

R E J O I C E !

—a sermon by Barbara W. ten Hove — Paint Branch UU Church — Dec. 3, 2006—

This crazy holiday season can seem, in the classic words of Mr. Spock [of Star Trek fame], “illogical.” Spending a month each year in a frenzied round of shopping, decorating, and partying can be exhausting. Telling stories about stars that stand still over stables and kings who travel miles across the desert to give gifts to a poor baby—this taxes our imagination. Lighting candles in windows to remember a battle thousands of years ago seems pointless in this age of religious strife and war. And giving gifts to those less fortunate than ourselves is something we should do all year. Isn’t it just crazy that we spend the dark month of December doing all these illogical things?

Of course it is. And if there are any scrooges among us, you will be saying “Amen to that.” But I am not a scrooge. Despite its illogicalness, each year, as December rolls around, it seduces me. Perhaps I inherited my father’s holiday gene. I can’t help but enjoy everything about it.

But I am not fool enough to recognize how silly it all can seem. There are times when I feel a need to be serious, to look at the world not through red and green colored glasses but clearly and honestly. When I do that, I see so much not worth celebrating.

Despite singing songs of “peace on earth” each year, we are still at war. Despite remembering the story of Hanukkah and its emphasis on religious freedom, fundamentalism still has power over too many people all around the world. And despite the drama of the Christmas story, I know it’s not literally true. In times like this, what’s a UU to do?

My answer is simple. Let us rejoice. Rejoice. It’s a strange, yet moving word. Let me unpack it a little to see how it might help us approach this season with hope.

During December, much is made of merriment. We say Merry Christmas, over and over again. Merriment is all well and good. According to my dictionary, it means lighthearted happiness. Certainly, having a light heart is not a bad thing. But I think having a joyful heart may be more meaningful. For joy, at least as I understand it, is a deeper kind of happiness.

In the late 15th century, Fra Giovanni, a Franciscan monk and learned Italian architect wrote these words.

*There is nothing I can give you which you have not;
but there is much, that, while I cannot give, you can take.*

No heaven can come to us unless our hearts find rest in it today.

Take Heaven.

No peace lies in the future, which is not hidden in this present instant.

Take Peace.

The gloom of the world is but a shadow; behind it, yet, within our reach, is joy.

Take Joy.

*And so, at Christmas time, I greet you,
with the prayer that for you, now and forever,
the day breaks and the shadows flee away.*

This 15th century cleric reminds us that joy—like peace and like heaven—is not something separate from us. It is already a part of us, if we will only do the work of paying attention. He uses the imperative to tell us what to do: *Take heaven!* Don't assume it's somewhere far away; it's here in our hearts. *Take peace!* As many wise ones have said, peace must start inside if it is to be real and true. And he says *Take Joy!* It is always within our reach if we just look deeply.

So how to do that in these troubled times? Where is the real joy that can cause our hearts to sing?

Let me make three suggestions that may allow us to move with joy throughout this season.

First, I find joy in remembering that the celebrations we participate in during this season have deep roots in the past. The Biblical Christmas story is 2000 years old and the Hanukkah story is 200 years older than that. The celebration of the solstice goes back even further since it is clear from anthropological and archeological records that our Pagan ancestors commemorated the return of the sun in the winter as long ago as 5000 years. Even the modern Kwanzaa celebration—celebrating its 40th anniversary this year—is based on ideas and rituals used in Africa generations ago.

Understanding that we are a part of an ongoing chain of history allows us to see ourselves in context. We may have different ways of celebrating but we are doing

something people have done for thousands of years. One way I remember this is in the act of lighting candles. Candles are an old way of creating light. And as much as I love the bright electric lights that adorn our homes during this season, the simple act of lighting a candle in the darkness touches me at a much more primal level.

The most joy-filled time of this season for me is always Christmas Eve. Here in this beautiful, round sanctuary, we create magic when the lights go out and we see only the glow of our candles. Join me here on Christmas Eve. And find other times to light candles. I predict you will discover a deep joy as you feel yourself connected to all those who have lit candles in the darkness during this season.

Second, I also challenge us all to find joy by staying in the present. Each year, when this season comes around, it helps me if I try to remember that every year, every season, every day is different. Even as we celebrate our deep roots to the past, it is important to keep in mind the surprises that the holiday can bring at any moment.

Let me give you an example. Many years ago, when I was in my last year of seminary, I had planned to spend Christmas with my then boyfriend. But as fate would have it, we broke up on Dec. 21. Devastated, I assumed I would have a miserable Christmas with no boyfriend and no way to get home to my family far away. Instead, the church I was serving as an intern took me into its heart and I had a wonderful Christmas.

I remember eating two dinners on Christmas day—one in the traditional European style and the second one an incredible Chinese feast. I do not remember the names of those who took me in but I remember their ability to make room for me at their table. Because they were willing to let the season unfold without expecting it to look exactly like last year, they gave a homesick and lonely young woman a joy-filled Christmas and taught me to go with the flow during this special season.

Finally, you can't talk about this time of year without mentioning the huge emphasis placed on giving. Let's acknowledge the downside of it. We live in an incredibly materialistic culture and one of the worst aspects of the winter holidays is the constant barrage of ads to buy, buy, buy! I find this distressing and there are times when the focus on giving and getting more stuff seems the opposite of joyful.

But, there is something about holiday gift-giving that is surprisingly moving. Like most of us, I like getting gifts, particularly ones that I know were chosen with me in mind. Many years ago I lived with a couple in a little house in Seattle. Due to allergies, this couple was cat-less and thus I had to be, too. When we walked together around the neighborhood, I would love up on every cat I saw. My friends also found my tea drinking strange in coffee-saturated Seattle.

So when, during the Christmas I spent with them, a tea cozy and a teapot—both cat shaped—showed up for me under our tree, I was delighted. I still look at them with joy in my still cat-free house (ask Jaco about *his* allergies) and remember them and our time together with joy.

I also find the act of giving gifts, particularly to those who have less than I do, very meaning-filled. While it would be nice if all of us gave gifts to strangers who needed them throughout the year, the odds of that happening are slim. During this time of year, organizations like the UU-affiliated Beacon House in DC's Edgewood neighborhood make it easy for lots of people to give at one time.

Last year, Jeri Holloway and I delivered Paint Branch's gifts to Beacon House. The place was packed with gifts for the members of that community. Seeing all those presents in one place reminded me of the common purpose many of us have during this time of year. We take to heart the imperative to give and we do so generously, not simply as individuals but as a community. Our annual Alternative Gifts Market allows our whole church to give to organizations that are actively working to change the world for the better. This shared giving fills me with joy and I hope it does you, too.

Today, as we mark the first Sunday of Advent and look ahead to a month of parties and presents and packages, I would challenge all of us to follow the good words of Fra Giovanni and "Take Joy!" Take joy from your connection to all those who, throughout history, have made this time special. Take joy from the wonder of living in this present moment and keep yourself open to surprises. And take joy in the power of giving, as you allow yourself to be both generous in the gifts you give and gracious in accepting gifts from others.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Let us all rejoice. As we begin this holiday season together in this church that delights in it, I pray that the joy we feel here right now, will find its way, through us, to our community, our nation and the world. *Amen.*