

## “The Unitarian Who Saved Christmas”

by Janet Wood

As Marilyn Giese told us last Sunday, many of the symbols we have come to associate with the winter season have their roots in pagan traditions -- things like the burning of the yule log, the decorating of the Christmas tree, and kissing under the mistletoe. However our modern celebrations of Christmas finds their sources in two stories, one of birth, and one of rebirth. The birth story is that of the Christ child who was born in Bethlehem and who is revered by many to be the Son of God and Savior of the world. THE other is a story of rebirth and redemption. That story is Charles Dickens immortal tale, “A Christmas Carol”.

As we have learned, Christmas is actually an odd mixture of religious and secular themes that have evolved over time beginning in the 4th century. Although recorded in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the story of Jesus' *birth* was not important to his immediate disciples. Their writings do not reflect that they ever celebrated Christ's birth. In fact, the first record of Christmas occurred when the early church in Rome took over a pagan holiday which celebrated the winter solstice and made it into the “Christ's Mass”. Continuing through the Medieval period, a combination of the celebration of the birth of Christ with the ancient Roman festival of Saturnalia was widely practiced. This celebration included hedonistic feasting and merrymaking, and the giving of small presents. But in 17th century England, these practices and those of the Germanic winter festival of Yule, came under intense scrutiny by the Puritans under Oliver Cromwell. As an outgrowth of the Reformation, many Protestant sects rejected this Roman holiday. Christmas was not a holiday that was celebrated in America either, especially among the New England protestants, because it was too closely associated with the Roman Church. In the southern states it was celebrated to some degree, but not as a religious holiday.

At the beginning of the Victorian period the festival of Christmas was in decline even in England. However, once the sectarian tension in England had eased around the 1820s, the upper class of British society began to worry that the celebration Christmas was dying out and efforts were made to revive the holiday. As a result of their efforts, the singing of Christmas carols --which had all but disappeared at the turn of the century-- began to thrive again, and the first Christmas card appeared in the 1840s.

Something else was occurring during this time that had a dramatic affect on western society and culture. The Industrial Revolution was sweeping through Europe and America and it was creating a new class of wealthy people in the manufacturing industries. Unfortunately, the only goal in life for many of these people was the accumulation of money and possessions. Tragically, their quest for material wealth created a much larger and impoverished lower class who were forced to struggle for their day to day existence, who lived their lives in extreme poverty, and who would never have any power over their own destinies. There arose a new hardness, a new meanness and lack of compassion among this new merchant class of society during this time. Against this backdrop of selfishness and greed, a young English writer emerged who would make the written page his platform for exposing societal exploitation and cruel treatment of the lower classes, and become a significant voice for change in society. This author was Charles Dickens.

Dickens' book "A Christmas Carol", published in 1843, played a major role in reinventing Christmas into the holiday it has become today, one that emphasizes family, goodwill, and compassion rather than the traditional communal celebration and hedonistic revelry. Today, after more than 160 years, *A Christmas Carol* continues to be relevant, sending a message that cuts through the materialistic trappings of the season and gets to the heart and soul of the holiday.

Although he was brought up an Anglican, Dickens became conflicted about religion--its preaching vs. its practice, and by the age of 30 he felt he had to make a decision as to whether he would accept or reject Christianity. In his short life he had

witnessed so much suffering, so much cruelty, so many people rejecting the opportunity to extend warmth and compassion to others. He was disturbed by the number of people he heard who professed to be Christians, but in practice were totally dismissive of the teachings of Jesus.

Dickens was already a successful author when he traveled to Massachusetts in 1842, and met the city's literary elite including Unitarian poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Rev. William Ellery Channing, a famous Unitarian preacher. Channing so impressed Dickens that when he returned to England, he joined an English Unitarian chapel. Dickens discovered that Unitarianism was, in his words, "a religion which has sympathy for men of every creed and ventures to pass judgment on none; who would do something for human improvement if and when it could; and would always practice charity and toleration." Dickens became a Unitarian because he saw in Unitarianism an attempt to live the real Christian message.

"*A Christmas Carol*", which became the author's most celebrated work, is the story of a Christmas conversion. There are no traditional Christian figures in it because Dickens did not believe in them. He did believe that we are all haunted by ghosts of our better and worse selves, and in this story he lets the ghosts provide the vehicle by which one man would be redeemed to his better self.

"A Christmas Carol" is a Victorian morality tale of an old and bitter miser, who undergoes a profound experience of redemption over the course of one evening. His protagonist, Ebenezer Scrooge, cares passionately for the bottom line and for little else, and he has no use for religion or sentimentality as they do not cut a profit. He cares nothing for the people around him and values humankind only for the money that can be made through their exploitation and intimidation. He particularly detests Christmas which he views as 'a time for finding yourself a year older, and not an hour richer'.

On Christmas Eve Scrooge is awakened by the ghost of his dead business partner, Jacob Marley, who is wrapped in chains which are attached to locked strongboxes. Marley has been condemned to roam the face of the earth seeking in death the opportunities that he passed by in life, -- to lighten the load of his fellow men and women. He has come to give Scrooge one last opportunity to avoid the same fate. Marley urges Scrooge to go with the three ghosts that will visit him that night to see what they have to show him.

The ghost of *Christmas Past* takes Scrooge on a tour of his own childhood. He encounters himself as a lonely boy whose closest companions were the books he read. He remembers yearning for the presence and warmth of real people in his life, and the wishes for the love and approval of his family-- feelings he had buried long ago. He sees the many people who reached out to him, desperately attempting to slow his long slide into self-absorption, people whose souls he could not touch because of his own preoccupation with personal security.

Shaken by these scenes, Scrooge begins to feel things he had been content to suppress. Then the ghost of *Christmas Present* arrives to take him on a tour of the homes of his current acquaintances. He visits the home of Bob Cratchit, his clerk, where he experiences the warmth and stoic bravery of this family as they make the best out of what they are able to afford on the wretched salary Scrooge pays. He experiences, too, their worry over the fate of Tiny Tim, their sick youngest child. As Bob Cratchit offers a toast to his miserly employer, the ghost helps Scrooge realize that even as hardhearted as he is, people have not given up on him.

Then comes the ghost of *Christmas Future* -- the most frightening specter of all. A ghost who has no face and does not speak, communicating with Scrooge only by pointing its finger. Scrooge sees the future of the Cratchit family, worn down in their struggle against poverty, living now without Tim, who has died for lack of proper medical attention. Then Scrooge visits the chamber of a man who has apparently died in his sleep, and sees the maid and cleaning lady dividing up his things before the undertaker arrives. He hears two associates in the street arguing over whether it would be seemly to have a funeral at all for this man, since no one would attend. "But who is this man?" Scrooge asks, and he is taken to an unattended grave where the

ghost points to a headstone which bears the name "Ebenezer Scrooge." For the first time in his life, Scrooge is confronted with his own mortality.

As Christmas morning dawns Scrooge realizes that he has been given a reprieve, another chance to live his life to the fullest extent of his humanity . The spirits had shown him that the real bottom line is that no one lives forever; that the journey of life is brief, harder for some than for others, and hardest on those who, like him, try to make it alone. Scrooge saw himself a man who lived in a prison of his own devising, the doors shut and sealed with a bitterness of which he would not let go. His chains were forged with regrets that he could not release and hurts he would not forgive. What the ghosts did is to help Scrooge release the locks of his own feelings, permitting him to feel both sadness and joy. As a result, Scrooge came to regard Christmas as a time when one's primary focus should be extending generosity to the poor and to recognize the importance of "keeping Christmas" year-round by acting for equity and justice for all people every day.

"A Christmas Carol" is truly an Unitarian story. It does not teach a creed or dogma. Jesus is never mentioned but the importance of social justice, which Jesus preached during his life, is the essence of the tale. But Dickens also believed in the importance of celebrating this holiday and that the shared love and joy could help all to become our best selves.

There are many lessons to be learned from "A Christmas Carol":

- that the needy and the oppressed are our responsibility. We must be vigilant in our efforts to help them;

- that it is important for us to remember the past, and more importantly to learn from our mistakes;

- that we must honor and cherish our family and friends and celebrate our lives and the gifts we have been given;

- that we must be a beacon of hope in the world and spread peace, love, compassion, and joy to our fellow travelers in time and space.

There is one more lesson, not so obvious, but by far the most important. That is we must forgive others, as well as ourselves, for mistakes of the past. Scrooge's reformation would have been meaningless if those he had harmed had not be willing to forgive him.

So as we enter this week of celebration, let us enjoy it! Don't let the commercial trappings spoil your holiday. Remember that in spite of the fact that Dickens abhorred a society obsessed by cash boxes, ledgers, and "the bottom line" he became the strongest promoter of the celebration of the Christmas holiday. He believed that celebrations are the touchstones to our better selves--that they strengthen the love in our families and communities, that they help to shore up our good intentions, and they support our hopes and dreams. So let us all be like Charles Dickens, and celebrate our lives! And in the process of doing so, may the world be a better place for our having been here. And May God Bless us, everyone!