

Kearsarge Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Sunday, December 10, 2023
Martha Woodward. Speaker

Opening Words

#543 "Winter" by Greta Crosby

Let us not wish away the winter.
It is a season in itself,
Not simply the way to spring.

*When trees rest, growing no leaves, gathering no light,
They let in sky and trace themselves delicately against dawns and sunsets.*

The clarity and brilliance of the winter sky delight.
The loom of fog softens edges, lulls the eyes and ears of the quiet,
Awakens by risk the unquiet.
A low dark sky can snow, emblem of individuality, liberality, and aggregate power.
Snow invites to contemplation and to sport.

Winter is a table set with ice and starlight.

Winter dark tends to warm light: fire and candle;
Winter cold to hugs and huddles; winter want to gifts and sharing;
Winter danger to visions, plans, and common endeavoring —
And the zest of narrow escapes; winter tedium to merrymaking.

*Let us therefore praise winter,
Rich in beauty, challenge, and pregnant negativities.*

Opening Hymn #231 Angels We Have Heard on High

Words for Reflection Tom Durley 17th century,
Dramatist, friend of Charles 11

All hail to the days that merit more praise
Than all of the rest of the year
And welcome the nights that double delights
As well for the poor as the peer!
Good fortune attend each merry man's friend
That doth but the best that he may,

Forgetting old wrongs with carols and songs
To drive the cold winter away.

Hymn 225 O Come, O Come Emmanuel

Sermon:" To Drive the Cold Darkness Away"

An 8th century Latin poem, a Great Wind, by an
Irish writer begins

" White squalls from the north, amazing to behold,
Scare us with sudden gusts and threats of cold.
Earth itself shakes, fearing to be so blown
Old ocean mutters and the hard rocks groan.
The unruly north wind hollows the vast air,
Its hoarse voice now whines here, now bellows there....
The sun, which lately shone with dazzling blaze,
First dims his beams, then wholly hides his face."

Ancient rituals around the solstice had fire, drum beats,
songs and dances to save people from the cold and
darkness and to bring back light and life.

The church practiced evangelism through music,
substituting the Christian story and recasting
pagan symbols and fertility rites.

*"Good news! You're not going to freeze now.
God gave us a baby to sacrifice!"*

The imagery in early medieval poems and songs
is very mixed: stars in the heavens, pure virgins,
sacrifice, holy plants, death and hell.

"Good news..this baby saves us!"

From? Death? Hell? What did we do to
cause the darkness, The End?
Have Adam's fall and human sin doomed us?

The baby Jesus redeems us!

A lot of late medieval poetry is love poetry
about perfection and purity of The Lady.
The same language is used in hymns about Mary.

Here are the lyrics of a Christmas folk hymn:

A virgin most pure, as the prophets do tell,
Hath brought forth a baby, as it hath befell,
To be our redeemer from death, hell and sin,
Which Adam's transgression hath wrapped us in.

Advent was originally a season of penance which filled up the calendar in an agrarian society. There were songs and chants about longing for redemption like the one that has come down to us as O Come, O come, emmanuel (the UU words leave this out!)

Let's sing a carol first written down in the 15th century, but a bit older..you'll see it on your program insert. I'll play the song once, and we all can sing it.

This Endris Night

Now let's do a more cheerful modern folk carol,

The Sussex Carol

There are many nature songs, many about trees, and many early carols were danced as well as sung. The Holly and the Ivy were originally symbols in a fertility dance. The men (the holly) would approach the women (the ivy). Both plants are eternal in that they both stay green in winter. The Christian message supplanted the original lyrics.

The Holly and the Ivy

Birds and animals featured in many songs, including conversations between them about the baby in the manger which tell the Christmas story in very familiar language. There are a lot of French ones, and here's one we know:

#233 Bring a Torch, Jeanette, Isabella

Flowers feature in many songs, symbols of spring. The rose became a mystical representation of The Virgin, perfect in beauty. Let's sing one That is more modern and a *composed* Christmas song

Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming

I want to remind us that this in time of year, cold and dark still affects us. Many people become depressed, and world news and life circumstances can make it worse. We have festivities which come from old traditions, but we've lost the consolation of the promise of redemption and Heaven.

Many of us with no family or bad memories of family gatherings are very aware of what "might have been."

A modern anodyne is the Hallmark Channel Christmas movie. There are a few plots with lots of clones. Most of them contain specific nostalgia elements. There must be: A tree: shopping for a tree, making decorations together and cheerfully trimming the tree. There is hot chocolate and cookie making, nut crackers, ice skating and perhaps a sleigh or horseback ride, stuffy in-laws who reconcile after a grand Ball replete with Cinderella gowns and mistletoe, for these stories end with a kiss. Soft background music of carols creates a hypnotic effect. We can vicariously gather around a fire and eat and drink and sing with friends. These fantasy tv movies are about the hope of happy relationships. They suggest holiday memories but through a hazy lens.

A temporary fix, but maybe not enough to permanently dispel the gloom. I propose that the best way to dispel any seasonal blues is to help someone else, however we find to do this, to be grateful and remember the kindness and good things about people in our pasts and present.

I'm thankful for dinging together, and here's a fun modern nativity song:

Mary Had a Baby

Our **closing hymn** is

God rest ye Merry, Gentlemen

Closing words #719 by George Eliot

Excerpted from *The Choir Invisible*

O May I join the choir invisible

Of those immortal dead who live again

In minds made better by their presence:

*Live in pulses stirr'd to generosity,
In deeds of daring rectitude, in scorn
For miserable aims that end with self,
In thoughts sublime that pierce the night like stars,
And with their mild persistence urge man's search
To vaster issues.*

*So to live is heaven:
To make undying music in the world,
Breathing as beauteous order that controls
With growing sway the growing life of [hu]man[ity].*

.....
That better self shall live till human Time
Shall fold its eyelids, and the human sky
Be gather'd like a scroll within the tomb.....

*This is life to come,
Which martyred [souls] have made more glorious
For us who strive to follow*

May I reach that purest heaven, be to other souls
The cup of strength in some great agony,
*Enkindle generous ardor, feed pure love,
Beget the smiles that have no cruelty,*
Be the sweet presence of a good diffus'd,
And in diffusion ever more intense!
*So shall I join the choir invisible
Whose music is the gladness of the world.*