

*'Tis the Season*  
*A Worship Service by the REV. JEFF BRIERE*  
*Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga*  
*December 12, 2010*

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Good morning and welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Jeff Briere and I am the minister of this church. This morning, as *it is* the season, we'll begin singing songs *of* the season. It's not widely known, but as minister of this church, I get a few perks. Who knew? One of the perks is having some influence with the music director. If I take care of her when she's got a fever, if I fix her a hot toddy and bring it to her in bed, I can safely assume that I can cajole her into playing my favorite Christmas carol sometime in December. And I get to do this every year. Although the emotional content of this carol goes from despair to hope, this is my favorite carol because of the melody. It's one of those wonderful American tunes from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, published in *Southern Harmony*. Please join me in singing number 232, "The Hills Are Bare at Bethlehem." No, 232.

*HYMN 232, "The Hills Are Bare at Bethlehem"*

The hills are bare at Bethlehem  
no future for the world they show;  
yet here new life begins to grow  
from earth's old dust, a greenwood stem.

The stars are cold at Bethlehem  
no warmth for those beneath the sky;  
yet here the radiant angels fly  
and joy burns new, a fiery gem.

The heart is tired at Bethlehem  
no human dream unbroken stands;  
yet here God comes to mortal hands  
and hope, renewed, cries out, "Amen."

GREETINGS

**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*.

Last year, our **labyrinth** was a big hit, but a lot of work for those who administered it. This year it will be back, but only for one evening. Plan now to spend some time in contemplation as you traverse the labyrinth. It will be open December 21<sup>st</sup> at 5:45.

Also, please join us for a **candle light Christmas Eve service**. 5:00 pm on the 24<sup>th</sup> followed by a cookie ministry. Children are especially urged to attend.

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 the prelude, Kate prepared a piece that you may recognize. It's from *The Polar Express*. This is "Believe."

*PRELUDE: "Believe"*

## LIGHTING THE CHALICE

Our chalice lighting this morning comes from John Hanley Morgan.  
Your words are in italics.

The gray clouds cluster,  
Colder blows the wind:  
*Darkness comes early to the land:  
It is December.*

The snows of winter gleam,  
Sleet's iron fist descends.  
*We move in darkness,  
Therefore make ready with the light.*

Light of star, light of candle,  
Firelight, lamplight, love light.  
*These little lights can guide us,  
And bring a steady peace*

As we move toward the solstice,  
*And joy again the sun's release!*

### STORY: *Why Owls Stare*

Anyone here ever seen an owl? Do you know what they look like? Here's one. Owls are reclusive birds, meaning they don't show themselves very often. But sometimes you may see one.

For sure you can hear them. What do they sound like?

Owls come in several sizes and flavors. There are owls with bars on their chests, like this one. Or owls with funny faces, like this one. This is a barn owl. There are even owls with tufts of feathers and ears that look like horns, like this one.

Owls are mostly nocturnal, meaning they are awake at night and go hunting for mice and other small creatures when they can't be seen very well. This is a Snowy Owl, and he lives where there is a lot of snow. Owls fly very quietly and have excellent vision. They can see a mouse scratch his nose at night a hundred yards away and then fly there quickly and quietly.

Owls live mostly in the country and they tend to live alone. They are solitary animals. Except when they are young and still in the nest.

Owls seem to stare at you, right? Why do they do that? Well, I have a story about that, but it involves these birds.

Anyone here ever see one of these critters? This is a rock dove, also known as a pigeon. Pigeons can live anywhere, but we see them mostly in cities, because pigeons have learned to scrounge a living by eating what we throw away. Do you know what a pigeon sounds like? They don't hoot like owls; they coo.

Pigeons have earned a reputation of being dirty, but they are really no dirtier than any other bird. But in the city, they often live in dirty conditions.

People train pigeons to race, because they are pretty fast, but more important, pigeons know where their home is. These are racing pigeons. Pigeon races start far from the pigeon's home. There, the pigeons are released, and they all head for home. First one back is the winner.

Pigeons are social birds. They hang out in large groups. Have you ever fed pigeons? If you go to a park in a large city, the pigeons will flock to you if you have food. They will fly all around you. Being in the middle of a flock of hungry pigeons can be a little scary, because there are so many of them and they make a lot of noise with their wings.

I brought all these photos of owls and pigeons because I have a story about them. It's a story told by Native Americans and it's the legend of why owls stare.

Owl and Pigeon were friends. Most mornings they sat in the same tree to talk and watch the sunrise.

Sometimes one of them would boast about how fast she could fly, or her relatives could fly, or how far, and how good his eyesight was when they were high above the ground.

One morning Owl boasted about something different. "I think there are more owls than pigeons," he said.

"No," said Pigeon. "That's not right. There are more pigeons than owls."

"There's only one way to find out," hooted Owl, fluffing out his feathers. "I challenge you to a counting!"

"Agreed," cooed Pigeon. "Where and when should we do this? We'll need lots of perching space."

Owl scratched his wing feathers with his beak as he thought for a moment. Then he said "the Big Woods will do. It's a nice place, with plenty of trees for everyone to land."

"Okay," said Pigeon. "The Big Woods it is. You fly round and tell the owls and I'll tell the pigeons. I'll need a week because there are so many of us."

"Well, I'll probably need two weeks," hooted Owl.

"No way," said Pigeon jumping up and down angrily. "One week from today, an hour after sunrise. All owls and pigeons should be here. Anyone who's late won't be counted."

"Agreed," hooted Owl. Then they both flew off to tell everyone.

A week later the owls arrived first, just as the sun was rising. They swooped down on the Big Woods from every direction until there were owls in most of the trees. They hooted and laughed. "Hoo! Hoo! The pigeons are still asleep!"

The hooting and wing flapping died down as they settled on the branches and waited. They were sure there were more of them than the pigeons.

After a while they heard a swooshing sound in the distance. Huge grey clouds moved towards them from the east, south and north. The clouds were pigeon wings. Thousands of pigeons swooped down on the Big Woods, blocking out the sky.

As the pigeons landed in the trees, the owls had to shuffle closer together. Branches broke when too many pigeons tried to land at once. The owls couldn't believe their eyes or their ears. The noise of flapping wings and scratching feet was deafening.

The owls stared, moving their heads from side to side to watch the pigeons land all around them. And still the pigeons kept coming, circling down from the sky looking for landing space. The owls could not believe there were so many pigeons.

Their eyes grew wider and wider as they moved their heads from side to side, trying to keep track of the pigeons. More and more of them swooshed in.

Some of the owls started to feel nervous. Being surrounded and squashed by so many pigeons was a bit scary. They began to hoot to each other "Hoo! Hoo! There's too many pigeons! Let's get out of here!"

One by one the owls took off, darting up between branches and

diving away from the still incoming pigeons. The owls fled into the sky, their staring eyes flattened even wider open by the wind rushing past them.

No one did any counting. The pigeons settled themselves all over the Big Woods, cooing and calling to each other, celebrating their win.

Since then, owls have always traveled at night when pigeons are asleep. They stare at everything around them, watching out for pigeons.

Thanks for listening to my story, you can go to your classes now. And watch out for pigeons, but don't stare too much.

*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 your go.

*OFFERTORY: "The First Noel"*

A member of the Board of Trustees approached me the other day and asked that an announcement be made about a special collection to be taken up for a staff holiday gift. That made me a little too uncomfortable and I initially turned him down. I only mention it now because I know that I should speak about something that disturbs me. The compromise we made is in the bulletin and I urge you to take a look at it, because I am not going to talk about it too much.

I squirmed when he asked me to make this announcement because I would be in the room and I'd be more than a little embarrassed. And because I know that we ask a lot of you at this time of the year. Kate is heading an effort to collect items all month for the Pet Placement Center. Skip Stevens arranged for boxes to be distributed for Guest At Your Table. Leslie Brock made a box that's in the fellowship area for donations for needy people within our church family. And I stand here every Sunday morning and ask you to make a contribution to the church.

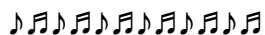
I know we ask much of you, and I don't apologize for that. I also know you for a generous congregation, and I hope to foster that trait in all who come here.

In stories of survivors of the Nazi death camps, an attitude of determined giving was one of the things that distinguished the survivors from those who perished. If a prisoner were on the verge of starvation, but had a crust of bread or a scrap of a potato that he could share with his comrade in suffering, then he was psychologically and spiritually capable of surviving.

A survivor of Treblinka described it this way: "In our group we shared everything, and the moment one of the group ate something without sharing it, we knew it was the beginning of the end for him."

We'll collect the morning offering now for the support and ministry of this church. Please be generous when the plate comes your way.

If you have a pledge payment, please mark it as such. If you are moved to donate something to the staff holiday gift, please use the special envelope for that purpose. 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.

Christina—and Jesse—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*

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

Most often, during this time of prayer, I am moved to pray for people or institutions in trouble or in need of relief. Today, I offer thanksgiving. I am grateful that economic development seems to be coming to this part of the world. Volkswagen, of course, will start to build cars next year. It also brought several suppliers with it. Now it appears that Amazon will build a couple of distribution centers here and in Bradley County. And Wacker Chemical is expanding.

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*

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 ways to make the world a better place.

*SERMON: 'Tis the Season...*

Deck the halls with boughs of holly!

Fa la la la la la la la la!

'Tis the season to be jolly!

Fa la la la la la la la la!

I knew a child once who thought we decked the halls with *Buddy Holly*. Me, I always wondered what those fa-la-las were all about.

As I wrote my rant for the current issue of the nUUsletter, it occurred to me that I had never really expressed any negativity in what I write for the nUUsletter. My pieces had been informative, inspirational, personal, spiritual and maybe, once a year, boring. But I had never written a rant like I did for the December issue.

I wondered if I should even write it, seeing as how it is the Christmas season and all. Aren't we all supposed to *jolly*? Maybe this is the wrong time to rant. Not only that, but Kate and I had to go backwards with our annual open house, and I was feeling bad about that. So I toned down the rant and softened the blow with another, more spiritual, and seasonally-appropriate piece elsewhere in the issue. I figured one ought to balance the other.

I think I got scared. Can you imagine? Me, the guy who preaches courage all the time, scared? I think I got scared when I read an article that the middle class was disappearing. The article painted a rather bleak picture of the future, with a few wealthy people and many poor people (wealthy and poor being relative terms) and no one else in the middle. The reason for this trend is because of a loss of jobs for mildly educated people.

Highly educated people would continue to find work. Uneducated people would continue to find really low-paying scut work. But the jobs for mildly educated people were disappearing. When I was young, it was possible that you could graduate from high school and expect to find a decent job, something that would support you and your family. It would be blue-collar work, but that was OK, because it was lucrative. Something like the auto industry, transportation, or here in Chattanooga, metal fabrication.

Not any more. Those jobs have disappeared. And the point of the article is that the middle class shrunk with the disappearance of the jobs that supported it. And that troubled me. As I wrote in the article, the existence of a middle class is critical for the stability and progress of society. In my lifetime, the middle class was bigger than anything else and I could not imagine this country without it.

The term middle class has been endlessly debated and dissected. I think we all have an idea of what the middle class is. Rather than rely on any definition, I like to say that the middle class is the class of people who say they are. Right there in the middle, neither extremely wealthy nor abysmally poor. Sociologists and historians will tell you that in the western world, the middle class rose with the Industrial Revolution. Here in America, it was given a big boost with two world wars and a powerful economy.

But no more. Here are some sobering statistics:

- 83 percent of all American stocks are in the hands of 1 percent of the people. The top 10 percent of Americans earn around 50 percent of our national income. 66 percent of the income growth in the last six years went to the top 1% of all Americans.
- The bottom 50 percent of income earners in the United States now own less than 1 percent of the nation's wealth.
- 61 percent of Americans live paycheck to paycheck. That was 49

percent in 2008 and 43 percent in 2007. 24 percent of American workers say that they have postponed their planned retirement age in the past year.

- In 1950, the ratio of the executive's paycheck to the worker's paycheck was about 30 to 1. On average. Since 2000, that ratio has exploded to between 300 to 500 to one.
- Average Wall Street bonuses for 2009 were up 17 percent when compared with 2008. And even more this year.
- The top 1 percent of Americans own nearly twice as much of America's corporate wealth as they did just 15 years ago.
- For the first time in history, more than 40 million Americans are on food stamps, and the Department of Agriculture projects that number will go up to 43 million Americans in 2011.
- Almost 21 percent of all children in the United States are living below the poverty line—the highest rate in 20 years.
- Despite the financial crisis, despite what is called the Great Recession, the number of millionaires in the United States rose 16 percent in 2009.

That's not right. Not right in my opinion. If this were Albania or Botswana, it might be understandable. Or even right. But this is the United States of America, a country conceived with egalitarian ideals and I am convinced that a strong middle class is essential for our well-being. If this means that I am a socialist, OK, call me a socialist. I don't mind what people call me. It doesn't make me anything less than what I am.

I don't want to kill the rich. I don't want to storm the palace and off the king. I am not a revolutionary with a Molotov Cocktail. But I believe, as I wrote in the article, that little piggies—actually big

piggies—oughta step back from the trough. God knows they've had enough.

So I got scared and it came out as anger. And that's what caused me to go on a rant. I'm all right now, and I don't feel so scared. Of course, I'm one of the lucky ones. I am one of the highly educated people who will be able to find a job. They don't ship ministers and churches overseas like they do the making of shirts and socks and pants and shoes. And nearly everything else.

But I wasn't always a member of the highly educated class, and yet I understood, from an early age, that the way to secure my future in relative comfort and security was to go to college and graduate school and enter the professional class.

This change in demographics is not a calamity. It's not likely to cause a social upheaval in our lifetimes. But if this trend continues, the fabric of our society will begin to unravel. And then we'll have to change our mythology.

The mythology of "The American Dream" always held out the possibility that a person born in poverty might succeed on his own merits and in time, become wealthy beyond her dreams. That has always been the allure of living in America. You can make it if you try. And even though it was a myth, every once in awhile, someone would come along and prove it true. A "self-made man" is the catchphrase.

If this demographic trend continues, the self-made man will join the other mythological heros in American culture like the cowboy and the nuclear family living in the suburbs.

As long as I was feelin' a little testy about the disappearing middle class and the conditions that are shrinking it, it occurred to me that a little ranting now and then could be a cleansing experience. As long as you can laugh at yourself for being scared, a little expression of

anger now and then can be beneficial.

So, here's a little ranting about the annoyances of this season.

'Tis the season for...

Shooting—photos of your family and showing them to everyone you meet. Shooting photos of your pets and showing them to everyone you meet and changing your Facebook profile photo to a photo of your cat.

Posting all the holiday photos on your Facebook page—even the ridiculous ones. Posting to your Facebook page your every craven thought and silly idea, and what the kids are doing. Sup? Lunch at mall. On way home. Need a nap.

Feeling guilty that you can't support every charitable cause, even though the bellringers have little tiny bells nowadays. But then feeling not—so—guilty because some person stuck 55 100-dollar bills in a kettle in Fort Oglethorpe. Maybe that will counterbalance all the Scrooges.

Driving here. Driving there. Driving to Grandma's house.

Making a list and checking it twice but all the same, forgetting Susie or Mark or Ashley or Clark. OMG! Time for a tweet! What 2 get them?

Meeting your future in-laws. Forgetting their names.

Rushing around town from one place to another, cramming everything into that extra hour we got from setting our clocks back an hour in November.

Writing letters and cards. Sending letters and cards and packages. And caring enough to send the very best. Sending a card to anyone

who could possibly be angered if you didn't. Buying stamps, some religious, some secular. Stamping letters & cards with holiday stamps. Mailing cards, letters & packages. Priority Mail. Express Mail. FedEx. UPS. Airborne.

Selecting gifts for people you don't know very well so that you have to ask someone else what the best gift would be, and then feeling guilty that you don't know the recipient well enough, and then wondering why you're sending a gift to someone you don't know all that well, and then getting angry at yourself for thinking that you had to send this gift and getting very frustrated with this whole gift thing.

Trimming the tree so that it stands upright. Decorating the tree. Wrapping presents, presenting presents, unwrapping presents. Throwing out the wrapping paper and gift boxes—Oops! I mean *recycling* the wrapping paper. And boxes. Sorry, Sandy.

Cooking food, baking cookies, serving food, eating food and cookies, washing dishes. Drinking. Anything. Indulging. In everything. Passing out.

Charging everything. Writing checks to pay the bills.

Assembling toys using drawings for directions, missing parts and trying to read English written by a woman in China who learned English from another Chinese person who learned English from an Indian.

Calling parents, chatting with friends, reading family newsletters, surfing the internet and playing games.

Seeing lights, lighting candles, singing carols, hearing “White Christmas” 72 times in a week, hearing “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer” 73 times, sleeping late not enough and rising early too often.

*[Pause.]*

Listening to her, listening to him. Listening to people. Hearing their words, understanding and listening again. Listening.

Searching for the truth, searching for just that one part of the truth that has eluded you for so long. Searching.

Wishing that? or Wishing for? Wishing, just wishing. Wishing for a better year ahead, fewer tragedies, clarity and more light. Wishing.

Believing that it will all work out. Believing in yourself. Believing in people and in life. Believing.

Pausing. For a few moments. Pausing and noticing what's going on. And appreciating it. Pausing.

Enjoying. People. Enjoying.

Remembering.

Praying. For each and everyone.

We don't often have a congregational response, but today seems an apt moment for you to sound off. As I said, as long as you can laugh at yourself, a little expression of anger now and then can be beneficial. If you let your anger fester and you keep your mouth shut 'cause you want to be a nice person, I guarantee it will come out at the wrong place and the wrong time and someone will be hurt. So rid yourself of anger in a safe place. Kids, don't try this at home.

So what better and safer place than church to let off a little steam? It's certainly better than in your car on I-75 with all the nutcake drivers or worse yet, at the dinner table with your family. So now it's time to get it off your chest, so to speak.

If you are—or have been—bothered, riled, vexed or nettled, distressed, disquieted, discomfited or disconcerted, troubled, aggravated, bugged, piqued, provoked, peeved, perturbed or P-O'd, irritated, incensed, indignant or irate, exasperated, miffed, resentful, ruffled, roiled or rankled, unhinged or unglued, annoyed, or anxious—or even angry—come on down and tell us about it. If you are just cross, stay seated.

On the other hand, if you are felling good this holiday season, if your world is bright, if you are happy, come on down and tell us about it. Your raves will balance the rants. And mind your manners; this is a PG church.

*[Rants & Raves]*

Now that we all feel better, and because the words take us from darkness to light, please join me now in singing Hymn 240, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." No. 240. The words will be on the screen, but if you use the hymnal, ignore the notes and just look at the words, because Kate will play a slightly different melody, the one that Bing Crosby sang when he recorded it.

This melody was written by Johnny Marks, a man who has written more Christmas songs than anyone. Although he was Jewish, Marks specialized in Christmas songs and wrote "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer," "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree," and "A Holly Jolly Christmas" and several others. Kate will play it through once, and then we'll join in.

*Hymn 240, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day"*

I heard the bells on Christmas day  
Their old familiar carols play,  
And wild and sweet the words repeat  
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

And thought how, as the day had come,  
The belfries of all Christendom  
Had rolled along the unbroken song  
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

Till ringing, singing on its way  
The world revolved from night to day,  
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime  
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

And in despair I bowed my head  
“There is no peace on earth,” I said,  
“For hate is strong and mocks the song  
Of peace on earth, good will to men.”

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:  
“God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;  
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail  
With peace on earth, good will to men.”

#### *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*

This is the year-end holiday season, when we are enjoined to cuddle up closer with our families, to be kind to strangers and to add to the warm glow that people remember at this time of year. It's not only due to Christmas, although zealots would have you believe as much.

This is the darkest time, the coldest time of the year and our natural human inclination is to rekindle the warmth of summer.

So do that, please. Now that we have released all our anger, all we should have left is light and lightness, heart and hope.

Be not afraid.  
And seeing there is naught to fear,  
And bearing witness to what can never die,  
Let us go forth into the world in peace.

Be of good courage.  
Search all things  
And hold fast to that which is good.  
Render unto no one evil for evil.

Strengthen the faint-hearted,  
Support the weak,  
Help the afflicted,  
Love all men, women, and children.

Love all souls.  
Serve the Highest Good,  
And rejoice in the power of the Spirit.

*POSTLUDE: “Magic in December”*