

**“Holiday Vespers”©**  
**Mattatuck Unitarian Universalist Society, Woodbury, CT**  
**The Rev. Jeanne Lloyd, Minister**  
**December 23, 2009, 8 pm**

**HOLIDAY VESPERS**

**PIANO PRELUDE**

**WELCOME & CALL TO GATHER**

Welcome to Mattatuck Unitarian Universalist Society. I am the Rev. Jeanne Lloyd and it is my great privilege to serve this Unitarian Universalist congregation that stands for reason, faith and tolerance; love, respect and compassion for one another and the world. No matter who you are, no matter whom you love, we welcome you here this evening, we welcome you into this place made more sacred by your presence, our religious home.

Now let us begin our service. Please rise in body or spirit to sing:

**\*HYMN #226** *“People, Look East”*

**\*LIGHTING OF THE CHALICE**

**Unison Reading**

Our chalice is the symbol of our faith, representing for us, the light of reason and eternal love. I invite you to join me in the unison reading.

Into the bright circle of light and life, [the essential elements of this season] . . . we have come to warm our hearts and minds. May . . . the beauty, mystery, and promise of [the season] . . . fall like silver rain upon the broken dreams, the hates and fears of all. Once again, may we pause, look up, and in the far-off distances hear that old, old, music, the music of hope, brotherhood, sisterhood, [personhood], and blessed peace!

~ Alfred S. Cole

Let us now sing:

**\*Hymn No. 254** *“Sing We Now of Christmas” v. 1-3*

**A STORY**

**Denise Pedane, Director of Religious Education**

**CHORAL ANTHEM & OFFERING<sup>1</sup>** *“The Best Gift of All”*

The holiday season is that time when we try to let people know just how much they mean to us. If you long for a place that stands for reason, faith and tolerance; love, respect and compassion then please make an offering to sustain this community of hope. In particular, this evening’s donation supports the Minister’s discretionary funds,

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<sup>1</sup> Please give generously. This offering is the sole source for the Minister’s Discretionary Fund.

and is the sole source for funds that I may use to address with discretion the special needs of this congregation and the community. Please give generously.

**HOMILY**

**“Deliverance”**

**Rev. Jeanne Lloyd**

I remember taking a psychology course in college, a long, long time ago (the 70s), and hearing about two opposing theories about revolutionary change. One theory was called *The Great Man Theory*. It suggested that when great change is needed in this world, it only happens if and when a “great man” comes along to make it happen. Great men might include people like Abraham Lincoln, The Buddha, Moses, Albert Schweitzer, Jesus of Nazareth, Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others. And, great women such as Madame Curie, Queen Elizabeth I, Rosa Parks, Julian of Norwich, The Virgin Mary and others. All, people who had a sweeping impact on society.

The other theory was *The Zeitgeist Theory*, which according to Thelma Stepan and others is a German philosophy that means “. . . the ‘spirit of the times’<sup>2</sup> [or ‘spirit of an age’]<sup>3</sup>. “It describes the intellectual and cultural climate of an era. In German, the word has more layers of meaning than the English translation, including the fact that Zeitgeist can only be observed for past events.”<sup>4</sup> “It insists that revolutionary ideas are a product of their generation. [It] proclaims that at certain intervals in history[,] circumstances are ripe for new discoveries and that outstanding individuals[,] merely play their preordained roles in developing them. [It claims that] through the ages many equally able persons have existed, but that only those fortunate enough to have been born at [just the right] moment in time [cause revolutionary change to occur]. [This claim is bolstered] by citing the occasional duplication of work by contemporary scientists with no knowledge of each others work. The development of the theory of evolution by both Charles Darwin and Alfred Wallace at the same point in time is just one example of this phenomenon. The simultaneous development of the advanced system of calculation known as calculus by two men working independently of each other is another example.”<sup>5</sup>

It seems natural to me that, one theory, *The Great Person Theory* ties itself more tightly to the known, the familiar, the human face from which we might be delivered from whatever it is that needs changing. We see a problem of monumental scale, that we are

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<sup>2</sup> Scientific Autobiography by Thelma Stepan

<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1982/2/82.02.09.x.html> December 23, 2009

<sup>3</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zeitgeist> December 23, 2009

<sup>4</sup> <http://dictionary.babylon.com/zeitgeist> December 23, 2009

<sup>5</sup> Scientific Autobiography by Thelma Stepan

<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1982/2/82.02.09.x.html> December 22, 2009

individually unable to resolve, and as we look for relief, we look for that hero or heroin who can bring about salvific change, who can save us, individually, and perhaps humanity at its greatest breadth.

The other theory, *The Zeitgeist Theory*, requires a certain largeness of scale and understanding, of the breadth and depth of culture, and its influence on our individual lives and generations. It takes salvation out of any one person’s hands and says, “Look! The primordial matter is bubbling now!” “Look! Similar people have applicable skills!” “**Who** will be given the attention and support necessary to help them accomplish the goal of saving a people or a planet in these difficult times?”

Into this need for deliverance, various organized religions have placed themselves by both offering the hero and religious dogma into which people may place their faith that a hero or heroin, from that religion, will someday arise (or perhaps has already risen) to improve their lives.

But, long before so-called organized religion, there was sun and light, moon and darkness, earth and sea, water and fire. And, then there was life. Life lived in response to nature and its whims. There was food to hunt and gather, water to find, flesh to keep warm, children to protect, people and animals that needed attention. Before the Hebrew Bible was written there were people who saw in the sun, wholeness and healing. They celebrated its return each winter solstice, and honored the gifts that earth brought them each year, with gratitude. Leaning forward into spring before it had really arrived, what they really leaned toward was hope that no matter how difficult the past year had been, they had hope that next year would be better. That crops and animals would do well, families would be healthy, and the weather and earth would not challenge them more than they would be able to bear. It was a time and for many people remains a time when the lengthening of days starting now, offers hope that our lives will be saved from difficulties we cannot bear, and/or comforted by the return of the sun, again next year. We are reassured and inspired to advance hope as we experience the predictability of the seasons, and the return of light.

Likewise, the bible tells several stories about how people moved through different cultures, farmed, honored tribal customs, and conquered other people. Some practiced monotheism, others did not. For those that worshipped one G\*d, hope rested in the promise of some one, perhaps a great man, representing an all powerful G\*d, would save them from the difficulties of life. These were a people where the spirit of justice was fragile, where oppression was rampant, where the rule of might outweighed the rule of law, where people made their living most often by their hands, and where hunger and death was very often uncomfortably near at hand.

Very often difficulty inspires one to want change, something different. Relief. Or, if experienced too often, it may inspire cynicism and apathy. Thus, difficulty inspires either hope or despair. A culture cannot long last if it is grounded in despair. So, it makes sense to me that people have long clung to teachings that someday soon, a great teacher and prophet would arrive to create revolutionary change and justice. And, that that prophet would know justice because he would be one of them. And yet, he would also be given the strength of God so that he might save the people from human oppression and tyranny.

If you look at it this way, the many Christian references to being saved are firmly rooted in the Hebrew prophets’ calls for justice and fairness between people. Any religious tradition that calls for justice, must also call the people to have faith that change can happen, that things will get better. It calls for hope and optimism. It says to the people, “don’t give up.” It says, “someone will come to lead the way.” “Someone will come to deliver us.”

PAUSE

Along the way, someone arose to fill this job, but not without a culture ready to receive him. Jesus of Nazareth, a child, like all children, whose birth was mythologized into stories that would be handed down from one generation to another, grew into the role. These stories would expand and enlarge on the hero role, calling him, “King of Angels,”<sup>6</sup> “Love,”<sup>7</sup> “holy child,”<sup>8</sup> “baby, Jesus Christ,”<sup>9</sup> Lord of Hosts, and more. His message not only had to be one of justice, he had to also be given G\*d-like powers to stand up to and defeat the tyranny of ordinary kings. Thus, when Jesus was called Lord and King, it did not reference the abuse of power as happens with slaves. Words such as “lord” and “King” invoked the power of good to overcome evil, the supreme acknowledgement that it was his message that authorized him as King and Lord over all other kings, not his tyranny.

And, so, why is it we observe his birth at this time of year? Yes, we can talk about pagan holidays that were merged with Christian holidays. We can talk about the organized church and its methods of imposing its dogma on people. We could talk about a lot of things.

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<sup>6</sup> SLT 253, “O Come, All Ye Faithful.”

<sup>7</sup> SLT 226, “People, Look East”

<sup>8</sup> SLT 254, “Sing We Now of Christmas”

<sup>9</sup> SLT 241, “In the Bleak Midwinter”

But, here is why I think we owe Jesus some fair recognition for the teachings attributed to him. Unlike most of his followers, he didn't actually claim to be a G\*d-like super-hero. Perhaps he knew that to do so would strip the people of their own power to make revolutionary changes within their own culture. Over and over again, in his teachings, he calls people to practice justice. He calls us to treat one another as we would have them treat us. The golden rule. To simply be kind to one another. To practice justice. To keep hope alive. To hold faith that in the coming year, we can do better by each other, and perhaps by our efforts, the world will become a better place.

PAUSE

I think it makes sense that in this time of turning, as the season turns toward light, that it was predestined, if you will, that an icon would emerge for this season, and that that icon would be someone who preached a message of sustaining perseverance toward light and hope. It makes perfect sense that at this pivotal point of turning in the year that this particular season starts with the joy of thanksgiving and gratitude. Gratitude for the light of life and love in each other. It is not about shopping till you drop, and running up the charge cards. It is about the human spirit's relentless practice of carving out a month each year to say, in this time, we will practice hope, we will practice faith, we will practice love, we will practice justice. No matter what other superficial things we are distracted by the rest of the year, in this season of turning toward the light, we will remember to love one another.<sup>10</sup>

What Jesus taught us, as do the teachings of many other great religions and human

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<sup>10</sup> Just as Jesus taught, we will observe the Buddhist teaching: Do not hurt others in a way that you yourself would find hurtful.

We will honor Confucianism, which says: Do not do to others what you would not like yourself.

We will take heed of Hinduism, which says, "Never do to others what would pain thyself."

And, Islam:

Not one of you is a true believer until you wish for your brother what he wishes for himself.

And, Jainism: In happiness and suffering, in joy and grief, we should treat all creatures as we would wish to be treated.

And, Native American teaching that respect for all life is the foundation.

And, Sikhism: Do not make an enemy of anyone as God is with everyone.

And, Taoism: Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain and your neighbor's loss as your own loss.

philosophies, is that deliverance from much of the difficulties in life, lays not in faith in heroes or heroines to fix our lives for us. Deliverance lays in each other hands and hearts. It lays in how we treat one another. He reminds us of the lesson we already know, that we hold in our own hands our salvation. That the beauty of the human spirit calls us to turn toward the morrow with resolve in our hearts to be the light in each other's eyes, treating the other with love, justice, respect and compassion. For we are the guardians of this eternal truth that calls us to love one another as ourselves. The human spirit demands no less from us, and no more.

May it be so.

### **CHORAL ANTHEM**

### ***"Prayer for Peace"***

### **PRAYER & CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSE**

*Please remain seated after the prayer to sing:*

**Hymn No. 241** *"In the Bleak Midwinter" v.1 and 3*

Spirit of Our Times, Spirit of Community, Spirit of Hope & Faith, Spirit that resides inside of us and between us . . .

Holy is the pureness of an infant child. Holy are our efforts to acknowledge the simple needs for love that we have from one another. Holy is the practice of providing, without thought for return, the pureness and innocence of unexpected gifts of love to family, friends, and strangers.

We pray for safety for our children and loved ones. We cannot help but pray that they will be spared from this world's pain and trouble. And, yet, more, we pray that they know and live life and love to its fullest, drawing strength from others, who will likewise need their love.

We quake at a vision of a love so pure. We bow down with gratitude knowing that by our love for another we live the indescribable sacred into being. By the light of our eyes gazing on one another, the pureness of our souls radiate to others. May the grace and hospitality we extend to another, without expectation, bring forth to this earth, in this time, in our lives, the meaning of Love lived eternally and in these times.

May it be so and Amen.

*Please remain seated to sing:*

**\*Hymn No. 241** *"In the Bleak Midwinter" v.1 and 3*

**CLOSING WORDS** *"The Work of Christmas" by Howard Thurman*

When the song of 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 flock,  
[The holy work] 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 [our] brothers [and sisters]  
To make music in the heart.

Amen.

**CANDLE LIGHTING & CANDLE BLESSING**

*(Please gather your belongings and move into a circle surrounding the pews and await candle lighting instructions.) The candle lighters (2) come forward to the pulpit (center stage), and light the first 2 candles of congregants at the center front. Each congregant then lights their neighbor's candle until entire circle of candles around the sanctuary is lit.*

May each of us carry into the world through our own lives and deeds, the light [that represents the Love] of this [congregation] – [it is] a flame [that symbolizes] . . . the endless love of and faith in humanity.

Let the flame[, this love] from this [congregation] light our hearts and our lives. Light of warmth, light of truth, light of love,  
light our path this night,  
light our way now and onward forever more. ~ Robert Edward Green<sup>11</sup>

**Let us recess together, singing Hymn #251, "Silent Night" from the insert in your Orders of Service. Please follow me from this point of the circle (center front) and out into the star-lit winter night.**

**RECESSIONAL**

**\*Hymn #251 "Silent Night"**

*(At the end of the candle blessing, Rev. Jeanne and the 2 candle lighters will lead the congregation outside as we sing "Silent Night," see insert. Once outside, the congregation may wend their way home for the holidays.)*

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 281.

**CONGREGATION RECESSES SINGING SILENT NIGHT**

*Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright.  
Round yon virgin, mother and child.  
Holy infant so tender and mild,  
Sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.*

*Silent night, holy night, shepherds quake at the sight,  
Glories stream from heaven afar,  
Heavenly hosts sing "Alleluia."  
Sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.*

*Silent night, holy night, child of God, love's pure light  
Radiant beams from thy holy face,  
With the dawn of redeeming grace,  
Sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.*

**DEEP PEACE AND HAPPY HOLY DAYS TO YOU & YOURS, OUR COMMUNITIES AND THE WORLD**

*\*Please rise in body or spirit.*

Worship: The Rev. Jeanne Lloyd, Minister  
Choir: Directed by Charlie Batchelder, Choir Director  
Story Reader: Denise Pedane, Director of Religious Education  
Candle Lighters: Tracy Johnson, MUUS President & Chuck Johnson  
Greeters: Drew Morten & Donna Pereira