



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Let Every Heart Prepare,”
a sermon prepared by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
for December 15, 2013

Has anyone asked you lately, “Are you ready for Christmas?” I think what they mean is, “Have you done your shopping? Have you made your list and checked it twice?”

Last week I talked about a way to connect with the Christmas story of shepherds and angels and a baby born in a stable. I offered this thing called a second naiveté, a way to enter into the wonder and mystery and power of the story, without getting hung up on whether the facts are all empirically true.

This week I want us to reflect on how we prepare for Christmas--both the religious Christmas, and the cultural celebration. Advent is a time for preparation, and even if you said you don't celebrate the religious Christmas at all, my hunch is that you need to prepare yourself for Christmas. And I'm not talking about shopping or putting up lights. I'm talking about preparing your heart, making room for what Christmas asks of us.

There was a message going around Facebook this week, that said this:

“It's important to remember that not everyone is surrounded by large wonderful families. Some of us have problems during the holidays and sometimes are overcome with great sadness when we remember the loved ones who are not with us. And, many people have no one to spend these times with and are besieged by loneliness. We all need caring thoughts and loving prayer right now.”

If you've noticed a certain tone in today's service, especially in the hymns, it wasn't an accident. I don't think what we just sang is a bleak song, though it has that word in its title. But today I want us to take some time to tell the truth that this season is not all sweetness and light.

My hunch is that this season, and whatever holy days you celebrate, induces for most of us at least some bittersweet memories. How could it not? Our cultural image of Christmas is so romanticized, so idealized, that no family can live up to it. We each have our brokenness, our dysfunction, our disappointments and failures. When Christmas comes, how can we not think of those we have loved and lost?

So in addition to the happy Christmas carols that play continuously this time of year, I encourage you to make time for the melancholy that comes with this season. It might be Elvis singing “Blue Christmas,” it could be Joni Mitchell singing “I wish I had a river, I could skate away on,” or it

could be a some other music that helps you to be in touch with your sad side. I have a contemplative version version of “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear,” played on piano and violin, that I like to listen to this time of year. If you come to vespers this week, you’ll probably hear it.

You might ask, “Why should I make room for these dark emotions? Isn’t it better to just keep them buried, where they belong?”

You can try that. I certainly have. But in my experience, it doesn’t work. Those feelings need to come out, on way or another. If you find ways to experience them, they are a easier to deal with than when they show up uninvited.

For years I had this pattern, at some point on Christmas day, of feeling either sad or angry. I tried to keep this under control, and mostly did, but I didn’t understand why I felt this way on what’s supposed to be a happy day, given all the blessings I’ve known. It took some reflecting to understand that Christmas brought out those feelings because of a brokenness in my family that was never going to be fixed. This was about my dad, and how he’d made a mess of his life and cut himself off from all of us. Christmas day never failed to remind me of how sad this made me. But once I realized what was behind those feelings, I was better able to deal with them, better able to hold both the sorrow and the joy of that day.

The cultural Christmas emphasizes perfection. It’s a Norman Rockwell image of the family around the table, or children with their stockings by the fireplace. But our lives never reach perfection, and our families certainly don’t.

I know of a church that decided, one year, to intentionally lower the expectations they had of Christmas, and of each other. That year, they decided to have what they called, “a mediocre Christmas.” I don’t know exactly what they did to make it mediocre, but I appreciate the effort they made, to make less of an effort at being perfect. It sounds like a relief, doesn’t it?

So I encourage you, this Advent and this Christmas, to pay attention to what is real in your life, rather than chasing after the illusions that the cultural and commercial Christmas encourages. The illusion that you can buy happiness. The illusion that you can show someone how much you love them by how much money you spend. The illusion that more is always better.

I invite you to make room in your heart, in this season, by making room in your life. Make a cup of tea and sit by a window as the daylight fades to night. Put on some contemplative music and write in your journal, or write a letter to someone you won’t be with this Christmas. Take a walk, if you’re able, across this winter landscape we now inhabit.

Advent is a time that encourages intentional waiting. The poet we heard this morning keeps saying, “I am waiting,” and isn’t that a litany we could recite ourselves? “I am waiting, I am waiting.” You might be surprised by what you discover you are waiting for. It might be, like the poet, “a renaissance of wonder.”

The commercial Christmas doesn’t abide this kind of openhearted waiting--it says, “You can have it now--just ten easy payments!” The cultural Christmas, as lovely as it is, needs to be imbibed

carefully, because it is intoxicating, this image of a picture-perfect Christmas, and something that none of us can live up to.

The religious Christmas, by comparison, says God comes into the broken places. Think about the story. The child of God is born in a stable, surrounded by farm animals, to young parents far from home. Angels appear to shepherds, the working poor of their day. King Herod, threatened by the news of a new king, plots to find and kill the child.

Leonard Cohen put it this way. He sang:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

Theologian Gary Wills says “there is nothing in the Christmas narrative to make us turn the manger into a Disneyland scene... Saviors are found in the underground, outlawed, conspired against, and finally murdered. The good news always comes to us delivered by prophets and martyrs.”

“Why does Christmas lead so easily to despair?” Wills asks. “Because,” he says “Christmas heightens our memory and yearnings, our wish to love and be loved. It stretches our human capacities, often to a breaking point. Christmas is a dark and risky business: like falling in love, or beginning an adventure; like birth, sex, or death; like becoming flesh and dwelling among men.”

Next Sunday we act out the nativity story, in a beautifully imperfect way. Which is how it should be. For today, I want to leave you with words I read on Friday, from a blog post by a young woman named Laura Berol. Her essay is called, “Holy Days in Barren Places”:

“We celebrate the holidays with abundance if we’re able, but the holy day of Christmas is a remembrance of earthly lack as well as of heavenly bounty. Jesus’ nativity in the stable is God appearing in the place of small resources. There was scant shelter and assistance for that couple birthing their first child, but God’s arrival didn’t hinge on the sufficiency of anything except God.

“It can be the same for all of us who spend holidays in barren places.

“Our poverty, our sickness, our isolation are real. The Christmas story doesn’t erase our suffering, but it offers us the hope that the place of need is where divine love arrives.”¹

O come, O come, Emmanuel. Come, great Love, and be with us.

Amen.

¹ Laura Berol essay available online at <http://www.believeoutloud.com/latest/holy-days-barren-places>