

First Parish UU, Bridgewater
Worship Service – Soul Matters Theme: “Mystery”
Sunday, December 16, 2018 10:30am

Thought for Contemplation:

"It's the season of possible miracle cures
Where hope is currency and death is not the last unknown
Where time begins to fade
And age is welcome home"

—"The Atheist Christmas Carol" by Vienna Teng

Sermon “The Mystery of Christmas”, Rev. Paul Sprecher

There are times, I suspect, when many of us at this season might secretly like to imitate at least the feelings if not the words and deeds of one Ebenezer Scrooge; you know the story well, of course, as told by the eminent Unitarian theologian of Christmas, Charles Dickens, in *A Christmas Carol*:

Once upon a time—of all the good days in the year, on Christmas Eve—old Scrooge sat busy in his counting-house....

"A merry Christmas, uncle! God save you!" cried a cheerful voice. It was the voice of Scrooge's nephew, who came upon him so quickly that this was the first intimation he had of his approach.

"Bah!" said Scrooge, "Humbug!"

"Christmas a humbug, uncle!" said Scrooge's nephew. "You don't mean that, I am sure."

"I do," said Scrooge. "Merry Christmas! what right have you to be merry? what reason have you to be merry? You're poor enough."

"Come, then," returned the nephew gaily. "What right have you to be dismal? what reason have you to be morose? You're rich enough."

Scrooge having no better answer ready on the spur of the moment, said, "Bah!" again; and followed it up with "Humbug."

"Don't be cross, uncle," said the nephew.

"What else can I be" returned the uncle, "when I live in such a world of fools as this? Merry Christmas! Out upon merry Christmas! What's Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, and not an hour richer; a time for balancing your books and having every item in 'em through a round dozen of months presented dead against you? If I could work my will," said Scrooge, indignantly, "every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart. He should!"

"Uncle!" pleaded the nephew. "Nephew!" returned the uncle, sternly, "keep Christmas in your own way, and let me keep it in mine."

"Keep it!" repeated Scrooge's nephew. "But you don't keep it."

"Let me leave it alone, then," said Scrooge. "Much good may it do you! Much good it has ever done you!" "Good afternoon," [he added.]

"I want nothing from you; I ask nothing of you ; why cannot we be friends?"

"Good afternoon," said Scrooge.

"I'll keep my Christmas humour to the last. So A Merry Christmas, uncle!"

"Good afternoon!" said Scrooge.

"And A Happy New Year!"

"Good afternoon !" said Scrooge....

[The nephew is followed by gentlemen asking charity for the poor, and Scrooge turns them away, saying:]

"It's not my business," Scrooge returned. "It's enough for a man to understand his own business, and not to interfere with other

people's. Mine occupies me constantly. Good afternoon, gentlemen!"

The owner of one scant young nose, gnawed and mumbled by the hungry cold as bones are gnawed by dogs, stooped down at Scrooge's keyhole to regale him with a Christmas carol: but at the first sound of—

"God bless you merry gentleman!

May nothing you dismay!"

Scrooge seized the ruler with such energy of action, that the singer fled in terror, leaving the keyhole to the fog and even more congenial frost.

[As his clerk, Bob Cratchitt, is about to depart for the day, Scrooge resents the fact that he will take Christmas off *with pay*, no less. And though it is but once a year, he declaims:]

"A poor excuse for picking a man's pocket every twenty-fifth of December!" said Scrooge, buttoning his great-coat to the chin." But I suppose you must have the whole day. Be here all the earlier next morning!"¹

Well, it's surely fortunate that more of the world *doesn't* take the part of Scrooge, at least not openly! Scrooge was a banker, an entrepreneur, an exploiter – at least of Bob Cratchitt – a no-nonsense businessman. No surprise that there walk among us still many such Scrooges. Of course most of them know better than to go around saying "Bah, Humbug" – but there are other words that mean the same thing and are still in vogue. Scrooge probably thought that he was a self-made man, that he'd pulled himself up by his own bootstraps, and that he deserved every bit of gold that he hid in his secret chamber. He was a success, he thought to himself, because he worked hard. Anyone who wasn't successful –

not to mention poor! – had no one to blame but themselves. That attitude, too, is widely shared today.

Scrooge would have felt quite comfortable among the Puritan founders of our New England parishes, who – like Scrooge – frowned upon the celebration of Christmas. In fact, the celebration of Christmas was strictly forbidden in these parts by laws of our Commonwealth for about 150 years. The Puritans rejected the celebrating of Christmas because it reeked of popery – Christmas Masses – and it had pagan roots in Solstice celebrations and too many people celebrated by getting drunk. There was altogether too much wassailing for their tastes and beliefs. “Bah, Humbug!”

And then, along came the Unitarians, indulging in yet another heresy! The Unitarian Clement Clarke Moore penned “Twas the Night Before Christmas” in 1823 and established the image of St. Nicholas – Santa Clause – as a bringer of gifts for the holiday. Samuel Coleridge, he of the “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” who briefly served as a Unitarian minister in England,

...traveled to Germany one winter, and there he saw a ritual around a fir tree, where not only did the children receive gifts from their parents, but they also gave their parents gifts. He wrote:

There were eight or nine children, and the eldest daughter and the mother wept aloud for joy and tenderness; and the tears ran down the face of the father, and he clasped his children so tight to his breast it seemed as if he did it to stifle the sob that was rising within him. I was very much affected.

Coleridge loved how this tradition taught children about generosity and unselfishness, and his story about it was published in *The Christian Register*, the official Unitarian magazine of the time [in 1824]. This was one of the great answers to the Unitarian question—how do we teach generosity? This gift exchange among parents and children became part of the Christmas tradition, not only in Unitarian homes, but also in homes across the country.²

Rev. Charles Follen, an immigrant from Germany who became the minister of one of our Unitarian Churches in Lexington, introduced the custom of decorating a Christmas tree in 1832. And then of course there was Charles Dickens, who penned *A Christmas Carol* in 1843.

Scrooge's story doesn't end with "Bah, Humbug," of course. After that, in the night, the magic happens. A dream comes to him – perhaps better, a vision – in which he is transported back to the miseries of his own childhood, and forward to a miserable, lonely death despite all the gold he has accumulated, and then to the present, where the humble Bob Cratchitt is celebrating a Christmas feast with his family, who are sharing the kind of enjoyment and fun and happiness that Scrooge has banished from his own life. Converted by this dream, Scrooge begins to allow that magic to come into his own life as well by sharing and caring and giving rather than hoarding.

In this way, he experienced the possibility of magic and mystery and fulfillment – and love. The vision and its fulfillment came to him unbidden, in the midst of his truly impoverished life of "Bah, Humbug." In this way he

reconnected with the spirit of the child in each of us. Last month we shared the words of William Henry Channing in a unison reading, where he includes in the symphony he wants his life to be a commitment “To let the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious, grow up through the common.” In this way he pledges to open himself to that which comes of itself, unearned and mysterious but as real as the world of the counting house to which Scrooge confines himself.

One of my colleagues tells the story of how one of their children sees a star of particular brightness and – in her excitement and astonishment – tries to show it to her parents. They are preoccupied with grown-up things – paying bills, planning menus, finishing sermons – and brush her off. Finally, she gets in their faces and says, “You be glad on that star!” She’s asking them to leave “Bah, Humbug” behind and experience the magic of the star, which came unbidden in that moment, as did the vision of Scrooge that finally woke him up to wonder and gratitude and the mystery of love.

Stars, and dreams, and angels – these are the things of which the Christmas story and its celebration remind us. In this season, see if you can’t recover a little of the magic and mystery you hopefully experienced as a child, the simple expectancy – not just of gifts, but of shared love expressed in feasting and singing and sharing. See if you can’t still hear the bell that the hero of “The Polar Express” receives from Santa Claus on Christmas morning. Our Puritan forebears derided the pagan roots of the celebration of Christmas, but we can embrace them, finding that the primal fear evoked by the coming of winter

darkness can be overcome by celebration and joy in the company of others. You
be glad on that star!

Mary Oliver, in her Christmas poem “The World I Live In” says,

I have refused to live

locked in the orderly house of

reasons and proofs.

The world I live in and believe in

Is wider than that. And anyway,

what’s wrong with Maybe?

You wouldn’t believe what once or

twice I have seen. I’ll just

tell you this:

only if there are angels in your head will you

ever, possibly, see one.³

No more “Bah! Humbug!”

You be glad on that star!

AMEN

¹ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol, In Prose, Being a Ghost Story of Christmas*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1920 [original 1843], pp. 5-17 *passim*,

<http://books.google.com/books?id=WrlEAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA4#v=onepage&q=&f=false>

² Rev. Tracy Springberry, "A Unitarian Christmas," *Quest Magazine* 2013-12,

<https://www.questformeaning.org/spiritual-themes/a-unitarian-christmas/>

³ Mary Oliver *Felicity*, Penguin Press, 2015; <https://workthoughts.com/2015/12/24/the-world-i-live-in-a-poem-by-mary-oliver/>