

Happy Holidays!
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet
Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on December 16, 2018

Happy holidays to you all. I am certain each of you are well aware that we are fully immersed in the holiday season. The season makes itself known in so many different ways. There are the colored lights and decorations on people's houses and along downtown streets. There are holiday gatherings and parties. And then there is the seemingly endless barrage of advertisements that offer us the deal of a lifetime. All you have to do is shop during the proper hours, on a specific day and provide the correct coupon or sale code. Don't miss out because supplies are limited and all sales are final. Excuse me, I seem to have been overcome by a holiday shopping season moment.

Now, where was I. Oh yes, happy holidays to you all. This season has been commonly understood to run from Thanksgiving Day through New Year's Day. In recent years it seems there has been an attempt on the part of the retail sales industry to move the start date of the season. It may not be long before Halloween, on October 31, will be the season's beginning. More holidays means more shopping and more sales. To avoid being overtaken by another shopping season moment, I will shift my attention back to holidays.

The majority of people in this country tend to focus on three holidays, Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day. But there are so many more holidays during this time of the year. From Thanksgiving Day through New Year's Day, interfaith-calendar.org lists more than 20 religious holidays, and their list doesn't include our UU holiday of Chalica that ended last Sunday. If we consider Halloween as the season's beginning, another 11 holidays are added. That is a lot of holidays in a two month period of time—more than a holiday every other day. You will find a list of these holidays on an insert in your Order of Service.

I suspect that most of us aren't aware of many of the holidays that are on this list. And if we aren't aware of holidays, or only know of them peripherally, we likely don't think much about the reason they exist or what makes them meaningful. You might wonder why these various holidays and what they celebrate would matter enough to deserve a sermon from the minister? We have our holidays, the ones we know about and celebrate. And it is challenging enough to keep up with everything that goes along with the ones we already know about. Let me assure you, my intention today is not to try to sell you on celebrating any more holidays than you already do.

It could, however, be beneficial if we were to expand our knowledge and understanding of the holidays that others celebrate. It is quite possible that one or more of these holidays may resonate with some of our values or beliefs. And seeking to expand our knowledge and understanding would be consistent with our Fourth Principle which calls us to engage in a "free and responsible search for truth and meaning."

Our Unitarian forebears recognized that truth could be found in more books than just the Bible and that religious traditions other than Christianity held wisdom that we could benefit us and the planet we all call home. What our forebears realized and championed continues to be acknowledged in our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition today. Immediately following our Seven Principles in the UUA Bylaws is this statement, "The living tradition we share draws from many sources." Then comes a list of Six

Sources. Printed on the back of your Order of Service every week, you will find our Seven Principles and our Six Sources. I encourage you to take the time to review these often. Many of us recognize each of our Seven Principles. Some of us can even recite one or more of them from memory. When it comes to our Six Sources however, I have found that many of us aren't as familiar with them as we are the Principles. So today my hope is that we will become a bit more aware of a few holidays we might not have known much about previously. And that we might also consider how these holidays may somehow connect with one or more of our Six Sources.

If you haven't already done so, I would ask you to look at the list of holidays I mentioned earlier. As you review them you may notice a few themes that are common among them. For example, a number of these holidays recognize and celebrate a person's birthday. Birthdays are significant to all of us and celebrating them is a way of honoring a person. My wife, Sandy, has taught me just how important birthdays are. She has graciously assisted me in coming to the realization that the celebration of a person's birthday shouldn't be limited to a single day. The celebrations should last at least a month! Maybe she got this idea from observing how we celebrate Christmas, the day that honors the birth of Jesus. Whether she got the idea from Christmas or somewhere else I can't say for sure. Never-the-less, we celebrate her birthday for a full month every year. What a wonderful way to recognize how important someone is in your life. I will be forever grateful to her for helping me come to this important realization.

Recognizing the significance of a person's life is what religious holidays that focus on a birth are all about. These holidays acknowledge that a specific person holds a place of importance in our lives today. Christmas, as I mentioned, is one example from the Christian faith tradition. Other examples during this holiday season include the following. Baha'is acknowledge the day Baha'u'llah was born. Islam remembers the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. Sikhs celebrate the birth of Guru Nanak Dev Sahib. Buddhist's honor the day the Buddha was born. Each of the individuals just mentioned were central to the founding of a religious faith tradition. Each of them has had a significant effect on the lives of innumerable people. And like Jesus, each taught that how we treat one another is of great importance. All of these great teachers shared a message of love. Such wisdom is as important today as it was during the time that each one of them walked on this Earth. Clearly, we still need to be reminded to love one another and to treat each other with loving kindness. Maybe someday we can celebrate any or all of their birthdays by honoring their message of love every day of the year.

The opposite end of the life span, namely death, is another theme of this holiday season. Halloween is a time when death is acknowledged and even celebrated. One of the oldest religions in the world, Zoroastrianism, remembers the death of its founding prophet, Zoroaster, also known as Zarathustra, with the holiday Zorothosht Diso. Significant features of Zoroastrianism have had influences on numerous subsequent religious traditions including Judaism, Gnosticism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. In 2005, the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* listed Zoroaster first in the chronology of philosophers. His ethical and philosophical thought influenced numerous philosophers who came after him. He saw the human condition as a struggle between truth and untruth, or lies. He claimed that the purpose of human kind, like that of all other creation, is to sustain truth. This certainly fits with our Fourth Principle. Our world could

benefit greatly today from his guidance and wisdom that encouraged each of us to do all we are capable of to sustain truth.

Yet another theme of this holiday season is an expanded version of the two themes just mentioned, birth and death. Birth and death fit into the larger theme of beginnings and endings. Three holidays of this season fit into this larger theme. These are Samhain, marking the end of the harvest season and the beginning of winter, Yule, which begins on the winter solstice, and the Shinto holiday of Gantan-sai, which celebrates the end of the old and the beginning of the new year. Yule, with its focus on the changing season, is a holiday that encourages us to attend to the Sixth or our Sources. This Source involves “spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.” As we learn more about global climate change, it is clear that the time has clearly come when we must, just as this source states, learn to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

A fourth theme involves significant events in the lives of a collection of people. Thanksgiving certainly fits in this category. In this country, the holiday is often thought of as commemoration of the feast, which followed a successful harvest, held by some of the earliest European arrivals in this country. The Jewish holiday of Hanukkah is another example. Rabbi Ed Stafman had an article in last Sunday’s Bozeman Daily Chronicle about the history and significance of this holiday. If you didn’t read it, I highly recommend that you do so. I have a copy of the article in my office that I would be happy to share with anyone who is interested.

Here is a bit of what he states in the article.

In the Second Century BCE, Judea (whose capital was Jerusalem) had been a semi-autonomous Greek-Syrian province, where Jews were mostly permitted to worship in their own way. Amidst political infighting among different Jewish groups, the Greek-Syrians took control, defiling the Holy Temple and erecting in it statues of Greek gods—idols. What made this doubly offensive is that Jewish tradition, as one of its highest ideals, prohibits idol worship.

He then tells of the significance of this:

What was at stake was not just stone statues, which everyone knows have no power; no, idolatry is much more insidious. At its heart is that the idolatrous statues represented Greek-Syrian nationalism—the idea that Greek-Syria comes first and nobody else mattered.

I am certain all of us can think of current-day situations that correlate with the idolatry that occurred in Judea so long ago. Today, the holiday of Hanukkah can be a reminder to all of us that nationalism is not the ultimate value we ought to be lifting up, let alone worshipping. Rabbi Ed writes that:

... each Hanukkah, we (referring to people of the Jewish faith) must rededicate ourselves to opposing all forms of idolatry—whether in the form of statues we’re required to worship or the rising tide of nationalism and accompanying tyranny.

I have mentioned only a few of the multiple holidays that are yet to be or have been celebrated during this holiday season. Hopefully what I have shared has given you a small sense of how these holidays may be reminders to us—reminders of the values we hold dear and what truly matters in life. Possibly what I have shared has piqued your curiosity and will inspire you to explore how the wisdom of various world religions may offer guidance in our lives today. I hope so. We are, after all, still seeking to discover the truth. And as we discover more and more truth, I believe our lives will be filled with ever-increasing meaning, and we will seek to fill the world with love, peace and joy.

So may it be and happy holidays!