

## **Reclaiming the Concept of Christ**

*A sermon by Wendy Dennis originally presented at the Wakefield UU Church on December 12, 2010*

Stars and Shepherds, Watchmen and Christmas Bells, Heavenly Peace, Peace on Earth, the holiness of all birth, a gift of the heart, and even a bit about Santa...So, besides Christmas, what is today's Service all about?

My original description was a "service full of Christmas music and thoughts about the spiritual message behind the story of Jesus, from the radical hope of pagan origins that the days will once again grow longer, to having faith that it is possible to bring light and hope in a world of darkness, oppression and despair."

But, as I put together the service, I started to realize that there was something else in my heart that I needed to explore and give voice to. Something beyond talking about the origins, universality, and symbolic interpretation of the story of Jesus and his miraculous birth.

Yes, it is generally understood that the historic Jesus was born in September and that his birthday celebration was moved to December by the church to coincide with the Winter Solstice celebrations—celebrations that already had faith and hope as their focus. Add the mistletoe and evergreens, and you have symbols of love and everlasting life, too.

And, the birth — and life—of Jesus, along with many myths and stories from numerous religions and cultures, tell of the bringing or coming of the light and the ensuing inspiration for people to overcome great challenges, great "darkness, oppression, and despair."

But, while the stories do inspire, what do they really mean to us, personally? Or, should I say, what do they really mean to ME, personally? Although, I do hope that, in sharing some of my struggles, I touch upon something that also touches each of you in some way.

I have recently read articles and sermons that compare and contrast the spiritual message of Christmas and Hanukah, the message described by Rabbi Michael Lerner as this: "that it is possible to bring light and hope in a world of darkness, oppression, and despair." In his article "The Spiritual Messages of Chanukah and Christmas — and Their Downsides," he continues:

But whereas Christmas focuses on the birth of a single individual whose life and mission was itself supposed to bring liberation, Chanukah is about a national liberation struggle involving an entire people who seek to remake the world through struggle with an oppressive political and social order."

Now, given my inclination for community and political activism, I was immediately drawn toward this description of Hanukah! But, further into the article, Rabbi Lerner has this to say about Christianity:

"Radical hope is also the message of Christmas. Christianity took the hope of the ancients and transformed it into a hope for the transformation of a world of oppression. The birth of a newborn, always a signal of hope for the family in which it was born, was transformed into the

birth of the messiah who would come to challenge existing systems of economic and political oppression, and bring a new era of peace on earth, social justice, and love.”

He continues:

“Symbolizing that in the baby Jesus was a beautiful way to celebrate and reaffirm hope in the social darkness that has been imposed on the world by the Roman empire, and all its successors right up through the contemporary dominance of a globalized rule of corporate and media forces that have permeated every corner of the planet with their ethos of selfishness and materialism.

Seeing Jesus as the Son of God, and as an intrinsic part of God, was also a way of giving radical substance to the notion that every human being is created in the image of God. For God to come on earth, bring a holy message of love and salvation, and then to die at the hands of the imperialists and [then] be resurrected to come back at some future date, was and is a beautiful message of hope for a world not yet redeemed, and became an inspiration to hundreds of millions who saw in it the comforting message that the rule of the powerful was not the ultimate reality of existence.”

Celebrate; affirm; bring a “comforting message.” Okay, but where is the action? HOW is the birth of this, or any baby, going to “challenge existing systems of economic and political oppression and bring a new era of peace on earth, social justice, and love?”

Maybe we need to go back to Rev. Fred L Hammond’s interpretation of Advent that I shared in the opening words:

Advent for Unitarian Universalists can be a time of planning, of preparing the way, of welcoming the coming; if not of the Christ, then of the arrival or renewal of another life, meaning *our* life.

A life lived in compassion toward our neighbors as seen in activities to rid the world of oppression and injustice.

Such a life demands spiritual fortitude and spiritual practice to re-weave us when the cloth of compassion wears thin. Advent can be that season where we re-fortify ourselves for the work we have chosen for this specific time and this specific place into which we were born.”

Rev. Hammond says, “if not the Christ, then our life.” But, I say, how about we reclaim the concept of Christ?

What does Christ really mean, anyway? If you look it up in the dictionary, you will find that it originates from the Greek word *Christos*, meaning, literally, anointed. Or, “special.” The Merriam-Webster online dictionary puts the capitalized **Messiah** as the first definition, but the lower-case word messiah means, simply, a professed or accepted leader of some hope or cause.

Another definition of the word Christ is “an ideal type of humanity.”

To me, it seems that the word Christ has gotten so intertwined with the “supernatural” and, for many, the guilt-inspiring chapters of the story of Jesus, that we lose touch with the very radical and empowering aspects of this Jesus who was born so long ago but still lives on, in more ways than one, in our world today.

I personally do not think that we should conveniently ignore selected parts of the story of Jesus because I do believe that, if we meditate on each and all of the different chapters, including the virgin birth and the empty tomb three days after the crucifixion, we can discover that **what** these stories **symbolize**, like any long-lived myth or, even fable, can teach us something --- Something about ourselves, each other, or our world, whether or not we also believe these stories to be literally true in one or more ways.

Christ can mean so much more than some being that who died for our sins. In fact, I see it more that Jesus, as Christ defined as an ideal type of humanity, **lived** in a way that showed us how to overcome our frailties. I don't have time to go off on a tangent right now, but to me, sin is tied deeply to our own integrity, with ensuing harm to others as collateral damage, albeit often very serious and consequential damage. But that is for another day.

Maybe we can try thinking of Christ as a way of being that, if not achievable by human beings, is at least worth striving for. Maybe we can hear and feel the word in a way that relates more to THIS world, to OUR lives here, to, as Rev. Hammond says “the work we have chosen for this specific time and this specific place into which we were born.”

Why not embrace the radical actions of the adult Jesus, the one who “went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves?”

Why not spend some time REALLY thinking about what it means to truly love thy neighbor? Or, how about the idea of actually loving your enemy that the adult Jesus talks about?

But, if we are to embrace the lessons we can learn by considering the Jesus who is described as being “the first non-violent revolutionary” by Steven Stills in his song **49 Bye-Byes/America's Children**, we still need to remember that he also was once an innocent babe. As were we all, all with the potential to do good works, to learn to be our truest selves, to lead when necessary, but to also humbly love our neighbors AND our enemies with a love that, at its least, is such that it acknowledges that we each also have potential to do good works AND to fail at times.

When I was in college, I had a history professor who taught me that writing a good history paper was not about coming to a conclusion. Rather, it was about asking the right questions and presenting them in a way that encourages further thought.

And, in that spirit, I am not going to try to come to any specific conclusions here. However, I want to leave you with the final line of the hymn that we will be singing at the very end of the service. I hope that, wherever you are in your path, that you can embrace these words for what they symbolize. These words are: “If you truly seek peace, Christ for you is born.”

*Amen*