

**WINTER REVELATIONS #3**  
**WILL THE NEW LIFE IN YOU MAKE LIFE BETTER?**  
Rev. Jack Donovan – Unitarian Universalist Church  
St. Petersburg, Florida - 12/24/17

**READINGS** (printed below, after sermon)

**Gathering**     *Cannot Discover Self Without Discovering...*, Dream of the Earth, Thomas Berry  
**Invocation**    *We Come Together This Morning*, Rev. Kathleen McTigue, UU Hymnal #435  
**Meditation**    *For So the Children Come*, Rev. Sophia Lyon Fahs, UU Hymnal #616  
**Readings**       *The Spirit of Christmas Past*, Charles Dickens, A Christmas Carol  
                          *Who Shall Ascend*, Annie Dillard, Holy the Firm  
                          *You Are the Light of the World*, The Gospel According to Matthew, chapter 5

**SERMON**

Our church building needs occasional repair and renovation so we may use it at its full potential. This week Tom of the Building and Grounds Committee dealt with some wiring and fuses so that the lights in Gilmour Hall could function, especially in this darkened season of dying and reborn light. His work raised an ancient question: How many Unitarian Universalists does it take to change a light bulb? You can ask Tom about his way – but the standard procedure for many Unitarian Universalists is that we do not try to change a lightbulb unless we determine that it wants to be changed. Of course, that kind of attitude can leave people in the dark.

This is the Unitarian problem that Charles Dickens, as a recent member of London’s Unitarian Church, dealt with in A Christmas Carol – how does one turn on the light within people, especially if life has left them benighted? Is the distribution of the light all predestined or are there neglected switches that can be turned on, alternative to a boy always being left abandoned in a boarding school over Christmas holidays?

For Ebenezer Scrooge, there had been alternative choices even within his power, and there still were – but it took the spirit of Christmas to reveal them – first, through people seeking charity for others, then through calling one’s own purposes into account, then through seeing his gains or losses due to his own choices, and finally through receiving persistent unexpected kindness that stirred a sense of the worth of others and a sense of the possibilities of love. There and

then, the spirits of the season entered in and the light of a man was turned on and his expectations of himself and the world were changed.

NPR this past week interviewed a research psychologist, Chinese born, but trained at the doctoral level in the U.S. He had studied the Chinese view that those born in the Year of the Dragon (every twelfth year) will have much greater success than those born in other years. His basic statistical analysis showed that it was true, not just a superstition. But the cause of success turned out not to be some spiritual characteristic of the year itself. The cause was the influence of the expectation of success, which influence was to increase nurturant behavior by others, especially parents. Because of the expectation of great things, we make preparations to achieve them. So much of who you become depends on the expectations of others about who you are and their response to that. So much of what others become depends on the expectations you have about who they are and your response to that. And, unendingly, so much of who you become depends on what you expect of yourself.

Because it is Christmas season, I have been thinking about the expectations into which Jesus was born and grew up. He was to save his people (from their covenant-breaking ways and from their spirit-breaking oppression). He was to be their messiah. He was to prove that “God is with us” by showing himself to be the heir to the throne of King David and reestablishing its domain for all time.

In a way that no one expected (or consciously wanted, or knew they needed), he achieved it all – much like the Buddha. Both lived up to prophesied expectations of spiritual blessedness, both with the support of their culture and disciples and passionate commitment.

There’s a naughty old vaudeville joke about Jesus and Mary – every Jewish mother thinks her son is the messiah, and every Jewish boy thinks his mother is a virgin. Okay – forgive me, already. But think - what if we recognized the messiah in every child. What if every child were born into a Year of the Dragon – an heir to vast creative power – born of the holy spirit?

Some creeds say we are undeserving. Other creeds say, Feed the children. And what would have finally been the lot of Ebenezer Scrooge if the youthful ageless spirit of Christmas Past had not said to him in full confidence, “Rise and walk with me”? “Rise and walk” – the same words Jesus used with the crippled man on the

stretcher. The spirit expected Ebenezer to rise and walk, and so he did, even though it meant walking through his own walls and walking on the thin dark night air.

As a counter example, Who has heard of the singer-songwriter Dory Previn? Who has heard of musician-composer Andre Previn? They were married and worked together, both winning Academy Awards and Grammys. I'm not sure what the difference in name recognition means with two such talented people. But Dory wrote a song in 1974 called "Did Jesus Have a Baby Sister?" which I think speaks to the idea of expectations predicting outcomes. She wrote,

Did Jesus have a baby sister? Was she bitter? Was she sweet?  
Did she wind up in a convent? Did she end up on the street?  
On the run? On the stage? Did she dance?  
Did he have a sister? A little baby sister? Did Jesus have a sister? Did they give her a chance?

Did she long to be the savior Saving everyone She met?  
And in private to her mirror Did she whisper Saviolette?  
Saviorwoman? Saviorperson? Save your breath!

When Jesus looks at the multitude drawn by his light and he turns it around and says to them, "You are the light of the world," what do you think he is saying? I think he is saying, "You – everyone, man, woman, child, have the power, the inner potential, to find the way and to show it to people, and to help them see that they too have the light within, the power to do all things gloriously – to repair the breakage of the world, to bind up the wounded, to create heaven on earth, even to see that it is already here, awaiting us. I'm guessing that this is what the Spirit of Christmas Present means when he roars, "Come, get to know me better, man!"

Of course, unborn babies know little of this in the womb. Romantics have said, Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting: The Soul that rises in us... cometh from afar... trailing clouds of glory... from the One, who is our home." But our science tells us that from conception babies begin to grow until at some point, before they know anything, they feel everything through the chemistry of their mother's body - hormones, nutrients, alcohol, nicotine, chemicals of elation, of depression, of fear, of love. Lucky the babies whose parents have grown from "me" to "us" and blessed the children who grow up seeing it lived.

So how many UUs does it take to change a light bulb? At this stage, the answer changes to “It takes all of them. One to hold the bulb, the rest to turn the world around.” But also at this stage, the answer may be not zero, and it may not be “all of them” The answer might be, “Just one.” This is the answer you give when you have learned to turn your own light on, and to nurture its magnification, as Mary put it, to bless everything.

Our congregation is full of people with these last two answers, that it takes all of us and that it takes each one of us to turn on new light. I feel like every day is Christmas around here. One good thing and one good person after another. Tom and Reggie are not the only persons turning on the light. Howard and Tee are not the only ones making sure we are not too hot and not too cold. Kevin and Sue are not the only ones making sure we are fed. Patti and Dave are not the only ones making sure every member is made to feel the warmth. Paul and Lori are not the only ones making sure this is a safe home. Laurie and Jeri are not the only ones making sure our space is neat and clean and appealing.

My list is much longer, but my time is short – but you get the idea. There are countless people who are adding special value to our community of all souls and feeling good about it themselves! We are a lucky group, and to paraphrase Mae West, luck has little to do with it.

So in the end, what does the scientific spiritual naturalism of Jesus, Buddha, and Unitarian Universalism expect of us? Is it not to live and act out of the neocortex of our brains – our upper and foremost minds - and to help all the newborn babies to do the same from their first breath and to help all the newborn spirits from the time of their first awakening.

Is it not to be patient with yourself and everyone, to detach from compulsive fear or desire, to crave not that ye be not crazed, to draw extra breaths of oxygen for the fire of commitment and the warmth of kindness? Is it not to hallow this place and our beings by being aware of one another and grateful? That is the sacrament of communion, which life requires of us if our lives are to be good.

Who will ascend the holy mountain and prepare the newborn to be lifted up? Who will help Earthkind open to receive the light, the energy, the grace that empowers all? Who will raise in us the expectation of fulfilling every potential of heart and soul and mind and strength as they are renewed with every solstice and equinox of our days? Who will be the light?

## READINGS

**Gathering**     *Cannot Discover Self Without Discovering...*, Dream of the Earth, Thomas Berry

We cannot discover ourselves without first discovering the universe, the earth, and the imperatives of our own being. Each of these has a creative power and a vision far beyond any rational thought or cultural creation of which we are capable. Nor should we think of these as isolated from our own individual being or from the human community. We have no existence except within the earth and within the universe.

**Invocation**     *We Come Together This Morning*, Rev. Kathleen McTigue, UU Hymnal #435

We come together this morning to remind one another  
to rest for a moment on the forming edge of our lives,  
*where we may resist the headlong tumble into the next moment,*  
*claim for ourselves awareness and gratitude,*  
*take time to look into one another's faces and see there communion,*  
*the reflection of our own eyes.*  
This is a house of laughter and silence, memory and hope.  
*It is hallowed by our presence together.*

**Meditation**     *For So the Children Come*, Rev. Sophia Lyon Fahs, UU Hymnal #616

For so the children come, and so they have been coming.  
*Always in the same way they come, born of the seed of man and woman.*  
No angels herald their beginnings. No prophets predict their future courses.  
*No wisemen see a star to show where to find the babe that will save humankind.*  
Each night a child is born is a holy night,  
*Fathers and mothers – sitting beside their children's cribs –*  
*feel glory in the sight of a new life beginning.*  
They ask, "Where and how will this new life end? Or will it ever end?"  
*Each night a child is born is a holy night –*  
*a time for singing, a time for wondering, a time for worshipping.*

## Readings

*The Spirit of Christmas Past*, Charles Dickens, [A Christmas Carol](#)

“Rise and walk with me” said the Spirit of Christmas past. As the words were spoken, they passed through the wall, and stood upon an open country road. The city had entirely vanished. “Good Heaven!” said Scrooge. “I was bred in this place. I was a boy here!” Jocund travelers came on; and as they came, Scrooge knew and named them every one. Why was he rejoiced beyond all bounds to see them? Why was he filled with gladness when he heard them give each other merry Christmas? What was merry Christmas to Scrooge? Out upon merry Christmas! What good had it ever done to him?

“Ah,” said the Ghost. “Your old school is not quite deserted for the holiday. A solitary child, neglected by his friends, is left there still.” Scrooge said he knew it. And he sobbed. At one of the forms a lonely boy was reading near a feeble fire; and Scrooge sat down upon a form, and wept to see his poor forgotten self as he had used to be.

*Who Shall Ascend*, Annie Dillard, [Holy the Firm](#)

Who shall ascend unto the hill of the Lord?  
or who shall stand in that holy place?  
There is no one but us.  
There is no one to send, nor a clean hand,  
nor a pure heart on the face of the earth,  
nor in the earth –  
but only us,  
a generation comforting ourselves with the notion  
that we have come at an awkward time.  
There is only us.

*You Are the Light of the World*, [The Gospel According to Matthew](#), chapter 5

You are the light of the world.  
Let your light shine before others  
so they may see your gracious work  
and appreciate the gracious Source of light that is in you and all.

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