



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Oh For A Clear Star

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It was just about this time of year, when I was a boy, that the lakes would begin to freeze over in Minneapolis, and when the city would begin to flood the football fields in the various parks to create skating rinks. Sometimes as early as Thanksgiving, but usually by the beginning of December, winter would descend on us, and great cold air masses from the Canadian shield would slide down over the upper Midwestern plains, through the Dakotas and into Minnesota.

It is hard to imagine that today as it inches to 80 degrees outside.

The skies would glisten, the stars were so bright. The world was not so lit up then, in the 1950s, and we could see stars almost from horizon to horizon, and often see the faint paint swipe of the Milky Way. I remember once, when I was young, in Northern Minnesota, seeing the Northern lights.

That is no longer the case. It gets cold later in the year as the earth is warming up. Lights are everywhere. Pictures from space show how illuminated the world has become – vast swatches of Africa and South America, some of central Asia, the middle of Australia are dark, the far north, but much of the world is lit up and bright at night, the earth almost a mirror reflecting the starry skies.

Some sea turtles are struggling because they evolved in a time of darks skies, and when the turtles hatched on beaches, the turtles would make for the brightest lights – the shine of starlight on the ocean. Now they often head inland, to the highways and death.

Have you ever been out when the stars were so bright you could almost read, or when they stretched horizon to horizon? Out in the desert, up on a mountain, out at sea - once, on Santa Rosa Island in the Channel Islands, camping with a friend, the stars were so bright, it was almost frightening – but so magnificent.

Some of you here, I know, are astronomers and peer into deep space on a regular basis, and understand the beauty and expanse of it all. Recently it was discovered there are many more stars than was thought and this has complicated our view of the universe and the cosmos.

Starry starry night, from the painting by van Gogh to poetry, stars. I think the first poem I ever loved was by John Masefield, called Sea Fever; it has these lines:

I must down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by,

No doubt it was a straight line from there to Melville.

Humans have seen meanings in the stars forever. Pictures in the sky helped them know where they were. The three kings followed a star – o star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright.' And they came to – well, what was it? Birth, or death? Eliot's poem raises the question. What must pass away and what might come.

Religion is a lot of things. The word basically means to reconnect. Re-ligare –like ligaments, ligature. But re-connect with what?

Those things we call religion – Buddhism, Judaism, Taoism, Christianity, UUism, the religions of India, Islam, Native American spirituality – they all have some things in common. There is an ethical component – notions of right and wrong action. There is a communal aspect – people gathering together who share something crucial; there is an educational aspect – learning traditions or rituals.

But all religions, too, have at some central point in them, the idea of mystery. It is our theme this month. Hannah's sermon got me thinking and it came to me that all religions share a central mystery.

The central mystery shared by all religious traditions, and common to all spirituality is the mystery of the incarnation – of the spirit become flesh, of the infinite expressed in the finite, the eternal in the temporal. It is the lamp burning for eight days for Hanukkah; it is the Buddha nature, the Koran; Jesus, all of us. Awash in tiny diamonds, the stuff of stars.

The incarnation. The Gospel of John begins, in the Beginning was the Word and the Word became flesh. Genesis starts with the spirit of God moving over the primeval waters. This last week was the traditional anniversary of the Buddha's illumination.

Let me go there for a minute. You all know about Hannukah, a minor holiday in Judaism, but major here in the US as a counter to Christmas; it celebrates freedom and perseverance, the mystery of ritual, and how ritual can carry deep and lasting meaning. Lighting a candle very night to remind ourselves about what matters, remind ourselves that we are not alone in this universes, that there can always be light in the midst of darkness.

And Christmas – you know about that. Christmas Eve we will have two services, at 5 and at 9. The season of giving – be sure to stop by in Ross Chapel after the service for the Alternative Gift Market – this is a chance, maybe not to save the economy, but to save some lives. You can make an extra donation to Young and Healthy, or support programs aimed at supporting women and children around the world, at reducing sexual slavery, for environmental concerns, alleviating homeless [for the 60 billion going in tax reduction for the wealthy, we could build housing for all of the homeless in the US!].

Christmas – perhaps the most successful of the incarnation stories. A story of the sacred being found in the most ordinary and in the humble, not exalted or royal, but common. Pablo Neruda has a wonderful collection of poems called 'Ode to Ordinary Things' where he captures this – the incarnation, the sacred in the ordinary. More Christmas in a couple of weeks.

December 8, for Zen Buddhists, commemorates the day the Buddha attained enlightenment. As you know, the Buddha had sought answers to the question of suffering for many many years, but had come up with blanks. A true searcher, he was sure that somewhere the answer lay. And so one night, he decided to sit and wait. And, tradition has it, as he opened his eyes and saw the morning star, the planet Venus, he became enlightened. Another star.

One of the essential truths of Buddhism is that everything we need, we already have, that whatever is divine or sacred, rests within us. It is a teaching of Buddhism that what is holy is democratic, available and present in all.

The spirit become flesh. This is the teaching of Jesus, and we contend that Christianity went wrong by limiting it to him. The testimony of the New Testament is otherwise – the kingdom of God rests within us, Jesus said. We grow in likeness to God, Channing preached.

The mystery of the incarnation. And if we see each other as holy, as imbued with dignity, with what is sacred, how can we feel anything but compassion for others.

You see, the job of religion and spirituality, the job of this congregation is to help us become better people. We say it is to live lives of service, integrity and joy. You bring your talents and treasures, your sorrows and joys, your fears and failures and look for something to put all of that together into a life well lived.

Yes? Is that so? And part of that process is to be open to the mystery of the incarnation – of everything and everyone.

There is an old Jewish tradition, in Hasidic Judaism that says everyone was originally one; everything was God. Everything was sacred. And, at some point, when time began, God decided to create the world and to do so, He, or She, made room within that original unity, and the world of individual things came into being. God was broken up into the world. And, the understanding goes was that in every bit of matter, a bit of God's glory was imbedded.

Our task, the Hasids say, is to liberate the sparks of the divine imbedded in everything that is; that is, in you and in me, in our children and friends, our neighbors and co-workers, our enemies, too. The sparks in trees and animals and the earth itself – in everything that is.

So, as you prepare for the New Year and are looking around for resolutions, how about this one: I resolve to liberate as many sparks of the divine in the world as I can. This is done by honoring each thing and each one.

But we get there, I go back to Eliot [TS Eliot, from a notable Unitarian family in St Louis]. He wrote the poem in the 1920s, about the time he emigrated to England and about the time he left the Unitarian Church and became an Anglican.

So it is partly a poem about transitions, both historical and personal – the historical is certainly in the aftermath of the First World War; the personal for Eliot himself. The kings know that something has happened – the 'old dispensation' as he says, has died and something new has come in its place.

Lots can be said about this, but I want to make this point: for us to liberate the sparks of divine in the world, we must be constantly renewing ourselves. It doesn't just happen once and then we are done with it. The death of what was happens over and over and over, and a birth happens, or must happen, again and again and again. This is why the Buddhists are right that spirituality is practice; this is why the Christians are right that we must pray without ceasing; this is why the Jews are right that every Friday we should light a candle; why the Muslims are right that five times a day we should face Mecca and pray. And Unitarian Universalists? Well, we have no central tradition – maybe here it is lighting our chalice every week, maybe it is the practice each of you have privately. But it should be something.

And when we do – whatever our practice – that clear star will appear, and lead us. Just look up; it is there, waiting for you. Oh for a bright star ...

Amen