

CONNECTIONS

Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. I am Matt Hoyt. At this time we begin with Connections. This a time where we share the triumphs and hardships in our lives. Where we can reflect on what is happening about us. This is not a time for announcements, political statements, or expressions of anger. We share our happiness and thereby multiply our joy; and we share our pain, thereby easing the burden we carry.

If you have something to share, please do so. Come forward; tell us your name; and what is on your mind. After each person has spoken, give us a moment to contemplate what they said. If what you share is too personal to share with the congregation, please say so and it won't be mentioned in the worship service.



Spirit we share, let us rejoice in the successes mentioned here. Bring those with pain or suffering the clarity and peace to see those trials through and let our sympathy help them. Let love surround us. Let us contemplate what has been shared and offer hope for any events too painful to be shared.

Amen, let it be so, truly.

Rejoin the world; stand now and greet your friends at the door. Share your love.

MAURINE. Good morning and welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Maurine Olin. Our minister, the Rev. Jeff Briere, contracted a case of food poisoning this week. He was well enough to write our service for today, but not well enough to preach it. So with the help of Rich and Kate and Catherine, we hope to bring his words to life. Let's begin with Hymn 410, "Surprised by Joy." Number 410. The words to this hymn are new to us, but the melody is familiar. The same notes, but in a different meter, are used for No. 34, "Though I May Speak with Bravest Fire."

HYMN 410: Surprised by Joy

GREETINGS

KRISTIE. **Thanks so much** for joining us in worship today. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted. And thank you so much for helping to create a reverent atmosphere during *Connections*.

If you have a particular **joy or sorrow** or something you'd like added to the prayer of the people, please clearly write it on an index card and drop it in the basket back there. You may sign it or not, as you wish.

A complete listing of announcements is included with the bulletin. The best way to find out what's happening around here is to sign up for a weekly e-mail. To do that, please see Chris in the office.

For music today, we are pleased to see Christie Burns again. She begins with a tune composed by a local journalist and musician, Casey Phillips.

PRELUDE: Cockeyed Hen

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

MAURINE. Mary Hunter, would you please light our chalice? Please read with me. Your words are in italics.

This place has been waiting for us,
To gather our dreams of justice and peace.

This place has been waiting for us,
To honor it by opening our hearts and speaking our minds.

This place has been waiting for us,
To fill it with compassion and loving kindness.

This place has been waiting for us,
To draw from it a breath of common purpose.

This place has been waiting for us,
To listen to the wisdom of its silence.

This place has been waiting for us,
To fill it with the urgency of new possibilities.

This place has been waiting for us,
To make it sacred by our presence.

STORY: Abu l' Hssein the Fox ☽ Rashida the Raven

KATE. Who knows this word? Hospitality. I'd like to talk a little bit about hospitality. It has five syllables: Hos-pi-tal-i-ty. It comes from the French, and before that, Latin. What's it mean? Hospitality.

Look what's inside hospitality. Spit. Does hospitality have anything to do with spitting? No.

Look what else is inside hospitality. Hospital. Does this mean we go to the hospital to practice hospitality? No, we don't have to go to the hospital.

Hospitality is the practice of making your friends and guests feel welcome in your home. When you offer your friend some food or a drink, you are being hospitable. But you just can't offer them whatever is in the fridge. You should know that your friend prefers orange juice instead of root beer. And if you have a guest, you can ask if they prefer roast beef or roasted cauliflower. Hospitality requires that you offer your guest or friend something that makes them feel at home *in your home*.

Hospitality refers mostly to food and drink, some kind of refreshment, but it doesn't mean only food. Hospitality is something we try to achieve every Sunday morning as we welcome visitors to this church. Being hospitable means being friendly, generous and respectful. Whatever it takes for your friends and guests to feel relaxed, refreshed and comfortable. That's hospitality.

Rich and I have a story of hospitality in action. This story is about Abu l' Hssein, the Fox and Rashida the Raven.

NARRATOR RICH. Abu l' Hssein, the fox, had always been close friends with Rashida, the raven.

NARRATOR KATE. One day, Abu was trotting along the trail when he saw Raven perched in a tree.

ABU L’HSSEIN. Rashida! Long time! What’s happenin’ babe?”

RASHIDA. Why, hello, Abu. I’m winging well, thank you. How are you?

ABU L’HSSEIN. I’m doin’ fine. Fine! Say! Let’s catch up! Howsabout you & me havin’ dinner tonight?

RASHIDA. How thoroughly thoughtful of you. What time?

ABU L’HSSEIN. Why don’t you drop by about seven, eh? You know that big flat rock in front of my den? I’ll meet you there.

RASHIDA. Shall I bring something? Say a carafe of Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc?

ABU L’HSSEIN. Naaah. My treat.

NARRATOR KATE. Once he arrived at his den, Abu l’Hssein began to prepare a super soup and a sumptuous supper for his friend.

NARRATOR RICH. He made a savory soup with low-salt, no-fat bouillon, bits of soy protein, locally-grown organic vegetables and fresh herbs and seasonings. All day long, his soup simmered and smoked, smelling spicy and sinfully scrumptious. Rashida arrived promptly at seven.

RASHIDA. Abu, what is that fabulous fragrance?

ABU L’HSSEIN. Tonight, we’ll forage in my famous forest soup. Eat well, my friend. I made this just for you.

NARRATOR KATE. And with a flourish, Abu l’Hssein poured the soup onto the large flat rock in front of his den.

NARRATOR RICH. Rashida pecked at the soup, which covered the rock to a depth of about a millimeter. She pecked and pecked, but was unable to eat, for her bill was meant to crush nuts and grab fruit, but not eat soup, especially soup poured out onto a flat surface. She became very frustrated as she watched Abu l’Hssein lap up the delicious dinner.

RASHIDA. Who does Abu l’Hssein think I am? I can’t eat this! Soup on a stone?

NARRATOR RICH. Rashida folded her napkin and gazed over the rock at Abu.

RASHIDA. Really, Abu?

ABU L’HSSEIN. [*Clueless.*] What? Would you like some more?

RASHIDA. Oh, dear me! No more, please. I can’t eat another drop. Abu l’Hssein, you have outdone yourself with this splendiferous supper. I simply *must* repay your hospitality. Please visit me tomorrow evening for dinner. I will share with you some delectable dates from my tree.

ABU L’HSSEIN. Rashida! How did you know that dates are my favorite? I ain’t had a real date in so long, I can’t remember what they look like. All I get are the rotten ones that everyone else leaves behind.

RASHIDA. Shall we say 7? At the base of my tree? And don't bother to bring anything. Just your appetite.

NARRATOR RICH. And with that, they parted and Rashida flew home. Abu l' Hssein arrived promptly at 7 the following evening to find Rashida perched in her date tree, silhouetted against the orange glow of a warm setting sun.

RASHIDA. Abu! These are the most divine dates. I've never tasted a sweeter fruit. Watch out, now. I'll knock some down for you. Eat them and you'll think you've died and gone to heaven.

NARRATOR RICH. Rashida knocked off a few dates for Abu l' Hssein, but not where he could catch them. She dropped them into the middle of a dense thorn brush. Abu, mad with hunger and crazed with visions of sweet dates, ran around the thorn bush, looking for a way in.

NARRATOR KATE. But no matter how he wriggled, squirmed, jumped or pounced, he could not reach the dates. Before long, his snout had a deep cut, his lips were red and swollen and his paws were raw and bleeding from reaching into the thorns.

NARRATOR RICH. But then Rashida flew down and alighted near him. She used her hard beak to deftly reach into the thorns and grab a date for herself. After she had eaten it, she reached into the thorns with her scaly claws and grabbed another. For a hour or so, she stuffed herself with dates, at last holding her tummy and groaning with satisfaction.

NARRATOR KATE. At that moment, Abu l' Hssein got it. Now, instead of thinking more about his own tummy, Abu understood that hospitality demands that he think first of his friend's comfort. And the next day, he went to Wal-Mart and bought some bowls to serve his soup so that he would be more hospitable to Rashida and all his friends and guests.

NARRATOR RICH. Thank you for listening to our story. You can go to your classes now and remember to be hospitable to your friends and guests.

CHILDREN'S RECESSONAL

We hold you in our love
as you go, as you go
May your heart
be at peace as you go.

To nurture the spark
of your precious life
We hold you in our love
as you go.

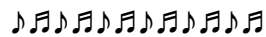
OFFERTORY: Redbird

MAURINE. Nikita Khrushchev was the Premier of the Soviet Union from 1958 to 1964. He was known for his temper, but he could also be hospitable. Shortly after the Congo achieved its independence from Belgium, Khrushchev furiously denounced the United Nations for preventing Russian intervention in the Congo. Within a week of blasting the UN, he sent Dag Hamrnarskjold, then secretary general, an invitation to a Soviet reception.

Hammarskjold attended the reception and was greeted with great cordiality by the Russian leader. Someone asked Khrushchev why he behaved so warmly toward a man whom he had recently been attacking so bitterly in public.

Khrushchev replied, "In the mountains of the Caucasus in our country, the people have a strong tradition of hospitality. When an enemy is inside your home, sharing your bread and salt, you should always treat him with the greatest hospitality. But as soon as he steps outside the door, he is again your enemy."

We'll collect the morning offering now for the support and ministry of the this church. And when you step outside, we'll still treat you with respect. If you have a pledge payment, please mark it as such. As always, the Wood-Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non-perishable food and household items for the Community Kitchen. The collection basket for that is by the front door. If you wish to light a personal candle of joy or sorrow, you may step up here and Mary Hunter will assist you.



Eternal Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience today. Would that we recognize our blessings every day and remember to be thankful for them.

Kate, please lead us in our Hymn of Thanksgiving.

HYMN OF THANKSGIVING

Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day,
For all gathered here, and those far away,
For this time we share, with love and care,
Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day.

ORISON

MAURINE. *Dona Nobis Pacem.* Give Us Peace. *Dona Nobis Pacem.*

Carolyn Moore is undergoing radiation treatment. She began it last week after her physicians discovered cancerous growths in various places and lesions in her brain. Please keep her in your thoughts and prayers.

Jeff wrote this during the week: In between being sicker than sick, I watched a little TV this week. Like you, I was staggered by the images of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan. I was reminded of the images of the earthquake in Haiti and the tsunami in Indonesia. A disaster like this reminds us that we are puny little earthlings, subject to the whims of the natural world. The death toll seems to be high; destruction of cities and farmland, abysmal and fears of nuclear pollution only add to the general mayhem.

Many high-functioning and sophisticated relief agencies have mobilized their resources to alleviate suffering. Google has set up a page with links to many agencies working to restore order and treat the injured. If you wish to make a donation, go to the website indicated on the insert in your bulletin.

I have it written down right here if you want to see it after the service. www.google.com/tsunami_relief.html

I pray for the people of Japan, for the first responders, and subsequent relief efforts. May they be safe.

Thou, which are everywhere,
Many are your names.
May we always feel your presence,
May your wisdom guide us,
In our deeds as well as in our dreams.
May we have what sustains our body and soul;
Lead us first to forgive the mistakes of others
Even as we hope our own mistakes will soon be forgiven.
May we resist the temptation of the quick and easy,
And be delivered from that which demeans and destroys life.
May we live purposefully and joyfully
in every moment, in every encounter,
now, and in the time to come.

During this time of silence let us hold close to our hearts those who are suffering and rejoice with those who are jubilant, but let us never forget those who suffer the fallout of war.

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.

RESPONSE

When our heart is in a holy place
When our heart is in a holy place
We are blessed with love and amazing grace
When our heart is in a holy place

HERE

KATE. Here may no one be altogether a stranger,
no honesty of thought ignored,
no depth of feeling dismissed,
no life belittled, and no life shut out.

Here may clarity of mind and heart
be humbly treasured,
brought to bear toward word and person.

Here may fellowship be treasured most of all
and paths to sustain and renew it
be sought and found.

Here may growth of spirit be our purpose;
such understanding as shall lead us
to make the world a better place.

SERMON: A Reason to Party

Awhile ago, it was decided that we would bring back the goods and services auction as a fund raiser. I thought to donate a sermon on the topic of the winning bidder's choosing. When we determined that we could not sustain the effort to produce the auction, Wendy Sapp suggested that maybe I should give it away. The sermon—give it away instead of auctioning it off. She thought if I offered a sermon of your choice, I might get more responses than if I bid it out and I would have many topics to preach about.

Finding a topic to preach about can be difficult for a Unitarian Universalist minister. We are not bound by the lectionary, which is a three-year cycle of topics and readings prompted by biblical passages. I could use the lectionary, but I don't. It allows no room to preach about events that are not already predicted by it. So I am left to my own devices and to topics that crop up locally and around the world.

I agreed with Wendy and in the past few months of the weekly e-blast, I have invited sermon topics. Expecting to be inundated with requests, I have received two. Which means that you don't want to hear about hardly anything from me, or that you've already heard about nearly everything from me, or that you so like whatever I preach about that you don't want to stifle my creativity or distract me with your suggestions.

The first suggestion came from Jerry Smith. He wanted to hear my take on how group status can skew moderate viewpoints in a more radical direction. That will take some research and reading.

The second suggestion came from Claire Hale. She wanted to learn more about the evolution of pagan celebrations into current Christian celebrations, showing that Christian holidays predate Christ. And that is a topic that I knew about, but had never researched, so here it is, *A Reason to Party*. And thanks, Claire.

What I will say this morning derives from and applies to the western European culture, especially British, because that is the cultural ancestor of most people in this room. I don't mean to discredit any other cultural derivation, but the plain fact is that, broadly speaking, American culture descends from the British. Of course it has been supplemented by African, Asian, Native American and Hispanic cultures. Of course it has. And many others, please forgive me for not naming them all. And we are richer for it.

The other aspect of this is that Unitarian Universalism descends from the Roman Rite of Christianity, through the Church of England and supplemented by other liberal religious impulses. And it is richer for it. In both cases, our religion and culture come to us from Europe.

Claire asks me to explain how pagan festivals became Christian ones. I could talk about Halloween, All Saint's Day, Ember Days and a few others. But the two critically important festivals that were co-opted by Christians when they spread the good news are Easter and Christmas. And where did the missionaries spread their good news in the years after Jesus died? They went west into Europe.

Here's a shot of the Mediterranean world from Google Earth. Some missionaries may have gone east, but whatever they did there did not flourish as it did in Europe. So I cannot really talk about how Christians co-opted holidays in Persia, India or China. They may have, but their influence was small and their legacy is lost to us. We know there were churches in northern Africa, but they were not long for this world. They were overwhelmed by the spread of Islam in the latter half of the first millennium.

Starting here, in ancient Palestine, missionaries went west into modern day Turkey, into the Balkans, Greece, Italy, the Adriatic coast and from there into France, eastern and western Europe and the British Isles. Why did they go there? Because that's where the Roman Army decided to go and conquer the natives. That's where the resources were. Roman influence never really went too far east of Palestine.

So any pagan culture in our heritage is rooted in pre-Christian European culture. I want to parse this word, “pagan.” The dictionary tells us that a pagan is one who is not a Christian, a Muslim or a Jew; a heathen. Or one professing no religion. The word derives from the Latin word for a country-dweller, a hillbilly.

I thought the whole etymology was tainted by the editor’s bias or someone’s bias. Or maybe I’m too politically correct. Using this definition, a pagan could be a Sikh, a Hindu or a Native American. And I think that’s just a little bit beyond the pale for me. I try not to use the word, but today, when I use it, I refer to the folks the missionaries encountered in Europe and Britain.

Using approximate numbers, and the best scientific research available, *Homo Sapiens* is about 200,000 years old. We moved out of Africa about 55,000 years ago and began to dominate the planet. Jesus was born about 2012 years ago and his church began to spread rapidly only about 1600 years ago. Subtracting 1600 from 55,000 tells us that whatever culture developed in early humans had a head start on Christianity of about 53,400 years. Human beings had 53,400 years to practice and pass on to their children their religious and cultural norms before Christians showed up.

What do you suppose those religious and cultural norms were? No one has incontrovertible proof, but we have an awful lot of evidence indicating that people were influenced by the cosmos. I mean the phase of the moon, the movement of the moon and the sun, the equinoxes and solstices and what they imagined about the stars. We also have evidence they were influenced by the natural world, especially the seasons of sowing and reaping, growth and dormancy.

To me, this seems like a no-brainer. The two biggest things above our heads and the rest of the natural world could not be unimportant to an ancient society. We are creatures of the earth. Our name, human, derives from an ancient pre-Latin word meaning earth. We are earthlings. Not water-lings, not air-lings, not fire-lings. We come from the earth, as the second creation story in Genesis confirms. Coming from the earth, it is only reasonable that we should be attached to its cycles and influences.

From the earliest times, humans have celebrated certain times of the year: mid-summer, mid-winter, spring and the harvest. Mid-summer was a time to celebrate the warmth of the sun and the growth of animals and crops. Mid-winter, when nothing could be done with the cold earth, was a time to re-ignite the warmth of summer and look forward to longer days. In spring, celebrations of re-growth were in order. The harvest was, of course, a big reason to party, as the earth had once again produced grain and vegetables to sustain the people through the winter.

In time, when mythologies developed, certain gods and goddesses became associated with these festivals, along with other human activities, such as hunting and fishing and so forth. So by the time of Jesus, at least in the Roman world, many feast days around the year were established in honor of many gods and other mythical figures.

And just to show that aspects of ancient culture are still with us today, our word January comes from the name of the fellow on the cover of the bulletin. In Roman mythology, Janus is the god of gates and doorways, beginnings and endings. He was borrowed from other, much older, middle eastern cultures. Most often he is depicted as having two heads, facing opposite directions; one head looks back at the last year while the other looks forward to the future.

The Christian liturgical year is an annual cycle of seasons and days that commemorates the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the virtuous lives of his followers. It is certainly not the calendar Jesus himself followed. Jesus was bound by the Hebrew calendar to the law of the Sabbath and to observing feasts and fasts prescribed in the Old Testament. As his ministry developed he became less concerned with outward conformity to Jewish legal sanctions. “The Sabbath was made for man,” he said, “and not man for the Sabbath.”

So let's first examine the Sabbath, which is Sunday for gentiles. First, the word itself comes from the Latin, *dies solis*, or in English, Sun's Day, a day the Romans named in honor of their god of the sun. The original Christians were actually Jews, and they continued to celebrate their Sabbath on Saturday, the last day of the week.

In time, Christianity attracted more gentiles as converts and, not being bound by Jewish law, Sunday was adopted as the Christian Sabbath because of a scriptural passage from Mark indicating that Jesus arose from the dead before dawn on the first day of the week. And that's where our custom of gathering at 11 am on the day of the Roman sun god began.

Now, about Easter. The word derives from the name of a Saxon goddess of spring and offspring and fertility, *Eastre*, whose feast day was the vernal equinox. *Eastre* is pronounced and spelled nearly the same as Easter, the last two letters being reversed. The root of the word comes from a pre-Roman word meaning to shine. From that root we also have east and aurora.

Second-century Christian missionaries, spreading out among Teutonic tribes north of Rome, encountered numerous religious observances. Whenever possible, the missionaries tried not to interfere too strongly with entrenched and popular customs. Rather, they attempted to transform pagan practices into ceremonies that harmonized with Christian doctrine.

There was a very special reason for this. Converts publicly partaking in a Christian ceremony, and on a day when no one else of their clan was celebrating, were easy targets for persecution. But if a Christian rite were staged on the same day as a long-observed pagan celebration, and if the two modes of worship were not glaringly different, then the new converts might live to make other converts.

The Christian missionaries observed that the centuries-old festival of *Eastre* at the start of spring, coincided with their own observance of the the Resurrection. Thus, if the Resurrection were subsumed under the protective rubric of *Eastre*, the missionaries might make more friends and influence people.

I don't have time to go into it here, but the Easter Bunny and Hot Cross buns can also be traced to this ancient festival of *Eastre*. For many years, Easter was variously celebrated on a Friday, Saturday, or Sunday. In 325, after the Council of Nicea and after Constantine became Christian and made his new religion everyone's religion, he decreed that Easter should be celebrated on "the first Sunday after the first full moon on or after the vernal equinox."

And why should Easter happen at that time? Because Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread was what drew Jesus to Jerusalem the week before he died. Fixing the dates of that holiday week is a function of the vernal equinox. Passover begins the holiday week and is the evening after the first full moon that occurs after the spring equinox.

So that is why our Easter is the first Sunday after the first full moon on or after the vernal equinox. And that is why the holiest day of the Christian liturgical year, Easter Sunday, bears the name of the pagan sex goddess *Eastre* and the pagan sun god *Solis*.

Now, on to Christmas. You can find many cultures around the world which celebrate a mid-winter and a mid-summer festival. Especially in the northern hemisphere. Some celebrate the victory of light and goodness over darkness and evil. Others maintain a more earthly inspiration and celebrate longer days and the return of the sun.

As I said earlier, it would be hard to over-state the importance of the life-giving sun to ancient (and modern)

peoples. The sun makes everything—everything—grow. Without the sun, we'd all be dead. So it's not surprising that people early on began to chart the movement of the sun in the sky. They realized that as the sun cuts an arc across the sky, that arc is higher each day until the 21st of June and then each day, is lower until the 21st of December, when the cycle begins again.

So you can understand why they might create festivals at mid-summer and mid-winter. The mid-summer festivals I researched had only one common element aside from their co-incident occurrence. They were suffused with agricultural themes. Some plants had magical powers at mid-summer, some plants gained special importance, the waters of rivers and lakes took on attributes they didn't have at other times—it seems to me that everyone's focus was on making the most of their agriculture. And this is not hard to understand.

The mid-winter festivals also had one common theme. Excess. Animals were slaughtered for drunken banquets and people generally went on a bender. In Roman times, the week-long festival of Saturnalia ended on December 21st. It was a time of sexual license and the toppling of the social order.

During the holiday, all restraints of law and morality were set aside. Class distinctions were abolished. Gambling was allowed in public. Masters served their slaves, accepting taunts and insults that would be punished by the lash or death any other time of year.

The community selected one person to be King of Saturnalia. This mock king directed his subjects to get drunk, dance, carouse and be blatantly lewd and lascivious.

Saturnalia eventually died away, but its customs survived in the one-day winter solstice holiday, *Brumalia* (from *bruma*, meaning the shortest day or winter solstice). *Brumalia* survived down to the Christian era, when, its rituals became absorbed in the celebration of Christmas. The Catholic Church ended this bacchanal in the 16th Century as the Reformation approached.

Well, not quite. It's hard to quash a good party in the middle of winter when everyone is cold and has cabin fever. From the middle ages through the 17th century, various theologians and church leaders have tried to sweep away the urge to splurge and every time, have failed to eradicate excesses during the mid-winter season. Christmas was suppressed by 17th century Puritans in New England; meanwhile, across the Atlantic, Christmas was forbidden by Act of Parliament in 1644.

The reasoning: There is no biblical basis for Christmas. It's a pagan holiday dressed up in Christian clothing. And the anti-Christmas folk point to two things: How the date was fixed and shepherds in the fields.

In the early church many dates were celebrated as the birthday of Jesus. The first recorded date of Christmas being celebrated on December 25th was in 336 in the time of Constantine. A few years later Pope Julius I officially declared that the birth of Jesus would be celebrated on the December 25th.

Isaac Newton argued that the date of Christmas was selected to correspond with the winter solstice, German theologian Paul Ernst Jablonski argued Christmas was placed on December 25th to correspond with the Roman holiday *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti*, the Birth of the Invincible Sun, and therefore debased the true church.

In 1889, Louis Duchesne suggested that the date of Christmas was calculated as nine months after Annunciation, the date of the conception of Jesus. Now this has some scriptural basis in Luke's story of Mary and Elizabeth. But it depends on your reading of the Hebrew phrase in Luke 1:26, "in the sixth month." If you read that literally, you can deduce that Jesus was born in late December. But most biblical authorities believe it should refer to the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, which is un-datable, except by the most tortured non-scriptural reasoning.

However, as long as we are dabbling in Scripture, the other point that anti-Christmas folks have made is that in late December, in Palestine, shepherds are not lounging around in the fields at night, watching their flocks. It's cold, wet and dark. They would be inside and so would their sheep. So Jesus was most likely born in the spring, during lambing time, when shepherds and sheep were outside.

Remember Pope Julius I? He's the guy who fixed Christmas on December 25th. He oversaw the creation of one of the first church calendars. He and his Cardinals were inspired by cosmic order to name the winter solstice, December 25th, as the birthday of Christ, and the summer solstice as that of John the Baptist, supplemented by the autumnal equinox for John's conception and the vernal equinox for the conception of Jesus.

So maybe now you can see why we have so much pagan residue around the winter solstice; the yule log, the exchange of presents, the revelry on New Year's Eve, the mistletoe, the singing, the partying, the cops looking for drunken drivers, the Christmas tree, the urge to say "Season's Greetings!" instead of "Merry Christmas," and the pushback to that urge, and the Super Bowl, which I think is the real end of the mid-winter festival in America.

All of that behavior derives from a cycle of the sun and because we are humans. Because sometimes, we need a reason to party.

There is plenty of evidence that in our distant past, European and Middle Eastern peoples worshiped a god that was female. Creation, fertility, wisdom and strength were some of the attributes that people hoped would come their way through their worship of a female goddess. However, the god of the ancient Israelites was a male deity, no doubt about it. And like it or not, our religious heritage includes the ancient Israelites.

But the attraction of a female deity was and is very strong. Today we speak of Mother Earth. Devotion to a female goddess persisted in various places, until the Christian church promoted the cult of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Marian devotion is now a big part of Roman Catholic culture, but was downplayed by the Protestant Reformation.

Our closing hymn today has words written by Kendyl Gibbons, who is minister at the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis. She wrote it for a competition for hymn texts that celebrate feminine imagery of the divine. We have only sung this a couple times before today, so I will play it through once so you'll get the melody. Please join in singing Hymn No. 51, "Lady of the Seasons' Laughter."

HYMN 51, Lady of the Seasons' Laughter

MAURINE. Mary Hunter, would you please extinguish our chalice? Please read with me.

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

We extinguish this flame,
but not the light of its truth,
the warmth of this community,
nor the fire of our commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
and share with all the world.

BENEDICTION

MAURINE. Jeff so liked the benediction we read last week and wanted to do it again. Your words are in italics.

Grieving dreams that have passed away,
We wait for night vision.

Marching to unfinished music,
We listen for whispers of wisdom.

Seeing the cost of impatience,
We take slow steps for change.

Sensing the price of waiting,
We walk with courage.

Letting go of innocence,
We touch our guilt with forgiveness.

Silencing prideful talk,
We lift up what has not been done.

Moving from solitude,
We walk side-by-side.

Balancing our dreams with reality,
We live in hope.

POSTLUDE: Slängpolska efter Byss Kalle