Sun., Dec 7, 2014 – Peter Scales at CUUC: **Origins of Christmas**

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Song: Let it Snow, by lyricist Samuel Cohen (aka Sammy Cahn) and composer Julius Stein (aka Jule Styne) in July 1945. It was written in Hollywood, California during a heat wave as Cahn and Styne imagined cooler conditions.

Oh the weather outside is frightful / But the fire is so delightful.

And since we've no place to go / Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!

It doesn't show signs of stopping / And I've bought some corn for popping.

The lights are turned way down low / Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!

When we finally kiss good night / How I'll hate going out in the storm!

But if you'll really hold me tight / All the way home I'll be warm.

The fire is slowly dying / And, my dear, we're still goodbying,

But as long as you love me so / Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!

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Silver Bells: Words and music by Jacob Harold Levison (aka Jay Livingston) and Ray Lipsitz Evans, in 1950.

City sidewalks busy sidewalks, Dressed in holiday style,

In the air / There's a feeling / of Christmas.

Children laughing / People passing, Meeting smile after smile

And on every street corner you'll hear:

Silver bells, silver bells / It's Christmas time in the city.

ring- a- ling hear them ring! / soon it will be Christmas day.

Strings of street lights / Even stop lights

Blink a bright red and green / As the shoppers rush home with their treasures.

Hear the snow crunch / See the kids bunch

This is Santa's big scene. / And above all this bustle / You'll hear:

Silver bells, silver bells / It's Christmas time in the city

Ring-a-ling, hear them ring / Soon it will be Christmas day.

Homily: I love singing Christmas songs. I love the lights and the seasonal food! I love music from many genres including, of course, Broadway tunes. When I learned that Broadway composers, many of whom were Russian Jewish immigrants, had turned their pens to Christmas music, I wanted to hold them up today. That’s why the three Christmas songs in today’s service are specifically those written by Jews. And Christmas is, after all, about a Jewish family giving birth to a boy who would become a great saviour to the Jewish people. So let’s sing Jewish songs!

Nothing I say to you today is secret or hidden. Some of you have likely heard much of my information before. Unitarians across North America will hear similar homilies during the Christmas season, because Unitarians have an abiding sense of searching for reasons and truth, and we want to know note just what but when and why. We want to know the story behind the menorah candles of Hanukkah; we want to know why Buddhists revere all living things; we want to know why Muslims fast at Ramadan; and we want to know why the major Christian festivals, Easter and Christmas, were started and what gives them strength and staying power.

Why do Unitarians want to know these answers? In our principles we strive to accept one another and to encourage spiritual growth within each congregation. When we say we strive to accept one another, I don’t think we just mean “other Unitarians”… I think we mean “other people, of all faiths.” In our list of sources, we assert that we draw wisdom from the world’s religions, to inspire us in our ethical and spiritual lives. We have a tradition of drawing from world religions to enrich Unitarianism, and we like to talk about being a faith group that can bridge the differences between larger religions because we try to understand the good in each religion. We also, and I’m not going to ask for a show of hands, sometimes feel smug because we have avoided the worst aspects of other religious traditions… we pride ourselves on our tolerance.

On to my talk: Origins of Christmas.

For the central figure in Christianity, I had intended to use the Hebrew name Yeshua, but I will use the anglicized Greek name that is frankly more familiar to us all: Jesus. Similarly for his parents Youssef and Miriam, I will use the anglicized Joseph and Mary.

The newsletter blurb for today’s service says that nobody knows when Jesus was born, and asks why we celebrate on December 25th. The truth lies in the history of the Roman Empire and the religion of Mithras. I promised to describe how the unnoticed birth of a builder’s son named Yeshua ben-Youssef became the link between the Hebrew prophets, Emperor Constantine, and Canada today. Epics in the ancient days had a great deal of political influence. Leaders were portrayed as gods. The Christmas story is largely contained in two books called gospels, in the Christian Bible. Depending on one's perspective, these accounts either differ from each other or tell two versions of the same story. These biblical accounts are found in the Gospel of Matthew, namely Matthew 1:18, and the Gospel of Luke, specifically Luke 1:26 and 2:40. According to these accounts, Jesus was born to Mary, assisted by her husband Joseph, in the city of Bethlehem.

The writer of Luke’s gospel, who wanted to see a new Jerusalem established in Rome led by Christians, wrote in his book that Jesus was a god. In the gospel of Matthew, Christ is portrayed as the messiah foretold in the Jewish Bible’s book of Isaiah.

[see the Bible stories]

Many of us have likely heard these stories, or elements of them. The Victoria Choral Society will sing Handel [music] & Jennens’s [words] magnificent choral work, *Messiah*, which includes much of the text that I have read to you just now.

[Wikipedia says…] Virtually all modern scholars agree that Jesus existed historically, although the quest for the historical Jesus has produced little agreement on the historical reliability of the Gospels and on how closely the biblical Jesus reflects the historical Jesus. Most scholars agree that Jesus was a Jewish rabbi from Galilee who preached his message orally, was baptized by John the Baptist, and was crucified in Jerusalem on the orders of the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate. Scholars have constructed various portraits of the historical Jesus, which often depict him as having one or more of the following roles: the leader of an apocalyptic movement, the Messiah, a charismatic healer, a sage and philosopher, or an egalitarian social reformer. [end Wiki]

Three hundred years after the birth of Jesus, the Roman emperor Constantine, wanting to settle the complicated religious situation of his day, and wanting most of all to gain control of the various factions, convened a conference at Nicea. The conference attendees established the date of the birth of Jesus, which just happened to be exactly the same as the birthday of a popular god.

Three hundred years before the birth of Jesus, Alexander the Great was worshipped as a god. Following his example, the Roman emperors often took divine status. All over ancient Europe, India, Egypt, and the Middle East, it was not unusual for humans to be accorded the status of gods. For hundreds of years, the Greeks had deified great warriors and kings, and the Greeks had their holy books, Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey. After Greek power had waned and the Roman Empire had taken over, the Romans continued the practice of giving divine status to great men. For example, Caesar Augustus brought peace to the land that is now Israel, and one inscription states that the people were joyful because “Providence has sent to us a saviour…” The worship of Caesar Augustus and the other caesars was the de facto religion of Rome and the Roman Empire, before the birth of Jesus and for hundreds of years after. [parts of this section are inspired by a lecture by Marianne P. Bonz, 30 May 1998 at Harvard University, titled “The Gospel of Rome versus the Gospel of Jesus Christ: Two New Testament responses from the churches founded by Paul.”]

Fast forward to about seventy years after the death of Jesus. In the town of Ephesus in modern-day Turkey, an early Christian wrote two Greek books about the religion that a man named Paul was spreading. The early Christian editor named the books the Gospel of Luke, and the Acts of the Apostles. The author-editor… let’s call him Luke for simplicity, even though that probably was not his name… wanted to demonstrate the Israel and the Jews were the old world, and that Rome and the Christians were the new world. Just as Homer had written in his epic about the foundations of Greece, and Virgil had written in his epic about the foundation of Rome, Luke wrote an epic that the new world was the fulfillment of God’s plan.

The other important thing to draw from the story so far is that Luke was writing a challenge to emperor-worship. Luke was boldly setting out to make Christianity the winner in the rivalry between monotheism – the belief in one god and only one god – and hero worship. Like Paul and other energetic Christians, Luke believed earnestly that Christianity was the only path for the world, and he wanted to convince the world that Jesus Christ represented the one and only god.

But here’s the rub: except for a scene in which the teenage Jesus is found arguing with the Jewish scholars inside the temple, we do not know anything about the life of Jesus from the time he was born until he is about 30 years old and gets baptized by his cousin John. I mentioned the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Matthew. The Christian Bible has two more important gospels, called ‘Mark’ and ‘John’, plus several letters by Paul. But none of these authors refer to the birth of Jesus as being unusual or special in any way. Conservative Christians believe that the story of Jesus’s birth, in Matthew and Luke, are proof of his divinity. Moments ago I told you that Luke wrote two generations after the death of Jesus, and that he wrote with a specific political purpose in mind. Matthew, who wrote his book before Luke did, wrote of the miraculous birth based on his earlier reading of the book of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah. Matthew, a pious Jew, knew his Torah; so he knew that Isaiah chapter 7, verse 14 said “Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a maiden shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” Note that the word was not ‘virgin’ but rather ‘maiden’… [http://www.2think.org/hii/virgin.shtml - There are two Hebrew words usually translated 'virgin' in English. '**Bethulah**' means virgin in the sense that we understand it. It was used, for example, in Isaiah 62:5. '**Almah**' (the word used in Isaiah 7:14) simply means a young woman, or maiden. Although it is sometimes used in the sense of a sexually pure woman, this is not its exclusive usage. The confusion arose when the Greek Septuagint used the Greek word '**parthenos**' to translate Isaiah 7:14. This word, in Greek, does denote a sexually pure woman, and was the inspiration for the gospellers myth of the Virgin birth.]

…my opinions: the accounts of the birth of Jesus are likely fables, and we cannot know when Jesus was born. I am not saying that the historical Jesus did not exist. I am saying that we do not know anything true about him until he is about thirty years old.

With Matthew and Luke trying to persuade other Jews that their man was divine, it is likely that the true details of Jesus’s birth – if they were ever known – were lost.

In a minute I will describe the birth story of Mithra, a mid-Eastern god, which is uncannily similar in every detail to the one set in Bethlehem.

So far I have discussed Roman emperor worship, I have described Luke’s and Matthew’s stories about Jesus, and I have briefly discussed our ignorance of the birth date of Jesus. Next, I will tell you about a god who was born on December 25th.

Mithra was a Persian god…the god of light and contracts. Roman soldiers, who occupied Persia and must have respected the antiquity of its culture, adopted Mithra as the hero-god of the manly-man, a divinity of fidelity, manliness and bravery. Women were excluded from the caves wherein the men worshipped Mithra through secret rituals. While they are quite different in person and mission, there are similarities between the legends of Mithra and the story of Christ. Mithra was said to have been born in a cave, with shepherds attending. Mithra had been born of a virgin, and his mother was given the title “Mother of God.” Mithra was a moral god, upholding the sanctity of the contract even when the contract was made with one who was sure to break it. Initiates into Mithraism were ‘baptized’ with a trickle of sacrificial bull’s blood. This blood was said to cleanse the initiates from any impurities.

Mithra came to be identified with the Greek sun-god Helios. During the time of the Roman emperor Aurelian (270-275 CE), who reigned during the years after the Gospels were written but before the great councils decided Christian dogma, Romans blended solstice celebrations of such god-men and saviours as Apollo, Attis, Baal, Dionysus, Mithra, Osiris, Perseus, and Theseus into a single festival called “the birthday of the unconquered sun,” which they celebrated on Dec 25.

How did the birth of Jesus get integrated into Dec 25?

In the Jewish Bible there is one passage that describes the Messiah as the unconquered sun, and this sounds a lot like the earlier, non-Christian festival of Roman times. During the 300s the Christians were forging alliances with the Roman leadership, and wanting to align the Christian and Roman festivals. If Christians had holidays on already-established Roman holidays, then the risk of persecution would be less, for one thing. In the US the holiday of Kwanzaa was contrived for the same reason, and for Unitarian youth and young adults the festival of Chalica is similar.

In the year 440, Pope Julius officially proclaimed December 25 to be the anniversary of the birth of Jesus. Giving Christian significance to December 25 helped the pagan world to align with and embrace Christianity. That is how Jesus got his birthday on December 25, and why -- even now in the 21st century -- Christ’s Mass is held after the solstice, after three or four lengthening days prove again that the sun will rise unconquered.

Unitarian-Universalists can embrace Christmas. Although most of us are not Christian, we should embrace the deep Christian roots of our faith tradition. If you feel pain or regret when you hear about Christianity – one word for this is “cross-cringe” – then it seems to me that your spiritual development is a work in progress. I feel that this is the place for that work.

I want to conclude with words of hope. The actual date of the birth of Jesus is irrelevant. The important things that we – Unitarians and non-Unitarians – should keep in mind about Jesus are that he was a radical social reformer. Jesus confronted systems of power with his urgent pleas to help the poor and afflicted. He affirmed the inherent worth and dignity of all persons, including lepers, prostitutes, and soldiers…the rich and the poor. The date of his birth may be arbitrary rather than factual but his continuing impact cannot be denied. In Victoria historically and today, caring for the homeless and the poor is almost entirely a Christian mission. That we even think of the poor and afflicted, and try to help them, is a religious impulse. That is something worth celebrating. Merry Christmas to you all!

Rudolph, The Red Nosed Reindeer - Rudolph first appeared in a 1939 booklet written by Robert Lewis May (1905-1976), who grew up in an affluent, secular Jewish home in New York. Johnny Marks (Nov 1909 – Sep 1985) was a Jewish American songwriter who specialized in Christmas songs, setting the Rudolph story to music in 1948.

You know Dasher and Dancer, and Prancer and Vixen; Comet and Cupid, and Donner and Blitzen. But do you recall? The most famous reindeer of all?

Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer / Has a very shiny nose

And if you ever saw it, / You would even say it glows.

All of the other reindeer / Used to laugh and call him names.

They never let poor Rudolph / Join in any reindeer games.

Then one foggy Christmas Eve, / Santa came to say,

Rudolph with your nose so bright, / Won't you guide my sleigh tonight?

Then all the reindeers loved him, / And they all shouted out with glee,

Rudolph the red-nose Reindeer / You'll go down in history!

Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer / Had a very shiny nose

And if you ever saw it, / You would even say it glows,

And all of the other reindeer / Used to laugh and call him names,

They never let poor Rudolph / Join in any reindeer games,

Then one foggy Christmas Eve, / Santa came to say,

Rudolph with your nose so bright, / Wont you guide my sleigh tonight?

Then how the reindeer loved him, / As they shouted out with glee,

Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, / You'll go down in history!

Homily text © Peter Scales – December 2014