

Blue Christmas

A Homily by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein ©

Sunday December 10, 2017

Is your heart in synch with the angels and babes in mangers? Is your holiday shopping in synch with expectations? Is your mind in synch with the news? No. Me neither! Let's be honest: this month of December can be a very difficult time for many of us in the best of times. And 2017 is not the best of times.

Part of my feeling out of synch with the whole December holiday thing has to do with current events. There are days when I simply cannot bear to read another news article about sexual harassment or assault, or about naked greed being enacted into law, or about the depredation of the environment for profit, or about the dismantling of civic structures such as libraries, public schools, museums, national monuments, or about the unfettered racial hate now let loose in our nation. I just can't.

And yet . . . just when I'm ready to give up in despair, along comes the flicker of the Hanukkah candles, reminding me that there have been tough times before, and that the persistence of righteous people can bring about the defeat of a corrupt empire.

Part of my feeling out of sync with the whole December holiday thing is more personal. When light is less, my energy ebbs. I long to hibernate through the long winter nights; it feels like a gut punch when we turn the clocks back and the darkness comes early. And there is an awful lot to do in this month with the shortest day and longest night. It is not a good time for a minister to hibernate!

That low-energy metabolism of mine can feel a lot like sadness. This year particularly, I recognize that sadness as I am mourning the death of Denny Davidoff. Denny was known to many of you as the Moderator Extraordinaire of the Unitarian Universalist Association. For two years, just prior to coming to Wilmington, Denny was my parishioner in Westport. I got to know her personally and to love her. Denny died a few days ago.

I know that many of you are also mourning the loss of somebody beloved; a grief that feels more acute in December than at other times.

And yet . . . just when it feels like the ho ho hos are a cruel mockery of my grieving heart, just when I begin to wonder where I will find the energy to tackle that December to-do list, along comes the Yule log, reminding me that the seasonal movement of the sun's path is inexorable, that the solar declination will occur whether I am in synch with nature's rhythm or not. The sun's path, as observed from the earth, will indeed reverse direction at the Solstice. Solstice, from the Latin words *sol* (sun) and *sistere* (to make stand). The moment when the sun stands still, then resolutely turns and reverses direction, signaling the return of the light. And I know, as the ancient people knew, that my energy will return, that my griefs will be softened, that "weeping may endureth for a night, but joy cometh in the morning." From Psalm 30, a Psalm ascribed to King David and written in Thanksgiving at the dedication of his temple. You know when it is read today? At Hanukkah – the festival of Dedication.

You see, it doesn't matter whether we are in synch with the season after all. Because Christmas will come whether we are ready or not. As will the angels. In 1849 Unitarian minister Edmond Stanley Sears wrote a scandalous Christmas carol; a carol about the angels and their radically prophetic message. It doesn't even mention Jesus! An article in the *UU World* says of this carol, "Sears's song is

remarkable for its focus not on Bethlehem, but on his own time, and on the ever-contemporary issue of war and peace. Written in 1849, it has long been assumed to be Sears's response to the just ended Mexican-American War. Sears's pacifism would take second place to his commitment to abolishing slavery in the Civil War, but his carol remains, repeated all over the world every year. Probably more than any other Christmas carol, it talks about today — his day or our day. It says that the call to peace and goodwill to all is as loud on any other day as it was on that midnight of old, if we would but listen “in solemn stillness.”

So, in this time of blue Christmas, take solace from this verse from *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear*.

Still through the cloven skies they come
With peaceful wings unfurled
And still their heavenly music floats
O'er all the weary world;
Above its sad and lowly plains
They bend on hovering wing.
And ever o'er its Babel sounds
The blessed angels sing.

Whether we are in synch or not. They sing. They sing.