happy Christmas, Kyoko;" and John whispers, "Happy Christmas, Julian."

Soon after John Lennon's death on December 8, 1980, the song was re-released in the United Kingdom, December 20, again just before Christmas, and has since become a Christmas standard, appearing on a number of Christmas albums, as well as being recorded by a number of other musicians.

I anticipate our singing of this song this morning will be a fine way to bring the Christmas season here at the Fellowship to a close.

Benediction

In the time of your life, live – so that in that good time
There shall be no ugliness or death
For yourself or for any life that your life touches.

Seek goodness everywhere; when it is found
Bring it out of its hiding-place
And let it be free and unashamed.

Discover in all things that which shines and is beyond corruption.

Encourage virtue into whatever heart
It may have been driven into secrecy and sorrow
By the shame and terror of the world.

In the time of your life, live – so that in that wondrous time
You shall not add to the misery and sorrow of the world,
But shall smile instead to its infinite delight and mystery.

(Preface to “The Time Of Your Life” by William Saroyan)

Extinguishing of Chalice

We extinguish our chalice
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.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the Old Year meditation by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode on Sunday, December 30, 2007. The spoken meditation, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ somewhat in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)