

# **CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS**

**A Homily Preached by Cheryl M. Walker**

**All Souls Unitarian Church, New York  
December 16, 2007**

A few weeks ago I was talking with a colleague of mine and we were comparing notes on Christmas eve celebrations. He's from a small church where they usually have one Sunday service and was wondering what we was going to do about having two Christmas eve services.

"Two?" I said, "Try five! Five services on Christmas eve, 3, 4, 7, 9 and 11! And I don't even celebrate Christmas."

He looked at me and said -- "Well you do now."

And he was right, I do have to celebrate Christmas. The reality is that when you become part of a community you have to make that community's history and traditions your own. You might not want to or even like to but that's part of the deal. What's theirs is now yours. And Unitarian Universalists celebrate Christmas. They always have and they always will, and now I must as well. Resistance, in the end, was futile. It's time for me to jump on board and really embrace Jesus Appreciation month. I'm joining the 84% of Americans who are not Christian who celebrate Christmas. But where to begin? How am I supposed to celebrate Christmas? Thus began my quest to understand Christmas celebrations.

Now, I know the Christmas story according to Matthew, the baby Jesus is born in a manger and three wise guys, I mean wise men, come and bring him presents. So Christmas is like a birthday party for Jesus except Jesus isn't there and Jesus probably wasn't born on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December. Some astronomers think that according to the Biblical description of the star of Bethlehem, Jesus was born on April 17<sup>th</sup> in the year 6 BCE. They've concluded that the alignment of planets and a lunar eclipse by Jupiter was what the three wise men saw when they proclaimed that a star in the East had announced the birth of the anointed one. But that's speculation too, we don't seem to know when Jesus was born. We celebrate Jesus' birthday on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December because Pope Julius I, in 350 CE, said we should. It was a convenient date since it coincided with the Winter Solstice celebrations and the Roman feast of Saturnalia. Which helps in understanding why Christmas is a holiday of eating and drinking and merriment. It began as a pagan feast.

But Christmas is more than just making merry. There's the whole gift giving thing. Now it makes sense that we would give gifts to Jesus on his birthday but why do we give gifts to each other. I don't remember reading anywhere in the Bible where Jesus said that we should give everybody a present on his birthday.

Americans will spend over 400 billion dollars on Christmas presents. A guy named Reverend Billy calls it the Shopocalypse. It's make or break time for retailers and they are doing everything possible to get you to spend your money. Free shipping, 24 hour shopping hours, discounts galore. But why do we buy presents at all? Well blame it on Santa Claus and some 12<sup>th</sup> century nuns in France.

The name Santa Claus comes from the Dutch -- Sinta Klauss or Saint Nicholas. And yes, Virginia, there really was a Saint Nicholas. He was a monk who lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> century in what is now Southern Turkey. He was born to wealthy parents who died when he was young and he took seriously Jesus' command to give away one's wealth. He took all of the money he had and gave it away to the poor and he did it anonymously. Soon after he died, on December 6<sup>th</sup>, 345, he became a saint and there was a feast day for him remembering his good deeds. People loved St. Nicholas and he became both Greece's and Russia's patron saint. His feast day was very popular.

Enter a group of nuns in France in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. They celebrated the feast of St. Nicholas by leaving treats in the shoes of children saying that they were left by Saint Nicholas. The idea of giving children gifts from St. Nicholas on his feast day spread quickly and since his feast day of December 6<sup>th</sup> was so close to Christmas they became conflated. St. Nicholas, Sinta Klauss, Santa Claus brought presents to children around the world. Soon the adults got into the act and Santa Claus was bringing everybody a present. Saint Nicholas went from being a real monk giving away his wealth to the poor to a fictional character giving presents to the wealthy. Hmmm, how did that happen?

Well good old Saint Nick has undergone quite a few changes over the centuries. In early times, Saint Nicholas was always depicted as a lean, slightly bent over monk but beginning with the famous poem a *Visit from St. Nick, or 'Twas the Night Before Christmas* by Clement Moore he became a jolly fellow with a round belly. Then he underwent one more transformation to become the fat guy in the red suit. In 1931 the Coca Cola company was looking for a way to convince consumers to buy and drink coke in the middle of winter. They commissioned an illustrator, Haddon Sundblom, to create an image of Santa Claus drinking a coke. This Santa Claus had red suit that just happened to be the same colors you find on a bottle of coke. Imagine that! This is the image of Santa Claus that has stuck with us.

So now I know where the merriment comes from, where the presents come from and where the idea of Santa Claus comes from, but still something is missing. Yes, the tree. The tree comes from a German tradition and is called Tannenbaum. It probably was a way of bringing life and greenery into the dreary months of winter. But the origins aren't quite clear.

Did you know, it takes about 12 years to grow a good sized Christmas tree and the overwhelming majority are grown on tree farms in every state including Hawaii. Now,

however, 60% of American households use an artificial tree. They come in all shapes and colors and can be made of any material. But whether one uses a natural or artificial tree, the act of decorating a tree is a special time for families. A time to carefully place the ornaments on the tree and share a day and memories of Christmases past. It is a tradition that has been with us a long time.

So celebrating Christmas seems to be about trees, presents, Santa Claus and merriment. Yet, when I ask people about celebrating Christmas they always talk about something else. Something special about this season. They talk about parents making their children's hopes come true if only for a day. They talk about families gathering to share a meal and good time and the warmth of home. Some speak about caroling on the streets with friends and a few even talk about the birth of a child. One child, born on a day unknown, in a land far away who grew into a man who performed the greatest miracle that any person could -- to change the world forever. This one child, not so special at birth, born into a poor family, to an unwed mother grew up and spread a message of peace. "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God." (Mt 5:9)

So maybe celebrating Christmas is really about celebrating the birth of an idea. When we take away all the trappings of Christmas we come back to one simple idea -- love one another as you would want to be loved. That's truly an idea worth celebrating.

Now I'm still pretty ignorant when it comes to Christmas celebrations - how secret is a secret Santa? And what's a white elephant gift exchange anyway? But I know this much to be true -- Christmas is about all those things silly and serious. From a big guy in a red Coca Cola suit to the birth of the baby Jesus. It's a time of the year when we set aside our realities and live in a world of fantasy and hope. A fantasy world of flying reindeers and hope for a world of peace. We celebrate life and light in the time of the earth's death and darkness. We celebrate friends and family and we celebrate love. I think I can get with the program.

Amen, blessed be, merry Christmas to you all.