

**Keeping Christmas Part I**  
**Presented by Rev. Martin Woulfe**  
**December 14, 2003**

Christmas is an enigma in our civilization. For some, it is a day, while for others, it is an entire season. Some will use Christmas as an excuse for personal excess and binges, while others will approach the day with reverence and awe. Many will remember strangers less fortunate while others will focus on family; some families will focus on children, and children will focus on Santa Claus.

In a very real way, the symbols of the season before us today reflect the diversity. Everywhere, there are lights: the colored electric bulbs wrapped around bushes and trees, advent candles, Hanukah candles, kwanza candles, the Yule log. Beacons of light and hope in the midst of winter.

Twenty centuries is of course a long time, and few things remain constant over such duration. For the moment, though, let us focus on the traditions associated with Christmas. As is common knowledge, Christmas has acquired many extraordinary myths, legends and customs over the passage of two millennia. When one turns to the stories recorded in the Christian scriptures themselves -we read of the pilgrimage to Bethlehem, the visit of the three wise men, not to mention the visitation of angels on earth. There are holes - too many to address - in the narrative.

Also, it is generally acknowledged that much of what is associated with Christmas in our age is of relatively recent origin and was deliberately invented and skillfully advertised – some by pious men and women, others by commercial interests. So it is that we do not flinch when the immanent arrival of Christmas is heralded not by angels, but the sudden appearance of a Santa Claus outside the supermarket, the incessant repetition of carols over store loudspeakers, the avalanche of cards, and the inevitable broadcasts of Rudolph the red nosed reindeer, Frosty the Snowman, and The Grinch who Stole Christmas. To name a few.

But such are only embellishments, the proverbial trimmings.

Now, many sincere people of faith have taken issue with these embellishments, not to mention the crass commercialization of the day. This is not a new attitude. For example, I recently read that the Puritans of Oliver Cromwell's day were so appalled by the pagan customs that had "corrupted" Christmas that they actually banned the holiday by act of parliament. Mind you, these were the same people who took offense at secular plays and shut down every theater house. When some refugee Puritans sailed for New England aboard the Mayflower, they carried this peculiar spirit with them. It is part of the historical record that these early American colonists insisted - on principle - that all should work on Christmas day.

Mind you, very few mourn the passing of that part of the Puritan legacy. On the other hand, one year ago this week, I called an organization called the Westboro Baptist Church that was threatening to picket my church in Park Forest because we supported equal rights for gays

and lesbians. When I called, I tried to set a decent tone to the conversation that was to follow, so when a member of that (I hate to call them a church) sect answered the phone, I wished her "happy holidays." Much to my surprise, I was immediately scolded that Christmas was not in the bible and that it was a heathen corruption. Needless to say, the conversation went downhill from there. I can only imagine what her reaction might have been had I wished her a happy Chanukah or kwanza.

We would do well to remember that Unitarian Universalism is one of the stepchildren of the Puritan tradition. To be sure, Unitarianism grew out of a reaction against the Puritans' immediate congregational heirs. All the same, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree - successive generations of U & Us have inherited, by and large, a wary eye for corruptions that may have crept into the storehouse of tradition. As a result of this legacy, the rituals and sacraments common to traditional Christian denominations were gradually removed from our worship.

Setting all that aside, for a moment, there is much that we don't know about Christmas. In fact, we do not know on which day Jesus was actually born. The date we recognize as Christmas, December 25th, was chosen to usurp the Roman feast of Saturnalia, which was originally a holiday instituted by Julius Caesar to celebrate the birth of "the Invincible God." By the same token, there is no general consensus as to even the year of Jesus' birth. We in the west commonly call this year, what remains of it, 2003 – 2,003 AD, Anno Domini, Latin for "in the Year of Our Lord." In deference to those who are non-Christians, the acronym CE for "common era" was coined and has been enjoying some currency. But the year fixed by early Christian theologians for Jesus' birth, many historians now tell us, was off by probably four years. By this reckoning, Jesus was born in 4 BC, before Christ, or if you will, 4 BCE, Before the Common Era. This means, for what it's worth, that 1996 marked the 2000th anniversary of Jesus' birth.

Today, some may wonder whether this same sort of pruning would be appropriate with respect to Christmas. For, as many a commentator has observed, there's no getting around it: Christmas is ultimately about celebrating the birth of Jesus.

And yet, given the increased theological diversity of the typical UU congregation, many a church today does not take Christmas so much for granted. Some will wonder, how can we celebrate Christmas in good conscience? To be more exact, since we do not worship Jesus as our more traditional Christian brothers and sisters do, does the holiday retain any relevance for us?

Let us begin by asking, who was this Jesus?

Let us begin with the traditional view. If you are familiar with the Apostles' Creed, you will recall that while much is said of God the Father, of Jesus it is written that he was born of the virgin Mary; semicolon; he suffered and died under Pontius Pilate, and was resurrected from the dead. As Forrest Church remarked in his book, *Our Chosen Faith*, the entire life and teachings are condensed in that one minute semicolon. A traditional faith, Dr. Church further adds, technically only requires belief that Jesus was born in a miraculous manner and that he died in an equally miraculous manner.

But ours has never been a particularly traditional faith, true? Theodore Parker asserted, nearly 150 years ago, that something that Jesus taught as true may indeed be true, but not because Jesus was the spokesperson. A thing is true, and remains true, Parker argued, because it is in fact true. Relevance is akin to truth in this regard. Following this line of thinking, Universalists and especially Unitarians in ages past have been in the forefront of demythologizing scripture.

I mention this because if we are to consider Jesus we have to do so in the light of the Gospel narratives. Now, contemporary New Testament scholars freely admit that they can tell us precious little about the exact facts of Jesus' life. Succinctly put, approximately 2000 years ago a Jewish boy by the name of Joshua was born; after reaching adulthood, he left his home and followed a calling to be an itinerant prophet. He made predictions of an imminent apocalypse; he may even have come to believe that God had called him to usher in the end-time; and for his pains, he was arrested and crucified. End of story - at least, from a critical, historical approach. Naturally, if this was all that people believed about Jesus, his birthday would not be widely regarded as a day of special note.

Much of what is believed about Jesus in terms of supernatural abilities and a unique relationship to the Divine are drawn from two New Testament records, specifically in the writings of St. Paul and St. John. This is important to note because St. Paul's understanding of Jesus was based on a vision rather than actual acquaintance; his epistles convey the theological tensions brewing between him and the "pillars of the church" whom had known Jesus personally, including James, Jesus' brother. By a cruel twist of fate - namely the brutal intervention of the Roman military in 70 AD, the original Jewish followers of Jesus were annihilated; of the Christian churches that survived, most had been founded by Paul during his missionary ventures. So it is, that Paul's unique version of Jesus became the tradition. And what of St. John? He wrote his account perhaps 50 to 100 years after the actual crucifixion, when Jesus had already been elevated to a folklore figure, consistent with Paul's understanding. His Jesus is a Divine God who wears the flesh of humanity merely to fulfill prophecy.

Let there be no mistake, though: there is much beauty and poetic poignancy in their respective writings. But, poetic imagination - no matter how sublime - is not necessarily synonymous with literal truth. Ultimately, we must judge a book by its merits - in particular, its ethical and historical merits.

This is consistent with the liberal spirit. As I said earlier, we are a people who choose what to believe. As you may be aware, this is the literal meaning of the word "heretic." As many of you are no doubt aware, originally, this appellation was not derogatory - it was only when the later Christian church became embroiled in successive controversies concerning the perceived need for a uniform orthodox creed that one's right to choose what to believe came under attack.

I am reminded that both Luke and Mark tell of a time when several disciples complained to Jesus that they had encountered someone who was not a disciple preaching in Jesus' name. Jesus instructed them not to hinder such persons, explaining that if one was not against him, he/she was for him.

And so it is with Unitarian Universalists. We tend to follow the example of Theodore Parker, who urged men and women to seek after truth, not by virtue of its author but by virtue of its own sake. This we do in good faith. If we cherish the message of Jesus, it must be on the basis of the truth he preached, and not on the basis of any claims invoking supernatural authority.

So, in our search for the truth about Jesus and the truths taught by him, we must turn to the three earlier (synoptic) gospels - which depict a very different individual than that found in either Paul or John. Mark, the earliest Christian account, portrays a very human Jesus, a man who earned his reputation as a faith healer and homespun prophet. Incidentally, the earliest accounts of Mark end with his death and burial; a later hand added significant verses that told of a resurrection. But that's a topic for another sermon, another day, probably Easter.

A while back, I asked the question, is Christmas worth keeping? I must now begin to give you an answer. Despite the holes, despite the embellishments, despite the commercialization, I suggest to you that Christmas is indeed worth keeping.

Why, you ask? Why is the birthday of Jesus worth celebrating? Because of the semicolon I mentioned earlier, the semicolon that passes for his life and the best part of his teachings. While many of his teachings were not original with him, Jesus stands out a religious genius - and relevant role model - in his own right. He taught that God is love, and that people should strive towards incarnating that love in their relationships with others. Thus, one should love one's neighbor as oneself; love one's enemies; refrain from judging others. Jesus taught that one should avoid hypocrisy in one's spiritual life, to seek God privately and sincerely. Perhaps most radically, Jesus taught that we should regard God as "Abba" the Aramaic word for "Papa/momma." In short, he taught that all men, women and children were the sons and daughters of one Divine reality; thus, all peoples of the earth are one extended family. He believed that one's deeds were the clearest testament of a person's faith; in our time, we likewise profess that we believe in deeds, not creeds. He further taught that the Kingdom of God was within each person, and that we should remember those who society has spurned; he likewise asserted that the needs of people counted more than the requirements of custom. To use the phraseology of our Principles & Purposes, we would say that he affirmed the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Now, I'm not suggesting that Jesus was a UU as we know it; he followed the religious traditions of his family, and the traditions of the Hebrew prophets. On the other hand, the convictions he articulated are very much in keeping with those we hold dear. We subscribe to these truths, and we can admire his courage in standing by them. So, I encourage you to keep Christmas. I would urge you to keep it for the sake of those you love. Perhaps we should also keep it for our own childhood dreams of a world made whole through the transforming power of love.