

## GIFTS OF THE SEASON

Homily by Audette Fulbright  
Sunday, December 15, 2019  
All Souls Church, New York City

### THE CHRISTMAS TRUCE

“On Christmas Day, 1914, in the first year of World War I, German, British, and French soldiers disobeyed their superiors and fraternized with "the enemy" along two-thirds of the Western Front. German troops held Christmas trees up out of the trenches with signs, "Merry Christmas." "You no shoot, we no shoot." Thousands of troops streamed across a no-man's land strewn with rotting corpses. They sang Christmas carols, exchanged photographs of loved ones back home, shared rations, played football, even roasted some pigs. Soldiers embraced men they had been trying to kill a few short hours before. They agreed to warn each other if the top brass forced them to fire their weapons, and to aim high.

A shudder ran through the high command on either side. Here was disaster in the making: soldiers declaring their brotherhood with each other and refusing to fight. Generals on both sides declared this spontaneous peacemaking to be treasonous and subject to court martial. By March, 1915 the fraternization movement had been eradicated and the killing machine put back in full operation. By the time of the armistice in 1918, fifteen million would be slaughtered.

Not many people have heard the story of the Christmas Truce. Military leaders have not gone out of their way to publicize it. On Christmas Day, 1988, a story in the Boston Globe mentioned that a local FM radio host played "Christmas in the Trenches," a ballad about the Christmas Truce, several times and was startled by the effect. The song became the most requested recording during the holidays in Boston on several FM stations. "Even more startling than the number of requests I get is the reaction to the ballad afterward by callers who hadn't heard it before," said the radio host. "They telephone me deeply moved, sometimes in tears, asking, 'What the hell did I just hear?'"

I think I know why the callers were in tears. The Christmas Truce story goes against most of what we have been taught about people. It gives us a glimpse of the world as we wish it could be and says, "This really happened once." It reminds us of those thoughts we keep hidden away, out of range of the TV and newspaper stories that tell us how trivial and mean human life is. It is like hearing that our deepest wishes really are true: the world really could be different.”<sup>1</sup>

Maybe this is a story that you've heard before. But this kind of story seems more important than ever, circa 2019. I don't have to explain to you the divisiveness of our age -- you walk out into it every day; you see it on the news, and it's likely you have even become estranged from friends or family over the last few years as a result.

There are no promises in the days to come, but this is a season of gifts. These are the days when we're turning, in a different way, to the needs and wants of those near to us, and often, to those of people we don't know. This is the real magic of these short, late-year days, in these rituals and holy days that reach out for light in the midst of darkness. They are our rich, shared opportunity

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<sup>1</sup>Nuclear Age Peace Foundation: <https://www.wagingpeace.org/the-christmas-truce/>

to think about the Big Things, things like peace and love and plenty. What if we all treated them as such? What if we reached out and really made the holiday season our season of real worship – which at its root means to recognize what is of *worth*. “Worthship.” In December, we remember who we always wanted to be. We tend community; we reach out to our neighbors, those among us who are poor, who are hungry, who are ill, infirm, or alone. It is a time when people try to help fulfill the hopes of strangers, taking cards from angel trees and delivering cans of food to shelters. Some bake cookies for the people who risk their lives for us – fire fighters, police officers, people in the armed services. Others reach into boxes and pull out treasures made by young hands just finding their talents, and they matter more than the Tiffany glass beside which they hang. We sing songs we learned as children with strangers and friends; we hum along in elevators and grocery stores – tasks we often rush through suddenly can reveal surprising wellsprings of meaning.

This is what the holidays can mean. They are our chance to create the world anew. The band Five for Fighting once asked:

“What kind of world do you want?  
Think Anything  
Let's start at the start  
Build a masterpiece  
Be careful what you wish for  
History starts now...”

What kind of world *do* you want? What kind of person do you really want to be? Every day is the day to ask this question, but the holiday season invites this reflection for us as a people, as communities of neighbors. Everything we do matters. “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny,” Martin Luther King Jr. reminded us. Who we are and what we do shapes the rest of history. What kind of world do you want? History starts now.

I can tell you a few things I want. I want to live in a country that has a humane and robust immigration system, one not built on racist tropes and terror, but rather one that recognizes that immigration has long been a pathway to success for the United States. To that end, I am grateful to work with the immigration team at All Souls, which this month, on Dec. 19th at 5 pm, is also beginning to connect with other UU congregations in the city to expand what is possible. This is one of the ways we move our good intentions to reality -- we show up.

I want my children to have a livable world to inherit -- one with polar bears and bees and wolves and ancient forests. To that end, I am working with those of you who not only said you want the same things, but who show up so we can do the work together. This coming Tuesday night, December 17, we are meeting here to do that work. We'll be getting started on Green Sanctuary work, we'll be looking at a tree planting project with the Trust for Public Land, and we'll be connecting with Extinction Rebellion NYC and other UU congregations to deepen our community ties. It's an hour and a half out of your week, yet it's the budding of so much possibility. This is what it means to dream of a better world, and to create - with your hands, and imagination, and time - a new history.

At our 10:00 a.m. service, our children and families showed up to tell holy-day stories. From Las Posadas to Hanukkah to the story from the book of Luke, they celebrated the old stories -- stories of hope, and transformation, and the possibility of a new world being born. But there are also stories close to home, that tell a variation of the old tales. Here at All Souls, we take the

wisdom of Billy Murray to heart. Remember his passionate speech at the end of *Scrooged*, when he interrupts the live performance of *A Christmas Carol* to say,

“It's Christmas...It's the one [time]when we all act a little nicer. We... smile a little easier. We...share a little more....It's really a miracle because it happens every Christmas...You have to do something. You have to take a chance and get involved. There are people that don't have enough to eat and who are cold. You can go and greet these people. Take an old blanket out to them or make a sandwich and say, "Here." "I get it now." And if you give, then it can happen, the miracle can happen to you. Not just the poor and hungry, Everybody's gotta have this miracle! It can happen... for you all!If you believe in this pure thing, the miracle will happen and you'll want it again tomorrow! You won't say, "Christmas is once a year and it's a fraud." It's not! It can happen every day! You've just got to want that feeling! You'll want it every day, and it can happen to you.”<sup>2</sup>

Folks at All Souls know that feeling. You feel it when you come to the STEPS party. You feel it when you help make the dinners at Monday Night Hospitality or the lunches at Friday Soup Kitchen happen. You feel it when you bring mittens and hats for the Mitten Tree on Christmas Eve. You feel it every time you give to the Common Pantry. A better world, possible.

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<sup>2</sup> *Scrooged*: [http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie\\_scripts/s/scrooged-script-transcript-bill-murray.html](http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/s/scrooged-script-transcript-bill-murray.html)