



A sermon by Stephen Atkinson, Minister

December 16, 2007

'TIS THE SEASON TO BE

At this time of year, we are told frequently how we are to *be*. Be merry. Be glad. Be joyful. Be thankful. Be generous. And on top of that, we're told what we must *do*. Shop. Wrap. Give. Cook. Party. Feast. Even drink! In fine, capitalist and materialist manner, we are told exactly how to keep Christmas. How would we ever know if we weren't told?

I say this coming from a retail background. My family's business, now into the fourth generation, is photography. We not only lived on the idea that *pictures* contain our memories and help us hold onto the past (a highly questionable claim); we also made a large percentage of the profits that we lived on in the single month of December. All my earliest Christmas memories are bathed in the brilliant white light of the home movie camera, and all those 8mm movies are now converted to VHS tapes that are very dear to me. Kodak, bless its little corporate heart, is one of the most significant purveyors of 'happiness', and my family might have starved if it weren't for that company's success. So I refer to capitalism and materialism not in condemnation, but only to keep our eyes focused on the pressures we must manage.

Many of us Unitarian Universalists actively reject the Christian aspects of this time of year. We are unsure if Jesus were a historical character; we question the need for a savior; we doubt the accuracy of Scripture, let alone the tales of miraculous conception and birth. We're open to discussing the "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe," finding it easier to accept meaning hidden in C. S. Lewis' re-definition of the mythical elements of the Gospel message.

And, having mentioned C. S. Lewis, I must digress to comment upon Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, beginning with *The Golden Compass*, a film version of which is now running in theatres. I've not yet made it to see the film, but I hear it's a faithful rendering of the book. Last summer I read the whole trilogy in a final feast of fantasy fiction before starting to serve you here. It is one remarkable piece of literature, and I highly recommend it. Controversies around it have been getting a lot of press.

You'll have heard that Pullman is an atheist and that his book is therefore dangerous to young minds. It is – just as dangerous as Unitarian youth groups are. Let's remember that *atheism* is as complex a belief system as *theism* is, in that there are many forms of it. If Pullman is an atheist, it's not because he's a naturalist or a rationalist. His books are filled with the supernatural, with references to spirit and the uncanny, to beings of different levels of awareness and to a living essence that is fundamental to all intelligent life even in different universes.

To me Pullman is a humanist, darn close to being a Unitarian Universalist one, too. In fact, the trilogy is in some ways a retelling of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and some see Milton as being an early Unitarian Christian. But in Pullman's fantasy world "human" is better rendered as "conscious." Beings of entirely different kind recognize consciousness in each other and it links them all because it is caused by a multi-universal essence.

Further, Pullman's work is about the individual fighting the abuse of power, in particular the misuse of religion when it becomes allied with temporal power and social control, a religion that would prevent full consciousness and replace it with obedience. Using the metaphor of puberty, Pullman examines the idea of coming into self-awareness and spiritual independence, but of a highly responsible kind.

The god that Pullman denies in these books is not all and every kind of god, but the authoritarian, jealous god, that god associated with ancient human understanding. It's a god that's usurped by the selfish ambition of lesser beings to the degree that god is used up and pointless. That's one kind of atheism that I entirely agree with.

Thus endeth the digression.

So how do I get back to my earlier point?

Ah yes, many of us are comfortable accepting Judeo-Christian ideas when they come to us through Lewis, or Milton, or Shakespeare, or Dickens, but for some reason many of us balk at the idea of the Bible itself containing any meaning, once we don't feel required to believe it as *fact*. I suggest that it is un-Unitarian to dismiss the power of the Bible; we need to keep it up there on the shelf with the Gita, with Rumi, with Joseph Campbell, and all those books we feel it's *safe* to honor and find sacred. For when we reject the elements of the Christian myth too ruthlessly, we miss the opportunity to be moved by the underlying truth of its story, symbols and traditions.

Some of us find the greatest spiritual truths flow from the example of Jesus Christ, and our spirit of celebration is rooted in the deepest truths lying within the symbols of Christmas. For us, the merriment of this season is spontaneous and deeply heartfelt.

Others of us relate more to the *symbols* of Christmas that often originate in pagan religion, symbols that address this time of year. The miraculous birth is simply a transformation of the miracle of the rebirth of light from darkness. That's what our Yule log means. Out of this darkest time of the year, light and life are reborn, not *from* a virgin but *as* a virgin.

Others of us are deeply and satisfyingly nurtured and empowered by our families, and this season gives us a chance to recharge our inner batteries from that source of love and faith. Some of us are lucky enough to find sustenance in both family and the religious meaning of Christmas, especially given that this part of the Bible most emphasizes the devotion of parents to children and the special hope that a newborn brings. If this season helps us be fully in touch with our soul, our generosity and gratitude, then by all means, we must live out the fullness of our joy. All of us for whom this story and season is a miraculous time have reason to say, "Glory, Glory in the Highest!"

There are, though, many of us who feel blocked during the holidays. Christmas is a nostalgic time of year. That's an interesting word, *nostalgia*; literally, it means the pain we feel about returning home. Some of us have pain about returning home that we'd never categorize as *nostalgia*; perhaps more like anxiety, panic or rage. But, usually, we see nostalgia in a shimmery kind of light, especially at Christmas: "a wistful or... sentimental yearning for [an irrecoverable] past." We think of how the good old days used to be, and we try to re-create them or hold onto them. Some people are lucky enough to be able to do that, but for many the holidays become associated with pain that we'd never categorize as nostalgia.

And sometimes it's just *this* Christmas that we associate with real pain, like the Christmas after my father died. It's odd how that Christmas six months afterward was worse than his death. Compounding his absence was our fear of one of the family marriages breaking up and the realization that we were all together that one Christmas not because Dad had died. It was 1999, and we'd all planned to be home together for years before; only Dad wasn't there.

In contrast, in Dad's last few days and around the funeral our family had a lot of fun! It may sound weird, but we usually enjoy each other's company and being all together in Fredericton, I from Toronto, my older brother and his wife from

Houston, was fairly rare. Sitting around Dad's deathbed, we were frequently in stitches from remembering the old times, and by the jokes we were making together. If Dad was hearing us, he'd have felt better at our laughter than at our sorrow, which would have made him so uncomfortable. I think we really must try to find tidbits of humour in such dark times.

You may wonder what the difference is between my saying that we must find the humor hidden in our darkest moments, and our culture saying that we must be and act a certain way at a time of festival. The distinction is that to be told how to be and how to act is to be governed; it's obedience, much like a child doing what she's told. Hearing, "Tis the season to be jolly," and then playing along with everyone being jolly is vastly different from finding one's own *real* reasons for joy. *Being* whatever one is and then finding a way to live it through is what's truly important.

Christian tradition calls this time of year "Advent," which means "arrival," but theologically the word signifies the period of waiting and anticipation the soul feels for the coming of the Savior. Another sense of the word advent that encapsulates what I'm getting at today is "a coming into being or use."

We feel many different things in December every year – we feel festive, or nostalgic, or harried by all that must be done; we may be struggling with illness, or bursting at the seams from Christmas goodies. I rather hope that some of us might feel guilt about giving our children everything they want just because we have the money to, when so many around us don't have enough to give our children even what they *need*; some of us resent all the fuss. And, let's not forget that most of us feel a variety of such feelings, perhaps in a lovely jumble or maybe with painful conflict.

Whatever it is we feel right now, we can invest ourselves in the full experience of it. If Advent is waiting for what saves, let us *live* the waiting. Whatever form our

saving grace will take, it will come in its time and help release or move or heal us. If advent is a coming into being, let us open ourselves to what we are now, which will lead us to what we are meant to be. If advent is a coming into use, let us find in ourselves what gift we have that is most useful to the world; it is in us already, waiting to be born.

And when we witness in each other *this* miraculous birth will have reason to say, "Glory, Glory in the Highest!"

May it be so!