

# “On a Night Like This”

Rev. Shawn Newton  
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
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It was a sight to behold.

For blocks and blocks, carloads of onlookers  
wended their way through the streets  
of some of the grandest homes in Dallas, Texas.

They came, night after night, to see the dazzling display of Christmas lights.

These homeowners put on quite the show.  
Sometimes to be ostentatious.  
Sometimes to compete with the display next door.  
And sometimes, it seemed, as an outright act of faith.

I lived in that neighbourhood—not in one of the grand mansions,  
but in the tiny carriage house apartment  
tucked behind one of the more modest homes.

And, so in December, walking around the neighbourhood at night  
to see the Christmas lights twinkling in the trees  
also involved looking out  
at a sea of tail lights and head lights from the cars  
stalled in bumper-to-bumper traffic on the typically quiet streets.

The one house I most vividly recall—  
some twenty years later—was on *Armstrong Avenue*.

It was one of the grandest homes in the entire city.

Out front, they had a full-sized crèche,  
complete with living, breathing human beings filling out the tableau.

This wasn't one of those plastic manger scenes,  
with a light bulb tucked inside Mary and Joseph and the magi  
to make them turn into glow-in-the-dark mannequins.

This wasn't even a rag-tag bunch of church volunteers standing outside in their bath robes and sandles and fake beards.

No, this was the real deal, or at least meant to come pretty darn close.

There was an elaborate wooden shed, stocked with bales of hay.

Though it was meant to conjure a humble cattle stall, the shed was at least twice the size of my apartment just down the street!

And, there, inside that shed, each evening at nightfall, Mary and Joseph and a few angels with wiry, silken wings and flowing blond wigs would take their places around a manger filled with straw.

I still don't know to this day whether the Christ child was a doll or an actual baby brought in from central casting.

What I am pretty sure of, though, was that on Christmas Eve, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir was likely booked to burst out, at the appointed moment, into a stirring rendition of the "Hallelujah Chorus."

No detail had been overlooked. No cost spared.

But I do have to wonder how the city's ordinances were enforced later that night, when the shepherds arrived with their flocks, roaming over and across the manicured lawns of Highland Park. . .

But as amazing as this whole spectacle was—and who knows, maybe still is!—what I've told you isn't even the most remarkable part.

What was most stunning was how Santa Claus fit into the scene.

There, before the infant Jesus, Santa, the red-suited, overgrown elf knelt down in humbled awe, with his hat in his hand.

Along the ground, nearby, was a well-lighted sign that read: "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,

in heaven and on earth...”

The passage comes from Paul’s *Epistle to the Philippians*.

With Santa there, down on one knee, the message was unmistakably clear.

Whenever I’ve heard heated chatter in recent years about the “War on Christmas,” I’ve thought back to that strange scene unfolding nightly on Armstrong Avenue.

It frankly just felt overblown, like much of the rhetoric that fills the news this time of year.

Now, fortunately, the rhetoric about such a War on Christmas isn’t nearly as heated or politicized in Canada as it is south of the Border.

But, with predictable timing, there’s been a round of fresh articles printed this week in our city’s papers decrying the creeping influence of commercial, capitalist Christmas and the decline of the influence of traditional Christianity in a country growing ever more secular and ever more diverse.

To so much of that, I say, “Bah Humbug.”

To be sure, there is an unresolved tension about what we, in our culture, are actually doing—what we’re truly celebrating on December 25<sup>th</sup>.

My colleague Peter Boullata, who was once a member of this congregation, has recently summed up this tension in a conversation he’s sparked in the Unitarian Universalist blogosphere.

He has pointed out that there are two distinct holidays celebrated on December 25<sup>th</sup>.

“One,” he says, “is the twelve-day Christian feast of the Nativity, celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ.

It begins with a vigil on the evening of December 24 and runs through until the feast of the Epiphany on January 6.

It is a time of feasting and merry-making, singing carols and visiting family and friends.

“As a sign of God’s generously giving himself to the world in Jesus, gifts are exchanged, and the poor are served by the more fortunate. This twelve-day holiday is preceded by four weeks of introspection [known as Advent] in anticipation of the arrival of Christ.

“The other celebration on December 25,” he says, “is a consumer-capitalist holiday which, although it is dipped in the flavor of the religious holiday, has only its aroma.

“This secular ‘holy’ day makes some reference to generosity, but mostly in the guise of buying and giving consumer goods. It, too, has habits of feasting and merry-making. It generally begins after Halloween and ends abruptly on December 25.

“Many people,” he adds, “find it confusing that both holidays are called ‘Christmas.’”

I very much appreciate Peter’s point, but I would like to build on it by arguing that there are *at least* two holidays, if not many, many more—called Christmas.

I don’t think the whole matter can be so neatly divided up into Christian Christmas and Cultural, or Commercial Christmas.

The truth is there’s an awful lot in-between, and there pretty much always has been.

From its very beginning, Christmas has been in a constant state of change.

While traditions have emerged and evolved through the centuries—in families, in different cultures, and in various religious traditions—no one has ever—ever!—held a lock on what Christmas is, or what Christmas could be.

Christmas, from its very beginning has been a mish-mash, a hodge-podge of both the sacred and the secular.

Christian Christmas wasn’t even settled until the fourth century,

and then it was blatantly built right on top of the foundations of the Pagan Solstice celebrations that marked the birth of Mithras, the ancient sun god, called the Light of the World, who also happened to be born to a virgin in a cave on December 25<sup>th</sup>.

Down the centuries, Christmas has meant many different things, even to Christians.

During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it was banned outright by the Puritans in England—our direct religious ancestors—because it had become such a rowdy season of excess and revelry.

It seems Christmas at that time had little to nothing to do with Jesus, which is, of course, the same complaint made today by those calling everyone to put Christ back into Christmas.

From the very beginning, there's always been some struggle to actually keeping him in Christmas. . .

There was something of a design flaw from the very beginning.

If the goal was a pristine religious holiday, the bishops of the early church would have done well to avoid piggybacking on Pagan festivals.

Now, to be fair, there are many Christians, of course, down through time and around the world, who have created many wonderful and meaningful ways to mark the birth of Jesus.

And, it is true, that what has emerged as the consumer spending frenzy of commercial Christmas is a pretty odd and often appalling way to celebrate the birth of a poor, homeless child in Palestine.

What would be great, though, is if we could embrace Christmas, not as some perfectly pure tradition to be fiercely protected, but as the blessed and sometimes baffling mix of stories and rituals it is and always has been.

I love how the cartoonist, G. Wagner sums it up:

“Christmas is just plain weird.

What other time of year do you sit in front of a dead tree in the living room and eat candy out of your socks?"

Though Christmas takes many and often contradictory forms, I believe that embedded in all of it, even much of the crass over-commercialization, is some sacred spark we are still searching for a way to glimpse or to grasp.

We call it the Christmas Spirit.

The most jaded amongst us might argue that it's manufactured.

But I do believe it is real.  
Because I've spotted it often enough to know I want more of it.

It can prove elusive, but we know we've found it when that tell-tale lump forms in our throat or our eyes begin suddenly to water.

It is, I believe, what each of us most wants and hopes for at this time of year, whether we're really able to put that desire into words or not.

We hope for the radical in-breaking of peace and joy and love—the outside possibility that things really could be different, every day—that love could overcome and joy prevail, that peace could, just maybe, reign on this earth and even in our hearts.

And, so we go out seeking, in these darkest days of the year, for some shining light, for that ineffable thread that runs from the earliest human looking up to behold the wonder of the night sky, to a manger in Bethlehem, to all that we know of Santa and the growing heart of The Grinch, to this quiet moment, here in this sanctuary.

Perhaps we wonder, even now, if we will find it, if we will feel it this year before it is too late, before Boxing Day kicks in and the hope-filled contemplations of this silent night fade away.

But, the Spirit of Christmas is more  
than a haphazard search for a warm and fuzzy feeling.

It is a possibility.  
A possibility that can't be bought or simply found.  
But, instead, a sacred possibility that must be seriously entertained.

The need for that possibility seems ever more pressing this year,  
in a world filled with such strife and heartbreak.

That's why I think we so desperately need the possibility  
of taking Christmas,  
that it might take hold of us—  
grabbing us by the lapels to shake us awake, to stir us awake to life.

The great English writer G. K. Chesterton,  
in describing his evolving relationship with Santa,  
beautifully sums up how he seriously entertained  
the possibility that comes with Christmas:

What has happened to me[, he wrote,]  
has been the very reverse of what appears to be  
the experience of most of my friends.

Instead of dwindling [down] to a [fine] point,  
Santa Claus has grown larger and larger in my life  
until he fills almost the whole of it.

It happened in this way.  
As a child I was faced with a phenomenon requiring explanation.

I hung up at the end of my bed an empty stocking,  
which in the morning became a full stocking.

I had done nothing to produce the things that filled it.  
I had not worked for them, or made them or helped to make them.  
I had not even been good—far from it.

And the explanation was that a certain being  
whom people called Santa Claus

who was benevolently disposed toward me. . . .

What we believed was that a certain benevolent agency  
did give us those toys for nothing.

And, . . . I believe it still. I have merely extended the idea.

Then I only wondered who put the toys in the stocking;  
now I wonder who put the stocking by the bed,  
and the bed in the room, and the room in the house,  
and the house on the planet, and the great planet in the void.

Once I only thanked Santa Claus for a few dollars and crackers.  
Now, I thank him for stars . . . and wine and the great [blue] sea.

Once I thought it delightful and astonishing to find a [gift] so big  
that it only went halfway into [my] stocking.

Now I am delighted and astonished every morning [as I get dressed]  
to find a [gift] so big that it takes two stockings to hold it,  
and then leaves [such] a great deal outside;  
it is the large and preposterous present of myself,  
as to the origin of which I can offer no suggestion  
except that Santa Claus gave it to me  
in a fit of . . . fantastic goodwill.

That deep gratitude for the generosity of life itself  
is to me key to catching the Christmas Spirit.

If there is a battle to be fought in this season,  
I believe it is a battle against cynicism—  
against the hardening of ungrateful hearts,  
against the perils of indifference in a world of want.

May we, then, open ourselves to the promise of a night like this.

May our hearts be broken open by love and joy,  
that they might be filled to overflowing  
with the possibility of peace and abundant, glorious life.

Amen.