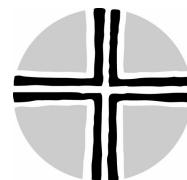


GOOD NEWS



November/December 2005

Advent

www.uuchristian.org

The Wise Men Go Home By Roger Butts, Davenport, IA

December 1997. It was the most significant Christmas of my life. Some things you should know. My father's family is from North Carolina. Since the early part of this century, the Butts have gathered all together for Christmas. When I was a kid there was no chance of missing that gathering in China Grove. Then, when my grandmother died, it shifted to Winston Salem. We were always there, and my immediate family lived in Illinois!

I haven't always made it back as an adult but I go when I can. In 1996, a year of divorce and heartache for me, I didn't go. But in 1997, I wanted --needed--to be with those people I love. On the 23rd, I was with my friends Jon and Tric, out here in Springfield Virginia celebrating the holiday season. Jon's parents, and second parents to me, were there. It was a good start to the season. When I got home that night, things got even better. My cousin Derek, who never calls, called from Richmond. Are you going to Winston Salem for Christmas? My cousin Derek is one of a kind. He's a seminarian who hung out with Sandra Bernhardt on Cape Cod one summer. He is working through movement therapy with addicted homeless people. He's a sculptor and a puppeteer. He oozes love. He, of course, the day before all of this is to happen, is calling for a ride home. I, of course, being no fool when an opportunity presents itself, said a hearty yes.



In Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus, we learn that after Jesus' birth, three wise men, three astrologers--Gentiles no less--are recently arrived in Jerusalem because a star has risen in such a way that they are convinced that a king of the Jews has been born. The account begins, essentially, with a question directed to no one in particular: Where is the child who has been born? We want to pay him homage they say. We don't know who they asked or if anyone particularly knew. But they must have been either persistent or loud, because we learn pretty quickly that King Herod grows disturbed. He calls a Cabinet meeting. Where is the Messiah to be born? In Bethlehem his court tells him.

Derek told me to meet him at a little downtown diner in Richmond. It was Christmas Eve. I picked up Derek. His hair, beard and stocking cap from Pakistan seemed one big invitation to call him Rabbi, Teacher. And so I did.

It was near midnight when we arrived in Winston. Derek excitedly remembered a beloved coffee shop. "Acoustic music around the clock, Roger. Let's go." It was closed--surprise--but we drove through Old Salem and came upon an old church, all lit up for Christmas Eve vespers. It was a Christmas card. We went to the door to hear the music. I don't know anymore what hymn was being sung, but Derek, as we turned around to head to the car, said, Good God look at that sky."

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Good News

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Christmas on Sunday

From Ron Robinson, Executive Director

This year Christmas falls again on a Sunday. On various ministerial email lists I am on, with colleagues of differing traditions, this convergence has been cause for hand-wringing about whether to hold worship and if so how to do so. The concerns are based on the probably pretty accurate assumption from past experience that rather than ancient Christmas fears of "no room in the inn" the contemporary fear is of "no one coming to the inn."

The previous time that Christmas fell on a Sunday, I was in the Unitarian Universalist church at Tahlequah, Oklahoma in our third year as a church. We felt it was important to not miss any Sunday, though we knew we would be fewer in number. It turns out that of the other downtown churches, ours was the only one that decided to have morning services.

There were 10 for worship including the paid accompanist. My wife and I were the last ones out, closing up and eager to get back to our children who had gone to their grandparents that morning. Before we could leave, however, a truck full of belongings pulled into the parking lot and a young man came into the church. He said he had driven straight through from Iowa, on his way south to start anew, and had detoured to Tahlequah to find the graves of some ancestors. He arrived in town Christmas morning, tired but hungry for food and mostly for companionship on this of all days, and had driven around and found everything was closed, except for us and the police station across the corner.

He said he didn't know anything about us except that the sign saying Unitarian Universalist sounded welcoming. I'd often complained, and still do, that the name was too much of a mouthful and mindful and marketing problem, but that morning it did what it was supposed to do—that, and the fact that a car was still there, a light was still on, and the doors were still unlocked. We sat down for cookies and cider and conversation and while we were there another young man came inside. He too had been out driving around that morning when he saw the car and truck and the lights on. He'd been in once before for an AA meeting. Another hour later and we each went on our way.

We were a new church in town. More than a few of the other churches at the time would put the word church in quotes when speaking or thinking of us. We were a theologically pluralistic UU church. Yet that morning, while others were closed, our church embodied Christmas, the birth of Christ, the incarnation of risk, presence, hospitality, going against the grain of religious and secular culture. It was a Bethlehem moment.

The UUCF is like that, too. And so at this seasonal moment, we invite you to help us be a presence in your world, in your unlikely places, with your unexpected people. Incarnate God! Start a new group! (Next month's column will be all about how people are doing that) Birth a new ministry, mission! Go on retreat or take some time during the rush and crush of the season to be still and know God, and

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“The Wise Men Go Home”

Continued from page one

After the bright lights of Christmas-time Old Salem, the dark, moonless sky was mystery, some kind of invitat

Herod, remember, is obsessed with this child. If three gentiles know about it, word is likely to spread and he apparently wasn't one for being out of the loop. "You're onto something, guys. Give me a report. Find out where this kid is so I can go pay homage too." The Wise Men find that star and are led by it. Overcome with joy, they find too the baby and Mary. The journey was worth it. They quickly offered up gold, frankincense and myrrh. Other than the gold part, I am a bit fuzzy about what all that means, but I take it that those gifts were valuable.

Derek and I leave Old Salem and arrive at his folks house, my Aunt Karolyn and uncle Gary. Gary answers the door in light blue pajamas, looking like he's had a long-ish Christmas Eve. Hugs and goodnights ensue. The next morning we build votives for the street and sidewalk. We help Gary round up some tables while he tells stories about how he got into ministry and how he happened upon his life's work --marriage and family development. It all started quite by accident. In the early afternoon Derek and I crossed a field and were in a part of North Carolina that you'd hardly think exists anymore--all red dirt and tin roofs and chickens in the yard.

Later, people started arriving for dinner. Soon all of the surviving Butts clan was together again. One cousin wanted desperately to go back to Japan and teach again. One cousin mentioned her class with Fred Chappell the novelist. She mentioned that she hated being an accountant during the day, a writer by night. But the show stopper was Uncle Archie, portable oxygen bag in hand. No one had been sure if he was going to make it to Christmas, let alone be strong enough to celebrate it with the family. After dinner the family sings carols around a piano. Aunt Helen plays the piano and her husband George stands next to her and leads the songs. Every year in the midst of the carolling they sing some song from like 1942, a love song that makes me happy to be alive. Archie cleared his throat and said, well I've written a song or two that I'd like to sing.

But, here's the thing about the wise men/astrologers. Remember they've been commissioned by Herod to bring back a report. What happens? Not only do stars appear for them with tidings of great joy, but dreams come their way with instructions to bail. They go home another way. Herod is left hanging. So the story begins with a question and ends with a kind of act of "civic disobedience". They knew a report to Herod would be the end of this infant they found under that star. So they took matters into their own hands. What should they have done? Who knows. but the story will lead to discussions of refugees and to infanticide. And in the midst of this proclamation of great joy, the birth of this beloved child, just a few verses removed, we get Rachel's lament:

A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted because they are no more.

Didn't Matthew know it was Christmas?

Uncle Archie sang his songs, and everyone in the house knew that this would be the last Christmas we would spend with that old minister. There were no dry eyes to be found. He had preached his last sermon to us, and we were better for it. Laughing, he named his favorite old Christmas song, the 12 Days of Christmas. So we sang. Derek and I were assigned 9 ladies dancing and the first time around we forgot that we were up. The second time we got the giggles when Derek whispered to me during 10 Lords a Leaping that it was best not to visualize any of the song. No good could come of it. After the party, my aunt Regina showed an old movie from the early 70s. There was my dad playing ping-pong and looking like he should maybe gain some weight. I was this little kid running around, over and under the table. Watching that tape, I felt his absence. He would have loved to have seen old Archie sing that song earlier in the evening.

Continued on page seven

Advent: A Time for Reflection and Prayer

What's your spiritual practice? How will you remember, honor and celebrate the birth of Christ? In the midst of the holiday season, how will you remember the ancient tale of God made flesh in the form of Jesus? For some, following the Christian lectionary is a discipline and practice that helps to keep us focused on the reason for the season. Below and on the following page is a list of lectionary passages through Christmas Eve and Day. Space constraints do not permit listing the entire quote; instead, I have edited down the lectionary reading to a couple of sentences at most.

*Some may choose to use this Scripture to practice *Lectio Divina*; the practice of **Reading** the text; **Reflecting** on the meaning; **Responding** to Scripture, and finally, **Resting** with the meaning of the text for you. Blessings to you and yours during the season of Advent—Epiphany.* —editor

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

November 27, 2005

Isaiah 64:1-9

Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

Ps. 80:1-7, 17-19

O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angered despite the prayers of your people? You have fed them with the bread of tears; you have given them bowls of tears to drink.

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Mark 13:24-37

Jesus said to his disciples, "In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 4, 2005

Isaiah 40:1-11

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

Psalms 85:1-2, 8-13

Truth shall spring up from the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven.

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day

Mark 1:1-8

He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 11, 2005

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor.

Psalms 126 or Luke 1:47-55

Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves

1 Thess. 5:16-24

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

John 1:6-8, 19-28

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you?"

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 18, 2005

2 Sam. 7:1-11, 16

Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?"

Ps. 89:1-4, 19-26

Your love, O LORD, for ever will I sing; from age to age my mouth will proclaim your faithfulness. For I am persuaded that your love is established for ever; you have set your faithfulness firmly in the heavens.

Romans 16:25-27

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith-- to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen.

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

CHRISTMAS EVE & DAY

December 24 & 25, 2005

Isaiah 9:2-7

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness-- on them light has shined.

Psalms 96

Sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the whole earth.

Titus 2:11-14

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.



While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!*"

The miracle of Christmas is that, like the distant and very musical voice of the hound, it penetrates finally and becomes heard in the heart. It is not destroyed by all the arts and craftiness of the commercializers, having an essential simplicity that is everlasting and triumphant at the end of the confusion. This week, many will be reminded that no explosion of atoms generates so hopeful a light as the reflection of a star on a pasture road. It is there we perceive Christmas--and the sheep quiet and the world waiting.

—E. B. White

From Cry Like a Bell by Madeleine L'Engle

God did not wait till the world was ready
Till...nations were at peace.
God came when the Heavens were unsteady
And prisoners cried out for release.

God did not wait for the perfect time.
God came when the need was deep and great.
God dined with sinners in all their grime
Turned water into wine. God did not wait

Till hearts were pure. In joy God came
To a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame,
God came, and God's Light would not go out.

God came to a world which did not mesh
To helia its tangles, shield its scorn,
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
The Maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane
To riase our songs with joyful voice
For to share our grief, to touch our pain
God came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!



Christmas on Sunday continued from page two

get in touch with the spirit of God leaping for joy within you!
Tell someone about this Good News! Surprise yourself by giving
a God-sized gift! For you have received one.

Constantly I hear from people (new to UU, life-long UUs, semi-narians) who have never heard of us before, of what we represent in the world. They haven't received the riches of our past, or the abundance of our spirit breaking out in so many ways today. And then I think of Mary during this season. How there is a time for the ponderings of the heart, a time for journeys on our own, a time of singing by ourselves, and yet finally a time for giving birth and nurture and changing the world for all time to come.

Come Sunday morning this Christmas, wherever you are, may you have a Bethlehem experience to share.

Rev. Ron Robinson, Executive Director

For St. John the Evangelist Day, Third Day of Christmas, Dec. 27

John is a man of the heart rather than the head, and his knowledge was derived from feeling rather than from fact; he is a man for this rising generation which has declared for sensitivity-training instead of mathematics and philosophy, and he could become their patron. You might say Jesus blew John's mind, that he was a turned-on Christian: wild, man, wild....Perhaps it is true that the Age of Enlightenment which ushered in this present Age of Science has kept us too closely bound to reason and so deeply mired in the muddy facts that our hearts are withered and our eyes so fastened on the ruts of progress that we have not looked up to the visions of beauty around us and beyond....At the time of the crucifixion, Jesus looked down at his sorrowing mother, so runs the account, and at John of the loving heart: "Mother," he said, "Behold thy son!" and "Son," he said, "Behold thy Mother." thus he put together a new kind of family, a society joined by deep feeling. It had nothing to do with historical birth records, with budgets, with common goals and shared philosophy: it was a matter of love. To be like John one day of the year can do us no harm. On this Third Day of Christmas let us love one another, for love is of God. *from "For Everything There Is A Season: Meditations for the Christian Year" by the late Rev. Wallace W. Robbins, first published by the UUCF in 1978 and reprinted in 1986-87 as Vol. 41, No. 4 of the UU Christian Journal*

"The Wise Men Go Home" *Continued from page three*

In the Lukan account, it is not wise men or astrologers, but shepherds. They don't see a star, rather they are visited by angels who tell them to not be afraid. That they were bringing good news of great joy. The shepherds are told to go find a child wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. Magi, wise men, star, angel. Doesn't much matter really. Oh, there are things we could say about why perhaps Luke chose shepherds. But why? Either way, something mysterious broke through to people going about doing the work of their every day life, watching the stars, tending the flock. They moved. They followed and searched. They believed. They offered up gifts and praise. And then what? The wise men, the shepherds go home.

On the way out of town, after this wonderful time with my family, a rare snow storm came through North Carolina. I slowed down, the wind and the snow creating a kind of mid-afternoon white out. Just then, I heard the NPR news-caster say: Terry Sanford, former Senator, Governor, and President of Duke University, has been diagnosed with inoperable cancer of the liver. He will be admitted to Duke Medical Center tomorrow but it is unclear what treatments might be available." Just five or six days earlier I had received a note from him addressed to all his former Hill staffers with the following words: "You were a remarkable group. As you each continue, I hope you will always remember that you were associated with a group that set high standards, ethically and intellectually, for themselves and their organization. And reflect too that there is an aging Democrat in Durham that gets daily pleasure just by thinking of you, and who loves you all."

Didn't that announcer know this was Christmas?

Christmas, A. Powell Davies used to say, always starts at midnight. I had just spent three incredible days with gifted and energetic Derek. I had just experienced the joy of reconnecting with my family, rooted again in their unconditional love. You can understand the shock of being reminded that there are snow storms that slow you down, even in the piedmont of North Carolina. And that there is change, change that includes endings (my father's absence felt huge; Archie was sick; now Senator Sanford, my former boss, was dying). Once I was in Little Five Points in Atlanta and bought a card that said: Before Enlightenment, Chopping Wood. After Enlightenment, Chopping Wood. A part of the journey, whether to the child or to North Carolina is the return home. A snow storm in North Carolina. The killing of the infants just after the celebrated birth. Rachel's lament. But here it is: If we live in that moment when mystery breaks through, we open ourselves to epiphany. New eyes to see. A moment of transcending the daily-ness of existence. We are changed and reconnected and we offer up our gifts. We come to a greater appreciation, a greater love, for those around us, those who have nurtured and sustained us. Hope amidst darkness. An angel, a star, a child. A trip home, and loss. Before and after enlightenment, chopping wood. Christmas always begins at midnight. —Roger Butts, *Davenport, IA*



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