

“CHRISTMAS: THE SEASON OF THE HEART”

Olympic Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

December 21, 2025

Guest Speaker: Rev. Bruce A. Bode

Service Leader: Bob Nuffer

Music Organizer & Slide Preparation: Harmony Rutter

Musicians: LeRoy Davidson, Geri Napier, Ida Domazlicky, Ida Domazlicky

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Sermon Title & Description: “Christmas: The Season of the Heart” – Christmas in our culture and even world-wide is not just a day but a season, a time we are called to attend more consciously than at other times of the year to the needs and dreams, the longings and loves, of the heart. Our service will explore both the challenges and possibilities within this “season of the heart.”

Greeting by Minister, Introduction of Theme and Responsive Reading

Thank you, Bob, for opening today’s service and greetings to all of you, both to those of you present here in the sanctuary and to those of you tuning in virtually.

Today, December 21, is the winter solstice, the time in the Northern Hemisphere when the sun’s light is at its lowest ebb, the “hinge of the year.” From this point on, the light of the sun begins to lengthen the days of the year.

In more ancient times, the winter solstice was celebrated not on December 21 but on December 25, because it was clear at that time that the sun’s light was really returning.

No one knows the actual birth date of Jesus of Nazareth, but it was in the early part of the 4th century of the Christian era – 336 is the date I’ve seen – when his birth date was assigned to December 25 to compete with the sun-god Mithra, a popular deity worshipped throughout the Roman Empire at the time when Christianity was also becoming popular.

The debate at that time was whether to have the celebration of Jesus’ birth coincide with the spring or winter festivals. The winter season won out, a “pact with pagans,” as some then said, arguing that shepherds near Bethlehem did not tend their flocks by night during the month of December, as the birth narrative from the Gospel of Luke has it.

But the *natural* urge to celebrate at this time of year when the sun is seen to return is very strong.

And so it is that “Christmas” – an old English word that first appears in 1038 and which means “Christ’s Mass, the mass celebrating Christ’s birth considered to be the most important – has come down to us over the ages at this time of the year, and we can continue to adapt it for our conditions, circumstances, purposes, and understandings.

My own sense of the meaning and value of Christmas was influenced by Dr. Duncan Littlefair, the senior minister for 38 years – 1944-1982 – at the Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where I served as an associate minister for 22 years from 1978-2001.

It was Dr. Littlefair who gave me a chance in the liberal ministry, and it was he who also expanded my sense of Christmas, which to him involved a whole season of celebrating the values and qualities of spirit that make us most truly human.

During the Christmas season, Dr. Littlefair always used a responsive reading that I especially like, and which, slightly adjusted, I now invite you to join with me in saying.

Responsive Reading – “The Bells of Christmas,” by Dr. Duncan E. Littlefair

MINISTER: In this Christmas season, we gather in our sanctuary to celebrate the wonder, glory, and joy of life.

CONGREGATION: Generation after generation – children and adults – all those with open hearts and minds – have celebrated the qualities of the Christmas season.

MINISTER: We do not always come to this festive season with happy hearts and carefree minds. We are not always ready to sing and rejoice.

CONGREGATION: Sometimes we are burdened with personal sorrow. Sometimes our community is torn with dissension. Sometimes our world is ravished with war.

MINISTER: Sometimes, even as we anticipate the return of the sun’s light, the world seems dark and dreary. We are burdened with the memory of too many failures, too many defeats, too much sorrow.

CONGREGATION: Sometimes loneliness, fear, selfishness, discouragement, and resentment turn the bells of Christmas into bitter mockery.

MINISTER: At such times we must remind ourselves that the lights and bells and songs of this season are meant to celebrate not only the good we know, but the wonder and glory we have lost and would find again.

CONGREGATION: So, we come together this day to open our hearts and minds to all that is good and beautiful and worthy to be treasured.

MINISTER: We come in the strong and confident faith that if we seek, we will find, and if we open our hearts, we will be filled with the joy and wonder of life.

Opening Hymn #233: “Bring a Torch, Jeannette, Isabella”

Our Opening Hymn is one my favorite Christmas carols – “Bring a Torch, Jeannette, Isabella.” It’s a 17th century French folk song from Provence in the southeast corner of France near the Mediterranean Sea and bordering Italy.

According to notes from Kimberely Debus:

“The song remains an important part of Christmas Eve celebrations in the Provence region, where children dress up as shepherds and milkmaids, carrying torches and candles to Midnight Mass while singing this carol.”

(“Notes from the Far Fringe” by Kimberley Debus.)

The first verse of this carol is in French, which you can read on your screens as our instrumentalists play it. And then we will sing the two English verses.

*1. Un flambeau, Jeannette, Isabelle,
un flambeau, courons au berceau!
C’est Jésus, bonnes gens du hameau,
le Christ est né, Marie appelle,
Ah! Ah! Ah! Que la mère est belle,
Ah! Ah! Ah! que l’Enfant est beau!*

2. Bring a torch, Jeannette, Isabella,
bring a torch and quickly run.
Christ is born, good folk of the village,
Christ is born and Mary’s calling,
Ah! Ah! Beautiful is the mother,
Ah! Ah! Beautiful is her child.

3. Come and see within the stable,
come and see the Holy one,
come and see the lovely Jesus,
brown his brow, his cheeks are rosy.
Hush! Hush! Quietly now he slumbers,
Hush! Hush! Quietly now he sleeps.

(Words: Traditional Provençal, 17th century; music: French carol)

“CHRISTMAS: THE SEASON OF THE HEART”
Sermon Part I: “The Heart of Love”

Introduction

I’ve titled my sermon today “Christmas: The Season of the Heart.”

That is: The Christmas season, above all, has to do with the heart, and the heart, above all, has to do with love, and love, in its essence, has to do with all the ways that we are connected to each other and to all that is.

I have two readings for you on the nature and meaning of “love.”

Ancient Reading: St. Paul’s “Hymn to Love,” excerpts from “I Corinthians 13”

The first reading, with which many of you will be familiar, consists of excerpts from St. Paul’s great “Hymn to Love.”

It’s from a letter he wrote to the church he founded in the city of Corinth in southern Greece in the first century of the Christian era.

The ancient Greek language in which the Apostle Paul was writing had four different words that we English-speaking people translate with the single word “love”:

- 1) *Eros* – erotic love. (Scholar of world mythology and religions Joseph Campbell colorfully characterized *eros* as “the zeal of the organs for each other.”)
- 2) *Philia* – that is, the love shared by friends.
- 3) *Storge* – familial love; the love, for example, that parents have for their children, and the love that children have for their parents.
- 4) *Agape* – lovingkindness; an unconditional, self-giving, embracing and abiding love that blazes forth from an awakened and transformed heart.

It’s this latter term “*agape*” that St. Paul uses in his “Hymn to Love.”

And *agape* is the word I’ll use in some excerpts from – what is really – a “Hymn to *Agape*.”

Agape is patient and kind; *agape* is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude.

Agape does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right.

Agape bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.

Agape never ends; prophecies pass away; tongues of ecstatic speech cease; knowledge, it, too, will pass away.

There are three things that abide: faith, hope, and *agape*.

Of these three, the greatest is *agape*.

Contemporary Reading: “Of Love,” by Mary Oliver

As just indicated, our English word “love” covers a vast amount of territory. Our feeling connections – our heart connections – to virtually anything and everything can be covered by the single English word “love.”

Here’s a, perhaps, not-so-familiar poem of Mary Oliver that illustrates this point. The poem is simply titled “Of Love,” and it speaks of the many things that attracted the poet, the things that pulled her energy, to which she felt a connection – love poured out on her, love to which she responded.

Of Love
by Mary Oliver

I have been in love more times than one,
thank the Lord. Sometimes it was lasting
whether active or not. Sometimes
it was all but ephemeral, maybe only
an afternoon, but not less real for that.
They stay in my mind, these beautiful people,
or anyway beautiful people to me, of which
there are so many. You, and you, and you,
whom I had the fortune to meet, or maybe
missed. Love, love, love, it was the
core of my life, from which, of course, comes
the word for the heart. And, oh, have I mentioned
that some of them were men and some were women
and some – now carry my revelation with you –
were trees. Or places. Or music flying above
the names of their makers. Or clouds, or the sun
which was the first, and the best, the most
loyal for certain, who looked so faithfully into
my eyes, every morning. So I imagine
such love of the world – its fervency, its shining, its
innocence and hunger to give of itself – I imagine
this is how it began.

(Mary Oliver, “Of Love,” p. 65 from *Red Bird*, Beacon Press, 2008)

1. Christmas: the emotional center of the year

It's not a requirement that a person like Christmas or the Christmas season, but I want to share with you this morning some of the ways that the Christmas season has evolved, deepened, and become universalized for me over the years ...

... with the thought that you might reflect for yourself on what Christmas has meant to you in the past, what it now means to you, and what it could mean for you in the future.

Let me begin, then, with the sense of the Christmas season as being the *emotional* center of the year.

It's the season when we attend most consciously to "the ties of love that bind us together, giving dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days." (Those words are a quote from Dr. Littlefair, the author of the responsive reading we read earlier.)

"Ties of love" as cosmic powers

When I consider these "ties of love that bind us together," I go *cosmic*. I think of those powers in the universe that draw things toward each other and keep them connected.

In my thinking, *before* "love" becomes a human quality, it is gravitational, electrical, chemical – those *elemental* powers of attraction and bonding!

These powers were present at the very beginning of our universe ... present in that original seedpod when all things were drawn together into a single incomprehensible point of energy so concentrated that when it unfolded in a sudden burst, it jeweled the universe with billions of galaxies of light, such as the energy and light of our sun, which Mary Oliver was talking about in her poem I just read.

These powers of attraction and bonding are still seen in the spinning of the electrons in their orbits around the nucleus in the atom and in the wheeling of the stars in their orbits in the heavens.

When cosmic powers enter human life

And when these elemental, cosmic powers enter human life, then we speak of "love" ... for what is love but all those forces that attract, connect, and bond us ... linking human bodies, hearts, minds, souls, and spirits: the strongest, fiercest, most tender forces we can ever possibly know.

Thus, I believe that there is a level of reality – and a level of human awareness matching that level of reality – in which we may experience that all things are, indeed, one: no division, no separation, no boundaries, no borders; but everything is one fabric, one organism. We are one before we are two; we are a singularity, a unity, before we are a plurality.

Of course, we are also two; we are separated one from another, individual planets, as it were; and, paradoxically, we would not know about our unity if we were not also separate in some ways.

Still, to me, the first fact of existence – not necessarily the first fact in our conscious awareness, but the first fact in reality – is that this is one gravitational force-field of connectivity.

It's one web, one net ... so that from all eternity we are bound one to the other ... and "love" is the primary word in our English language that we use to speak of this underlying, gravitational connection that links all things.

The root of "love"

Thus, my main *thought* on the subject of "love" and of our use of the English word "love" is that it is rooted in this philosophical-religious understanding that this is one inter-connected reality and that our unity is prior to and greater than our separateness.

"All you need is love"

Now, having a sense of this underlying connection, you might say we get carried away ... so that we profess our "love" to virtually anything and everything: to God, country, mother, father, spouse, children, pets, mountains, trees, flowers, sports teams, money, etc., etc., etc.

Our positive feeling connections – our heart connections – to virtually anything and everything can be covered by the single English word "love" – "All you need is love" seems to be our English-language motto ...

Lack of nuance with respect to the English word "love"

... which brings up another aspect of the subject, namely, that we may lack nuance in our feeling connections ... because in other languages we find more discrimination and differentiation in relation to our heart connections, our feeling connections. The ancient Greek language, as I mentioned in the introduction to my readings, has four different words that we translate with our single English word "love."

And I've read that in ancient Persian there are eighty words for "love" ... and in Sanskrit ninety-six different words for "love" – that is, eighty or ninety-six different words that differentiate and discriminate the "feeling nuances" of our various relationships and connections. (See *Femininity Lost and Regained*, p. 2, by Robert A. Johnson)

This may point to a certain impoverishment and clumsiness in our English language, even a muddling of our different heart connections ... though we know, for example, that the "love" parents have for their children has a much different quality to it than the "love" that parents have for each other.

The universal truth of “love”

Yet, in defense of the English language, and in defense of love and our use of the word “love,” there is, as I say, also a place where all the different types of “love” meet ... and our English word “love” points to, and is a way of speaking about, the fundamental unity of things that underlies all the different kinds of “love.”

The particular types of connections vary enormously, but underneath and in and through everything, we are all connected, all part of “one great love,” as we say.

We may not nuance the variations well, but at least we catch the *universal* note of connection.

So, that’s the main mental/intellectual way that Christmas has deepened for me over the years.

Interlude Hymn #241: “In the Bleak Midwinter”

Before we move to other more emotional aspects of the Christmas season, let’s sing, as an Interlude Hymn, another Christmas carol, the poignant hymn “In the Bleak Midwinter,” drawn from the words of poet Christina Rossetti.

It’s #241 in your in your gray-covered *Singing the Living Tradition* hymnals, and the words will also be projected on our screens as well.

1. In the bleak midwinter frosty wind made moan,
earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone,
snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
in the bleak midwinter long ago.

2. Christ a homeless stranger, so the gospels say,
cradled in a manger and a bed of hay;
in the bleak midwinter, stable-place sufficed
Mary and her baby, Jesus Christ.

3. Once more child and mother weave their magic spell,
touching hearts with wonder words can never tell;
in the bleak midwinter, in this world of pain,
where our hearts are open love is born again.

(Words: Christina Rossetti; new words: John Andrew Storey; music: Theodore Holst)

“CHRISTMAS: THE SEASON OF THE HEART”
Sermon Part II: “Christmas for Everyone!”

2. Christmas: the most difficult time of the year

Let me move to a second way the Christmas season has deepened for me over the years, namely, in my awareness of why and how the Christmas season can be so very, very difficult for so many people.

And, really, I suppose, it’s pretty obvious when one considers it. It’s because during the Christmas season the highest of our human ideals and values are lifted up and celebrated: ideals of harmony, the ceasing of violence and strife, the deep wish that peace might prevail upon this troubled planet.

However, in lifting up these ideals and values, it’s also a time when the *distance* between what we long for and where we are is felt most vividly. Tensions we can live with or overlook during the rest of the year now become *highlighted* at this time of the year.

A member in the congregation I served in Port Townsend once brought the following quote to my attention:

“Isn’t it funny that at Christmas something in you gets so lonely for – I don’t know what exactly, but it’s something that you don’t mind so much not having at other times.” (Kate Boshier)

Again, another member of the congregation once emailed me the following note, which read:

“Holidays [like Christmas] do have a way of making visible major leaks in the dike of one’s life.”

That image of “leaks in the dike” fits nicely with my Dutch heritage; actually, however, I tend to think of “seams” in relationships that become more apparent at this time of the year.

For example, during the Christmas season when families are supposed to be harmoniously of one accord, the *seams* that have stitched individuals and families together into one fabric become more obvious.

This “season of the heart” also brings forth “aches of the heart”: memories, perhaps, of a family that was once together but is so no more; memories of loved ones – those we lived with and lived for – who were once physically with us but are so no more.

In this season when we most pray that all tears may be wiped away, inevitably, spontaneously, they come to the surface.

But let them come! Let them come!

To find our way in this “season of the heart,” it’s important that we provide a generous space for the “sorrows of the heart,” a time for sitting with sorrow and not passing it by.

Paradoxically, unless and until our sorrow is honored and our grief given its needed place, we will be blocked from the full beatitude and joy of the Christmas season.

This is part of the reason that I so value the Responsive Reading that we read earlier, the lines that give voice to the fact that:

We do not always come to this festive season with happy hearts and carefree minds ...

Sometimes, indeed, we are burdened with personal sorrow ... or our community, nation, or world is torn by dissention ...

... and sometimes loneliness, fear, selfishness, discouragement, and resentment turn the bells of Christmas into bitter mockery.

These words and thoughts, as I said, were from Dr. Duncan Littlefair, who has been my primary mentor for what the Christmas season could be. He once said to me:

“If the liberal church had *only* the Christmas season, and if it celebrated it as it could and should be celebrated, it would validate its existence on that basis alone.”

3. Christmas: for everyone!

What was behind his statement?

Basically, as I took it, it was that the heart of religion is to be found in the values, qualities, images, and dreams that are brought forward and celebrated in this Christmas season.

“Christmas,” thus, is a symbol of the holiness and wholeness of life and being.

“Christmas” represents the possibilities of what humans can and should be within themselves, in relation to other humans, and in relation to the planet at large.

AND: Christmas represents these possibilities not only to persons of a Christian heritage, but to many others as well throughout our planet.

Christmas and “true believers”

Each year about this time, there will be complaints about Christmas being co-opted by those who are not “true believers” – a pitting of the Christ-child against Santa Claus; a contest between the Gospel of Luke and the movie *Miracle on 34th Street*.

But I like to think that I am also “true believer” in Christmas; it’s just that for me Christmas has little to do with either doctrinal belief or literal history. Rather, as English poet John Keats puts it, it’s about “the holiness of the heart’s affections and the truth of the imagination.”

I think that most people who celebrate Christmas understand this. They find the Christmas season meaningful and valuable largely because it’s *not* about either doctrinal belief or literal history.

I would venture to say that it’s only the doctrinalists and the literalists – from both the right and the left – who have trouble with Christmas.

“Christmas” as religion

A few years ago, I received yet another an email from a member of the congregation I served in Port Townsend, who wrote saying that she had recently asked her grown daughter the straight-forward question, “What is your religion?”

Her daughter, she said, thought for a moment, then with strong conviction replied, “*Christmas!*”

“Christmas” was her religion!

And is it not true that at Christmas, despite issues of commercialization and so on, there still shines forth the human dream of how human life could and should be lived?

This is a dream that arises out of the human heart, and which has to do with the ties of the heart – the yearnings and longings of the heart, and the possibility that even the most closed-off heart could be blasted open.

4. Christmas: a chance to start again

Let me, then, conclude my message to you as we draw near to Christmas Eve and Christmas Day with the figure who, perhaps, more than any other embodies “the spirit of Christmas” – I’m talking about the hero of Charles Dickens’ tale *A Christmas Carol*, namely, Ebenezer Scrooge.

A Christmas Carol is the story of the cracking open of Scrooge’s shriveled and frozen heart; it’s the drama of Scrooge’s rebirth and redemption; and it’s a story that has played a very large part in making Christmas what it is today.

Charles Dickens and the Unitarians

It turns out that Charles Dickens visited the United States in 1842 and became friends with a number of American Unitarians, including such notables as Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Ellery Channing.

Upon his return to England, Dickens began attending Unitarian religious services at the Little Portland Street Chapel in London where he and its minister the Rev. Edward Tagart formed a friendship that would last until Tagart's death sixteen years later.

Shortly after Dickens began attending the Little Portland Street Chapel – this was in 1843 – he conceived and wrote about this truly miserable soul who had turned his back on Christmas:

“Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster.... He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog-days; and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas....

“Nobody ever stopped him in the street to say, with gladsome looks, ‘My dear Scrooge, how are you. When will you come to see me.’ No beggars implored him to bestow a trifle, no children asked him what it was o'clock, no man or woman ever once in all his life inquired the way to such and such a place, of Scrooge. Even the blindmen's dogs appeared to know him; and when they saw him coming on, would tug their owners into doorways and up court[yard]s;...”

Such was the state of Scrooge's shriveled and frozen heart.

But then, Charles Dickens goes to work on Scrooge to see if there might be any hidden gold beneath his roughened, toughened exterior. Dickens goes to work to discover how it is that Scrooge had become cut off from love, and whether there was anything to be done about it.

The message for us

Thus, we, too, are also encouraged at this time of the year to ask in what ways our hearts have grown cold ... and how we might have lost our way to the deeper, underlying connections of life.

And, more than this, we are encouraged to realize that redemption and transformation are always possible, that it's never too late to connect and to re-connect with larger life, that it's never too late to uncover the potential latent within us that would allow us to experience a greater love than we have hitherto known.

Such love – such connection and re-connection – is at the heart of the Christmas and holiday season; it's at the heart of religious experience; it's at the heart of human life; and it's at the heart of the infinite, unoriginated, forward-pushing creativity of Being itself of which we are a small part.

Closing Hymn #224: “Let Christmas Come”

1. Let Christmas come, its story told,
when days are short and winds are cold;
let Christmas come, its lovely song
when evening’s soon and night is long.

2. Let Christmas come, its great star glow,
on quiet city, parks of snow;
let Christmas come, its table gleam,
love born again: the truth of dream.

(Words: John Hanly Morgan; music: English melody harmonized by Ralph Vaughan Williams)

Closing Words of Benediction:

Our Closing Words are the two verses of a hymn titled “There Is a Love,” a hymn used by some congregations as a Benediction to conclude services. The words are those of the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, and the “Love” spoken of in these verses is, as I take it, that of a *creative, cosmic, connecting power*.

Verse 1:

There is a Love [capital “L”] holding me.
There is a Love holding all that I love [lower case “l”].
There is a Love holding all.
I rest in that Love.

Verse 2:

There is a Love holding us.
There is a Love holding all that we love.
There is a Love holding all.
We rest in that Love.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service led by the Rev. Bruce A. Bode at the Olympic Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Sequim/Port Angeles, WA on Sunday, December 21, 2025.

Rev. Bode is Minister Emeritus at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Port Townsend, Washington, from which he retired in 2018 as the Senior Minister after serving the congregation for fourteen years (2004-2018).

Before coming to Port Townsend, Rev. Bode was the Interim Minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Houston, Texas (2002-2004) and the Hope Unitarian Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma (2001-2002). Prior to that, he served for twenty-two years (1978-2001) as an Associate Minister at the Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a large, independent, religiously liberal congregation.