

CHALICE LIGHTING

We gather together for this Christmas service as fellow sojourners looking for light, for hope, for peace, and for love.

We gather as people from different backgrounds, different faiths, different cultures and different spiritual paths.

But as we light this chalice, we gather as one body, listening to the Christmas story for its message to all of humanity.

Its message is that there is light, there is hope, there is peace, there is love.

HYMN – SPIRIT OF LIFE

FLOWERS OF JOYS AND CONCERNS

FIRST READING – LUKE 2:1-14

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.

And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)

To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were in the same country, shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.

CAROL – AWAY IN A MANGER

SERMON – A UU CHRISTMAS

This is the Christian story of Christmas. It's a nice story and Luke told it beautifully. But not all of us can relate to this or believe that this was the birth of Christ, the child of a miracle and the son of God.

So what does Christmas mean to us as Unitarian Universalists? What are we celebrating? And how do we celebrate Christmas?

Most Unitarian-Universalists celebrate Christmas in a similar way to Christians in our culture. We gather together with friends and relatives to have large communal meals. We have special food and special music. We decorate our houses with lights and candles and coloured balls on evergreen trees. We exchange gifts as tokens of our mutual affection and appreciation.

My family had lovely Christmas traditions that we followed religiously. On Christmas Eve we decorated the Christmas tree while listening to classical Christmas music and drinking eggnog. I chuckled while my dad struggled with the tangled strands of lights. We had a supper of oyster stew and then went to the candlelight service at our local Unitarian church at around 11pm. When we returned, we all read aloud the

Christmas parts of books like *Little Women* and *The Wind in the Willows* – or sometimes the ending of *A Christmas Carol* or even the story of Luke that Claire read for us earlier. Christmas Day brought presents, and a huge dinner and visits from our relatives. And then naps!

I cherish those memories and just remembering those times brings a really warm and peaceful feeling to me. I still find Christmas in Oz a bit incongruous, since I was used to the traditional winter holiday of the Northern Hemisphere. I couldn't replicate my family's wintery traditions designed for the darkest time of the year, and I didn't want to, so I invented my own.

I had my good friends over for a Christmas Eve celebration a few years ago, and now it's a tradition, we do it every year. I invited a couple of friends over the weekend before Christmas to help trim my tree – that was only a couple of years ago, and last week I suggested doing something different and I was told...no, it's a tradition! Apparently, it doesn't take long to create a tradition. And I have my own rituals. Like I only play modern pop or rock Christmas music, Beach Boys, Mariah Carey, John Lennon – never traditional stuff. I even have my own personal Christmas song. One Christmas eve almost 30 years ago, we were listening to Roxy Music's song *More Than This* – it isn't a Christmas song at all – but my friends know, on Christmas Eve, they're gonna hear played about ten times.

And this year my family and my friends have decided to not to give each other presents. Instead, we will make contributions to a charity or an organisation in their names. I think this is a wonderful new change to my Christmas.

So, we all get to do Christmas the way we like. Which is such a good thing. I love the way Australians have adapted Christmas to this climate and season and generally take a relaxed approach to Christmas. A picnic at the beach, lunch at a restaurant, a BBQ in the back garden, or a full roast dinner – There are so many acceptable ways to celebrate Christmas in Australia.

Americans can get quite anxious about making everything perfect – holding their Christmas up to some unattainable aspirations about their family, their home, their food, their gifts. Some people become stressed or sad if their family isn't perfect, like when death, divorce, some sort of non-conformance means that your family doesn't look like a perfect American family – as seen on TV. I really love that Australians don't usually get caught up in that.

I'm even coming to terms with the Australian tradition of gathering with every group you belong to in December. "We must catch up before Christmas." The book group end of year dinner, the work group Christmas lunch, bowls club Christmas party, etc. etc. I had always found it a bit overwhelming, and I wasn't a fan for a long time, it seemed like too much all at once. But now I have come to realise that it is a good thing, an important thing. It reminds us that we are a part of many interlocking circles. We are members of many communities. It reminds us that we belong.

I hope you follow your own traditions – ones that you enjoy and bring you closer to your friends and family. Pick the ones you like and quietly discard the ones you don't.

Unitarian Contribution to Christmas

I'd like to take a quick look at how Christmas has been celebrated over the last two millennia and the part that Unitarian-Universalists have played in shaping those traditions. Did you know that UUs have made important contributions to Christmas traditions? It is surprising how many ways we have been influential.

So, where did the celebration of Christmas start and how has it become a UU holiday – even if the Christians don't know it?

Christmas is built on the inheritance of traditions far older than any of our current belief systems. The solar cycle, the feasting, the evergreens, the gifts, and many of

the other components have their own histories that go back much further than the birth of Jesus.

When Roman rulers were trying to convince their people to be Christian and not pagan, they announced Christ's birthday would be celebrated in December, the time when Romans celebrated Saturn with a long celebration of wild partying. Beginning in the week leading up to the winter solstice and continuing for a full month, Saturnalia was a hedonistic time, when food and drink were plentiful and the normal Roman social order was turned upside down. For a month, slaves would become masters. Peasants were in command of the city. Business and schools were closed so that everyone could join in the fun.

Later, as Christianity moved north, the celebration of Christ's birthday got mixed up with other winter celebrations like the Celtic Yule. These holidays also had an emphasis on a party. So the tradition of celebrating Christmas with a wild party continued. Until the 1600s, Christmas in England was nothing like the Christmas we celebrate today. It was a wild public party, sort of like schoolies week, Cup Day and Australia Day rolled into one. People drank. They got crazy. They shot off guns and fireworks. They made a nuisance of themselves. I found one description that called it "excessive social behaviour".

We still celebrate this Christmas in some ways, and the famous Welsh carol "Deck the Halls," is an example of the enduring celebration of Yule traditions.

Song – Deck the Halls

In the early 17th century, a wave of religious reform changed the way Christmas was celebrated in Europe. When Oliver Cromwell and his puritan forces took over England in 1645, they vowed to rid England of decadence and, as part of their effort, they cancelled Christmas. This lasted for 15 years. By popular demand, Charles II was restored to the throne and, with him, came the return of the popular holiday.

The Puritans, English separatists who came to America in 1620, were even more orthodox in their Puritan beliefs than Cromwell. They banned Christmas for nearly 150 years. The Puritans understood the pagan roots of Christmas, noted that the Bible never mentioned celebrating Christ's birthday and insisted that everyone should simply ignore it. In 1621, when some of the colonies' newer residents tried to take Christmas day off, the governor ordered them back to work. And thirty years later, Massachusetts declared the celebration of Christmas to be a criminal offense.

But by the 1800s, things had changed. In the southern parts of the new United States people had been celebrating Christmas with public partying like in England, and so had the new Irish immigrants who were settling in New England.

And, the puritans had divided into conservative and liberal factions, and were therefore not as powerful. And the *liberal* Puritans, some of whom were on the verge of becoming Unitarians, began to call for the public observance of Christmas.

The Unitarians believed that Christmas 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.

Unitarians at that time were obsessed with how to raise generous children with good characters. Tradition said the evil must be beaten from a child, but Unitarians didn't believe that. Still, how did you raise a child who was kind, generous, and good? This was brand new ground and Unitarian parents were understandably anxious about it. Celebrating Christmas, many felt, had the potential to help.

And while the story of the baby Jesus was not left out, what was central to this vision of Christmas was not the coming of God in a human form for the atonement of human sins, as it was for conservative Christians, but Unitarian values and theology. They wanted to celebrate Christmas as a family-centered rather than church-centered celebration.

Samuel Coleridge was a famous poet and a Unitarian minister in England. He travelled to Germany one winter, and saw a ritual around a fir tree, where not only did the children receive gifts from their parents, but they also gave their parents gifts. Coleridge loved how this tradition taught children about generosity and unselfishness, and wrote a story about it for *The Christian Register*, the official Unitarian magazine of the time. This gift exchange among parents and children became part of the Christmas tradition, not only in Unitarian homes, but in traditional Christian homes as well.

In 1823, Christmas was transformed in the US by the publication of “A Visit from St. Nicholas”. You probably know this as “’Twas the Night Before Christmas”. That poem transformed St. Nicholas into the modern myth of Santa Claus.

He was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot,
And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot;
A bundle of toys he had flung on his back,
And he looked like a peddler just opening his pack.

His eyes -- how they twinkled! his dimples how merry!
His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!
His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow,
And the beard of his chin was as white as the snow;

This Santa Claus is egalitarian. He brings gifts to all children, rich and poor. This poem gave us the Santa Claus we know today. It was written by Clement Moore. Now some UUs claim Moore as one of us, however I think he was mostly an Episcopalian, but I’ve also seen him described as an occasional Unitarian. So let’s call him that.

But a very famous Unitarian – and this one definitely was a Unitarian – was Thomas Nast, the greatest cartoonist of the 19th century. Nast was incredibly

influential; his cartoons depicted the horrors of slavery and other social injustices in a way that really made people take notice. His cartoons are credited with helping bring about Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation that freed the slaves.

In 1881, Nast was asked to draw a picture of Santa Claus to illustrate a publication of Moore's poem. That picture is in your order of service. He looks pretty familiar, doesn't he? Nast, a Unitarian, gave us our portrait of Santa as a large, jolly, humanist depiction of joy, hope, peace, and goodwill for all humankind.

In England, the publication of *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, a British Unitarian, brought charity to the forefront of Christmas. *A Christmas Carol* is steeped in the Unitarian theology that treating each other with kindness and generosity matters deeply. In that story, the nephew of Scrooge says:

I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round... as a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good; and I say, God bless it!

So Unitarians helped to bring a new focus to the celebration of Christmas. Of course, they didn't do it alone, but they certainly did have an impact.

And Unitarians gave us some of our most popular Christmas carols. Edmund Hamilton Sears, a Unitarian Minister, wrote a humanist hymn that came to be known as *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear*. Such a beautiful and popular Christmas Carol, it never mentions Jesus at all.

Song – It Came Upon A Midnight Clear

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a lifelong Unitarian, wrote the poem “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day. The poem was written during the Civil War and Longfellow’s son had been injured in battle. I love this carol, particularly the shift from despair to hope. It is a popular carol and is sung to many different tunes, so I’ll read Longfellow’s poem.

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
and wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along
The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime,
A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound
The carols drowned

Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men."

Let's move on to a more cheerful one. Did you know that Jingle Bells was written by a Unitarian? Yes, by James Lord Pierpont, a life-long Unitarian and son of a Unitarian minister. He wrote it for a Unitarian children's choir in 1857.

So, even though it isn't really appropriate for our season, I think we need to sing that now, don't we?

Song – Jingle Bells

I couldn't find much information about how Australians celebrated Christmas – or didn't – in the 18th and 19th centuries. And nothing about how Unitarians celebrated

in Australia. Perhaps Janine, our resident historian, will take up that quest someday. But I did learn that the first Christmas in Australia was celebrated in December of 1788, just a year after their arrival at Sydney Cove.

Reverend Johnson conducted services for Governor Arthur Phillips and his officers before they enjoyed Christmas supper.

By the mid-1800s putting up Christmas trees had come into fashion in England and the US. Using live fir trees wasn't practical for the settlers in Australia, but they continued the tradition using the native plants found in the area. People gathered tree ferns, palm fronds, eucalyptus boughs, Christmas bells, Christmas orchids and Christmas bushes to use as holiday decorations.

Meaning of Christmas

It is interesting to look at the history of how Unitarian and Universalists and Christians celebrated. I'm proud to say that the spirit of kindness and generosity at Christmas is itself a gift from our religious tradition.

But what does Christmas mean to us as Unitarian-Universalists? What are we celebrating?

Has anyone ever asked you why Unitarians celebrate Christmas? Or what a UU Christmas consists of and what it is all about? If you don't believe in the birth of Christ, what are you celebrating? I've been asked this question quite a few times.

My usual answer is what I learned in Sunday School. At Christmas, Unitarians celebrate the miracle of all births.

I always thought that was a good answer. But now I think it's more than that.

We celebrate family, community, and universal themes like peace on earth and

goodwill to all people.

It is, for us, a time for family and community. We tell stories of mythic characters (like Scrooge, the Grinch, and Will Bailey from *It's a Wonderful Life*) who, for a time, were lost to family and community, but had powerful experiences that turned them around and brought them home again.

It is, for us, a time for kindness and generosity. We think about people in need and try to avoid the commercialism of Christmas. We give generously to causes and organisations that will help.

It is, for us, a time of connection. We gather with family and friends and reinforce our communities. We connect to our loved ones who may be far away and hope that someday we may be together again.

It is, for us, a time of goodwill – goodwill towards men – towards all people. We consider what that means. Can we open our hearts to those who are not the same as us – in race, or culture or beliefs? What about people who seem to love the very things we detest and hate the things we value most? I will particularly be thinking about them this Christmas. I hope my goodwill can expand to include people like that.

It is, for us, a time of hope – hope for peace on earth. We ponder the possibility of repairing the world, and we cling to our dreams of world peace, world community, and universal justice – the goal of beloved community.

Conclusion

I love all the Christmas traditions brought to us by our Unitarian ancestors. I love how these traditions remind us to be giving, generous and kind to the people we know and the people we don't. This for me is the spirit of Christmas.

Where we came from is an enormous part of who we are, but it's not every part. I hope you can make Christmas your very own. I wish you a celebration this holiday that has glittering moments of excitement and warm moments of contentment.

And how ever you fashion your traditions, I hope you can enjoy them with your friends and family gathered round.

May you add your own strands of lights to the tangle.

Blessed Be and Amen.

MUSIC AND OFFERING– I DON'T WANT AN IPAD

CLOSING WORDS

Now the Work of Christmas Begins

By [Howard Thurman](#)

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.

As I extinguish the Chalice, I'll recall the words of Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol*...

Merry Christmas to all and to all a good night!