

LOVE IS THE FULFILLING OF THE LAW:**THE TWELVE HOLY DAYS****A sermon given to the****Unitarian Society of Menomonie, Wisconsin****December 31, 2007****By Bob Bledsoe, Commissioned Lay Leader**

This has been an interesting week. Since we last got together Benazir Bhutto, the hoped-for Pakistani presidential relief from General Musharraf, was assassinated, although there is at this writing some question whether a bullet or a head injury killed her. It is generally forgotten that her attacker also blew himself up after the event, killing another 20 people. Kenya's elections were contested by the opposition side and the delay in results of the voting have led to violence and killings. J.K. Rowling has offered that there may yet be an eighth Harry Potter novel, although not for at least another ten years. In Java, Indonesia, the third anniversary of the Boxing Day tsunami brought a mudslide that has killed at least 120 people. More people were

injured in Palestinian demonstrations of the Israeli-erected barrier. The Taize monastic order celebrated its 30th anniversary in Geneva. The six-year old winner of much-coveted Hannah Montana tickets has admitted to making up her winning essay which began with the powerful line, “My daddy died in Iraq this year.” A tiger escaped its enclosure at a San Francisco zoo and managed to maul three people, killing one, before it was shot by police. Ten Guantanamo Bay detainees were released after an unknown time and repatriated to Saudi Arabia. An apartment block in Alexandria, Egypt, collapsed, killing 33. The 5th caliph of Senegal’s Mouride Muslim brotherhood, Serigne Saliou Mbacke, died at age 92. And we celebrated the birth of Christ and our belief in the efficacy of shopping to bring in good cheer. We are currently on day 5 of the famed twelve days of Christmas.

Of course, we’re well aware now that Jesus, who probably existed, certainly was not born on December 25 or anywhere in December, at least not by the New Testament’s testimony. It would be sometime in the spring according to the gospels, which makes a good deal more sense metaphorically as well, Jesus as the lamb of god and brining in the spring of Christianity and all that. Interestingly, the First Day of Christmas in the popular song we sang earlier is not Christmas. In most chronicles of the twelve holy days, Christmas is considered the pre-day, day zero if you will. It’s the day for celebrating the birth of Jesus among Christians, but it’s also associated with the births of Mithras, Attis, Aion, Horus, Dionysus and the Unconquered Sun. Mithras you may be familiar with. The Persian god of light, his name means “Friend” and he is often synonymous with the Sun who protects man after death. Attis or Atys is not to be confused with Attic which means having to do with Athens, but was a young man laid claim to by the hermaphroditic fertility goddess Agdistis who was so maddened by her jealousy he castrated himself in frustration and was changed by her into a pine tree before he could cut his throat.

Agdistis herself, by the way, was made female by castration as well. Aion is the Germanic term of personification for the age of the universe, an eternal being itself personified. Horus is familiar as one of the Sky Gods as well as a Sun God and is often represented as having the head of a falcon. Dionysus, also known as Bacchus, is the god of wine and good times. His name in Roman, *Iacchus*, comes from the Latin for “shout” and is thought to have originated as an epithet for a rowdy, noisy god.

The Unconquered Sun is an interesting character because it is both a stand-in for any of the above gods as well as a euphemism for the thing itself. The unconquered sun is what we see in the sky along about this time. It is equally connected with the Reindeer Man, a sort of Green Man of the North, a pagan mix of *Sintaklass* and Odin, who appears at this time of year with the gift of the deer.

Why twelve days? Well, the number twelve pops up a lot of places in Christianity and pagan myth. Twelve apostles, twelve months of the year, twelve zodiac signs, two twelve-hour segments to a day, the twelve of the Circular Council to the Dalai Lama, the twelve members of the Arthurian Round Table, the historical Twelve Peers of France, the twelve tribes of Israel, the twelve imams in Shi’a, the twelve principle gods of the Greeks, the twelve cranial nerves in the human cerebellum, the age at which a Jewish girl matures and receives bat mitzvah, the twelve sons of Odin, and even the twelve function keys on my PC keyboard—F1 through F12.

The true first day of Christmas is Boxing Day, so-called from the British custom of giving servants a Christmas box the day after his masters have celebrated. It’s also associated with St. Stephen, the proto-martyr associated with horses—it’s said his body was returned to his

people on the back of a horse—and with wrens. Yes, the little birds. It's said that to kill a wren on any day other than Boxing Day is to invite bad luck.

The second day, December 27th, is given over to Mother Night or Mother Carey or Mother Christmas. She is the Anglicized version of the German Frau Holle or Holda or Hulda, a figure of fertility, abundance and justice. She was often seen, originally, as a beautiful woman in white and with a golden girdle or a sash, dispensing gifts from a sleigh pulled by her dogs. She probably resembled the evil character Miss Colter played by Nicole Kidman in the film of *The Golden Compass*, and I wouldn't be surprised if Phillip Pullman based this character on her.

But far from the nasty Miss Colter, who Pullman chooses to personify the less savory aspects of Christianity, Frau Holle, whose name means “kindly one,” was a gentle goddess specializing in the care of children. It was up to the early church to turn her to a witch who stole unbaptized children. But at midnight on the Eve of Epiphany, it's said that a man walking home heard voices, many voices, behind him and stepped aside in time to allow Frau Holle and her passel of children and her flowing white train to pass him, the children laughing and running beside her. The last of the children, the smallest, kept falling behind from tripping over his nightshirt. The man gave him his own belt to tuck the shirt into. Frau Holle saw this and rewarded the man with a gift that his own children would forever be without want. It is important that we recall Frau Holle or Mother Night or Mother Carey or Mother Christmas as a mother. She is both nurturing and kind and a shrewd judge of character and it's these aspects we honor in her.

Following close on this is Day three: the Day of Holy Innocents. In the Middle Ages this day of Childremass was considered particularly unlucky; nothing begun on December 28th

would be completed, since children have remarkably poor attention spans and tend to wander around abstractedly. A practice whose return I would welcome is the ancient one that survived until the 18th century of regularly beating children on this day. The idea was that by mercilessly flogging and smacking children on the 28th, one would both drive out the evil spirits that had lodged there in the previous year and it would serve as a surrogate for any deserved beatings the following year. I am not as much in favor of the practice as it evolved, which called for ritual, painless token beatings between children and parents, husbands and wives, masters and servants. This strikes me as one of those practices whose original purpose we ought to honor by leaving it as it was intended. It is on this day we honor the children and correspondingly honor both our wishes for what they will become and our recognition of the reality of who they are. We also recall our lives before their arrival, although it's probably best not to think of that before we whip them.

The fourth day is one we might be a little familiar with. This is the Feast of the Fools, celebrated in the *Hunchback of Notre Dame* and a few other novels and a *MASH* episode. This is the day when the normal order of things is reversed. Servants become masters, pupils become teachers, women behave like men, and the fools rule. Naturally, this is my favorite day. Parties were held, masques given, general mayhem encouraged. It was a ritualistic method for blowing off steam, the opportunity for people who lived by the strictest restrictions to behave in the riotous, cavalier way they had foresworn in order to keep their places in the community. At one time, this day was more celebrated and better-remembered than Christmas. So when someone reminds you that we ought to put the Christ back in Christmas, you ought to remind him to put the Fool back in Fool's Day.

Now we come to today, day five, the Feast of the Boar's Head. Those of you who were here for my sermon on Samhain this year may remember the great importance pagan culture gave to ritual slaughter. This day is a part of that. On this day, two ceremonies are honored: the Scandinavian tradition that Frey, the god of sunshine, rides across the day atop Gulli-burstin, his golden boar, whose spikes are the rays of the sun. The second is the older, now lost, tradition in England of the boar's head, whose meat graced the Christmas table until probably the mid Twelfth century when it disappeared, being brought in as the final remnant of the sacred meal and distributed among the revelers. It is meet we should remember the boars, now gone in both England and here, by leaving for them a small offering to their memory, an apple or orange, in the event one is still snuffling around.

New Year's Eve, that most festive of drinking holidays, is day six, and in many places supersedes the celebration of Christmas itself. In Gaelic Christmas is called *An Nollaig Mhor* "big yule" and New Year's Day *An Nollaig Bheag* "little Yule." And why not? The change of year has sturdier and more aged roots than the ostensible birth of the Christ. Still, how anyone might have guessed for this day to be the night when everything switches off for one year and switches on for the next is a feat of mathematical ambidexterity I couldn't begin to fathom. Nevertheless, here it is, December 31st. The feast on this day is known as *Hogmanay* and it was the day when the Druid priests cut the sacred mistletoe and distributed sprigs among the people. *Hogmanay* itself is a corruption of the French term *au gui menez* "lead [us] to the mistletoe," and in some parts of France children still celebrate the day with a race during which they cry, "*Au gey l'an neuf, au gey Gaulois*" "to the mistletoe, to the French mistletoe."

This is the day when we take care of the things we have missed taking care of throughout the year. The trash is taken out and fresh sheets placed on the beds. Socks are darned and brass

and silver shined. Pictures are hung straight. This is the day of Reclaiming Unfinished Business, clearing up all those things we neglected the rest of the year. Everyone experiences a new beginning, a new clearing of the old. After sunset, juniper branches and fresh water were brought into the house. The branches were dried out overnight, and in the morning the head of house drank the first sips from the water and sprinkled everyone else with some. Then the dried juniper was lit, the doors and windows latched, and the house was fumigated with the burning branch. This ensured the gifts of the new year were appreciated appropriately. The new year's blessing was brought by the first person to cross the threshold to visit, called "first footing." All the lights were put out except for a single candle left, and then that person must step outside, protecting the candle from the elements. At the stroke of twelve, she reenters, is given a mug of eggnog, and sets about relighting all the candles and lanterns of the house, blessing the house with new light. Often that person also gives a *handsel* a gift of coal or whiskey to make the blessings concrete.

Day seven of course everyone sleeps in. This is the *Kalends* of the new year, the hopefulness of the new day. The old year is now officially dead and while we may not immediately see any benefits yet to the new, there is always a reason to be thankful, even if it is our ability to have made it through another year. In contrast to New Year's Eve day, nothing is taken out of the house this day—trash, bones, excrement, they are all left inside until the next day, to ensure blessings of the first footing do not escape.

One of the nostalgic traditions we think of as Christmas in origin is caroling, but this is actually done on the Seventh Day and is referred to as Wassailing. Wassail is a heated, alcoholic apple cider and is meant to be shared with the trees of the orchard as well as with the visitors who sing. Robins were seen as the guardians of apple trees and it was them that the wassail was

intended to provoke, cake pieces and bread pieces soaked in the wassail being stuck to branches to reward them for their past year of faithful service. On this bleak day it is beneficent to intone, “The luck of the year, it is the bird-quiet hour, the midday contemplation of the sun. On this bleak day, when no sun shines, what wraps the birds in silence, what power blankets their song?” It’s the day of prophesying and divination—weather divination especially, as you can imagine from a people reliant on weather for their well-being, and one saying from Scotland runs, “Wind from the west, fish and bread; wind from the north, cold and flaying; wind from the east, snow on the hills; wind from the south, fruit on trees”—and the first day’s water drawn from the well is considered especially blessed and called the flower of the well.

The Eighth Day is the day for sitting inside to contemplate and reflect on snow. It’s imperative that we remain on snow’s good side, since to be in opposition to snow is to be in opposition to winter and that’s simply a waste of energy. We pay our respects to snow on this day, for its cancelling out of the darkness at midwinter and its transformation of even the bleakest spaces into a place of wonder and enchantment.

The Cherokee have a story about the Ninth day, which is devoted to evergreens. The Druids of course revered the oak and during *Kalends* yew and juniper play a major role. In the middle ages there was a well-known play about the Paradise Tree, a descendant of the original Tree of Knowledge, which Adam had smuggled out of Eden and planted in the outer world, where it grew to huge proportions and provided the wood for the cross on which Christ was crucified.

Back to the Cherokee. When the Great Mystery created all the trees and plants she wanted to give something to all of them. But she couldn’t decide among them who best deserved

it, so she proposed a contest. Whoever could keep watch for seven days and seven nights would receive the gift. All the trees were atwitter to be given such an important duty and had no problems remaining awake the first night. But on the second night they found it hard to stay awake, and the flowers were the first to fall asleep. By the third night, the birch and grasses were drooped, and by the fourth night the elms were snoring. On the fifth and sixth nights, the maples and even the oaks had drifted off, until, by the eighth morning only a few—the pine, the cedar, the spruce and fir and holly and laurel—were still awake and watchful. “What great endurance you have!” cried out the Great Mystery, and so she gave them the gift: they would remain green forever and keep guard throughout the winter while all the others sleep. The evergreens, this story says, are always awake. And always watching.

Day Ten is interesting because it is two different days for men and women. For both it was the day when each had to return to the drudgery of work after the luxurious time off afforded by the festivities of midwinter. In the case of women who in these preindustrialized times were often employed as weavers and spinners, it was known as St. Distaff’s Day, while for the men who were also expected to return to work, it was known as Plough Monday. Whether the day itself fell on a Monday or not wasn’t important, it was simply another Monday in their eyes. This became the excuse for another day of celebration as now mummers, the bemasked players who appeared throughout the year at festivals and feasts, now sped through town blessing the ploughs and spindles. Today Plough Monday has been given its own day in England, January 8, separate from the twelve holy days, but it’s thought to originate in another ancient Roman celebration, *Compitaline*. In this ritual a small shrine was built where four estates met to the four directions, with a miniature plough and wooden doll set on each alter, and then the first earth-

breaking of the new year was done on each property. With St. Dystaff's Day we begin to return to the normal times.

The Eleventh day of Christmas, January 5, is the Eve of Epiphany and the Festival of the Three Kings. This day is given over to the Magi whose journey is often a microcosm of the journey we ourselves make spiritually. Consider, they were themselves seekers after something and doing what felt right to them to do, going where their inner compass told them to go, and for so many of us, here today in this church, we have traveled so far and so wide only on the basis of our own compasses, be they in our hearts or our heads. As the Magi found what they sought in the form of a child, may you find what you seek here.

This is the day to consider too the gifts that so often become the major focus of these holy days, forgetting as we do that we are ourselves the recipients of a gift. I quote now from John Matthews: "At a time when the commercial Christmas has a tendency to swamp the sacredness of the season, we ask and are being asked, 'What do you want this year?' There are certainly things we would quite like, things that we hope will be brought for us, but these are not the same as our wants. True wants are not small things satisfied by prettily wrapped parcels: they are the immense needs of inner space that can be overwhelmed by all our little wants and yearnings. To consider our real needs—the things we lack in our lives—is often too frightening, opening up an abyss of need that calls our very existence into question.

"Our real wants eat holes in us: never resting, never loving, never greeting, never finding, never seeking, never being satisfied deep down. These ravenous wants define our treasures...they create a Christmas list that no store could supply: time to stop and really enjoy, in a space of quietness and contentment all the things we were put on earth to do.

“Space to give and receive love reciprocally. The grace to seek and find our spiritual joy. Freedom from the tyranny and burden of other’s expectations, of what others think. Acceptance of ourselves as we truly are.”

This then is the gift afforded us on the twelfth day. Epiphany. It means manifestation, making an appearance, and refers theologically to the appearance of Christ to the Three Kings. But it’s a lot more than that. In literature James Joyce gave us another meaning in an early draft of what would become *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. He describes it as a sudden insight, an instant when reality shines through an ordinary object, when “its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance.” It’s the appearance of what we need. Perhaps not what we want, because that’s always going to be something good, something we like, and our epiphany is more likely to be something we haven’t considered and don’t want and, god help us, we don’t like. For me, epiphany is often the realization that I have more work to do, that as easy as it seems to have gotten in one sphere, it’s become more challenging in another. For you it might be a recognition that you’ve had all your needs met and now it’s time to meet them for other people. For others it may be exactly the opposite: it’s time to consider yourself a while rather than others. There’s no one size fits all when it comes to epiphany. It can come in any number of ways: in someone’s smile, in the smell of woodsmoke where we thought there were no houses, in the sudden, unexpected taste of a good wine, in the sound of voices where we expected to be alone, in the touch of flesh on flesh that reminds us we are with one another. These tiny moments bring us out of ourselves and into the wider world.

Like anything artistic, epiphany can be ruined by over definition. Let’s take a minute of silence to reflect on what we have been given.