

Service
Sunday, December 23, 2007
Third Unitarian Church of Chicago

Opening Words

This is a celebration of life, of song, words, and of light: light of the sun making our very lives possible, of pale, thin light flickering against the broad darkness of winter skies, and the light from the first explosion of an ancient star. This light is descended from the explosion that gave birth to the Universe, the event that caused me, and you. Let us watch for the light spread by the young person who illuminates our first candle in the display this morning!

Lighting of Hanukkah Candle

The Hanukkah flame recognizes the Jewish heritage, a wellspring of Western Civilization. This flame is not the sun symbolized, nor a reenactment of Solstice rights. This flame recalls a defining moment in Judaism, a temple cleansing by a people whose existence has been scarcely been free of oppression. There are resonances of the menorah in our display this morning, and this is intentional. May the second candle lit now by this young person remind us of the meaning of the renewal of light to Jews everywhere, of a righteous victory against the odds, and of the incantations of ancient Hebrew prophets restated by Dr. King, “that justice delayed is justice denied.”

Lighting of Mid-winter festivals Candle

Legend has it that in pre-Christian Northern Europe, watchers stood in the cold to make sure Jul bonfires burned throughout the night to appease the fates and to keep death from villages in winter. How did they do this without hot chocolate and L.L. Bean? Solstice fires were lit to invite sun gods to end the winter. Women with children were celebrated on the Mother Night of the Anglis; babies were given gifts on the Babylonian Zagmuk. In lighting this third candle, we remember the holidays of our youth with happiness and melancholy, knowing that is our task to make the holidays lovely today.

Lighting of the Earth Candle

Let's light the earth candle now. As we do, look at the walls of this sanctuary—made from common Illinois clay. And the ceiling—the dark varnish and the wood itself from the timber stands of Wisconsin. Always we have championed, at times with uncommon courage, the cause of the common woman and man. Gifts from the earth we stand on made our church home; greens stand out against the brown, just as Andrene Kaufman imagined. Holiday greens hanging today recall the Roman holiday of Saturnalia held long before the birth of Jesus, and of the endurance of the balsam that never succumbs to winter.

Spoken Meditation

Each of us has our own needs this holiday season. Just as we struggle to meet the needs of the empty handed, we stumble on what to do with the heavy hearted. All I ask of you in this time of meditation is to simply listen as you breathe in and out. If there is joy, give thanks; if you feel nothing, you are not alone; if there is pain, feel it, and may you let it go.

Lighting of the Meek and Mild Candle

Is there anyone who wants to be small and insignificant? Why else are little boys fascinated with trucks and dinosaurs? The Bible says the “meek will inherit the earth,” but the world always proves otherwise. Will it ever be true? We’ll sing of the “holy infant so tender and mild,” given in birth to a humble family. Before they called him Christ the King, he was Jesus the baby, born in poverty.

May the fifth candle we light now remind us, again, that we have the power to care for the weak: to house the homeless, to feed the hungry. Religions have long relied on the metaphor of shepherds tending to their sheep, as it is with the foreshadowing scene of the lone shepherds on a Judean plain, to whom were revealed a star.

Lighting of the Magi/ Gifts Candle

“And they came bearing gifts,” or so the story of the Magi goes. Who knows the names of the Wise Men? They’re Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar of legend, and ‘magi’ is the basis of the Old English word for magic. Scholars have asked, “Were the gift-bearers who brought frankincense, gold, and myhrr to the manger sorcerers, or were they kings?” Either way, they represented wealth of the world. Think of the irony in this scene: things of value brought to a baby in a cow stall, who didn’t need them then, who would never need them.

If you’re a newcomer, you are a worthy, needful gift to us. On behalf of our church, I welcome you to our congregation, and feel free to stand and introduce yourselves as you would like.

Let’s now take a collection in support of the ministries of this congregation.

We light the sixth candle for the ritual dance of giving holiday gifts, and for our newcomers. Isn't it true that the best gift says, "I know who you are, and I love you for it, anyway?"

Lighting the Families Candle

Of course there's the holy family. The manger in front of the public building that should be free of religion reminds us of it!

How many families are there of which you are a part? There's the human family, certainly. There are also the families we choose, like our closest friends, and our church family, so close to so many of us. One friend told me last week, "The holidays mean that my family puts the "fun" back into "dysfunctional!" We are sustained by, and we also survive, our families—and that is the condition that makes us human, not the other way around.

We light the seventh candle now for the families we are born into, and the families we create, in love.

Lighting the Nativity Candle

It was the shepherds who brought the angel's good tidings to Mary and Joseph in the cow stall, and I have always loved the line in the Gospel of Luke, "but Mary treasured these words and pondered them in her heart," as if she knew who the child was to become. I suspect that every child with us today, and likely all of us, were looked upon with tenderness and wonder by our mothers at birth, their relief at the pain of birth momentarily obscuring how difficult we would become when we reached high school.

Ed Searl writes that all humanity is born anew with one birth, and we light this nativity candle for the pain and wonder of our creation.

Lighting of UU Forebears Candle

Today UU's ask themselves, just as everyone else asks, "Why do we celebrate Christmas?" Or Easter, or Passover, for that matter? We're not Christian, or Jewish exactly—but both are a part of our collective religious heritage. Well, for one thing, Unitarians have a distinct Christmas heritage. The great UU minister Richard Gilbert reminds us that "Charles Dickens wrote his *Christmas Carol*; Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* evoked a family Christmas; the tune "Jingle Bells" was written by the Unitarian James Pierpont, Charles Follen, who ministered to Unitarians in Lexington, Massachusetts, introduced the decorated Christmas tree to America." We have added to the depth and richness of this holiday in America, and we light the ninth candle to recognize this tradition.

Lighting of Social Justice/ Prophets

"For lo, the days are hastening on,
 By prophet seen of old,
 When with the ever-encircling years
 Shall come the time foretold
 When peace shall over all the earth
 Its ancient splendors fling,
 And the whole world send back the song
 Which now the angels sing."

This, written by the Unitarian minister Edmund Sears, was called the first great American anti-war song. We light the tenth candle in honor of those prophets who suffered so that others they knew not of could live in dignity, the bones and blood of who we are at Third Church.

Lighting of the Peace Candle

A phrase in the ancient Jewish text known as the Kabala goes, “Peace begins with quietness in the heart. No peace can be known without this.” We cannot have peace if we dislike ourselves and cannibalize each other. Let the hands of her who has striven for peace longer than most light this candle. What she has done is louder than what I can say.

Closing Words

These eleven candles will be lit for the remaining services of this year. They represent the purity of birth and re-birth, the warmth of creation, for soft strands of light against dark and cold. May your season—you whom I cherish—be one of tenderness.