

## **UUCSV Sermon**

**November 29, 2022**

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Growing up in Illinois if my Methodist church made any mention of advent, it completely passed me by. My first direct encounter with advent was when one of my neighbors, a Roman Catholic, presented my daughter, Virginia, with a piece of felt with 24 pieces of candy tied to it. I would like to tell you that this inspired my intellectual curiosity but it did not. Then, I began to attend the UUCSV lovely Christmas Eve service which involves lighting the four advent candles. But aside from an awareness that the candles stood for basic values such as peace it was all a little murky. There it stood until I discovered that the Sunday on which I had volunteered to give the sermon was the first Sunday of advent. Panic ensued and I went to work to discover precisely what advent is and being a historian, I decided to start with the beginnings. Which, as it turned out, was a good thing because this was not as easy as you might think.

The origin of advent was a period of fasting in December associated with the winter solstice. Christmas not yet being celebrated at the time of the solstice. Originally in a world where the Roman Empire and its food distribution system had fallen to pieces, where the plague had drastically reduced the population, and where the barbarians in the form of bands of migrants were literally at the gates – or wall if you prefer – , the church began a system of having forty days of fasting in midwinter. This probably had practical application in that it was important the harvest last through the winter and be husbanded. Not gobbled up in some unseemly Thanksgiving for the harvest. In the fourth and fifth centuries in Gaul and Spain there began to be a custom of four weeks of again fasting before the feast of the epiphany which was the time to baptize new Christians. Still fasting and not really connected with Christmas. When they spoke of advent at all in connection with this period of fasting it was in connection with the second coming of Christ and not with his birth. Sometime in the Middle Ages, a phrase as a historian I find appalling, Advent went from being the celebration of the second coming of Christ to a recognition of Christmas as the first coming of Christ. So it

became, and still, is a celebration in the Christian tradition of both the past and the future of Christianity.

By 1200 the color purple was associated with advent. The idea that there was an element of fasting involved, however, remained until 1917 when it was quietly dropped. Since much of Europe was facing serious food shortages in 1917 and was on strict rationing the concept of fasting made very little sense, in reality the traditional fast would have involved an increase in food, not a sacrifice.

Sometimes we as Unitarians Universalists are regarded as without tradition because our traditions are so comparatively new but just as an aside if you look carefully at the traditions of other churches, they are also new, often just the name is the same, although in the case of advent the time period starts first and then the idea of linking it to Christmas starts to creep in. It is an unimaginable gulf between a period of four weeks of fasting to 24 pieces of candy.

So without getting too much more into the weeds of history, where does our version which we still celebrate on Christmas Eve with the four candles representing four values of hope, love, joy, and peace. comes from? A partial answer is Martin Luther.

Martin Luther discarded most of the rites and rituals of the Roman Catholic Church on the grounds of their having no biblical foundation. The saints, marriage as divinely sanctioned, celibacy, etc as having no biblical foundation, but advent which by this time in the Germanic Catholic churches involved the Germanic pagan custom of a wreath of evergreens and four candles remained and became entrenched in Lutheranism despite no Biblical reference. The meaning of the candles began to shift to represent values rather than Biblical events. As a result advent was celebrated by many, but not all, Protestant traditions. The advent calendar was introduced in Germany in 1851 with the windows originally containing religious pictures rather than candy.

Advent has been a ritual in constant state of metamorphosis. I would argue that the same kind of metamorphosis is true of the Unitarian Universalist Church. The origins of advent are murky but UU was born in the full light of history. In its origins there are two entirely separate strands. One coming from Joseph Priestley

with his discarding of the Nicene Creed and the concept of the Trinity and another strand coming from William Ellery Channing and John Murray with their reactions against Calvinism and their emphasis on the loving nature of God. As over time advent blended the idea of Christmas with the second coming of Christ and basic Christian values. Unitarians blended western monotheism with a concept of the value of man rather than the sinfulness of man, and an increasing emphasis on values rather than on traditional Christian texts. It was not until the middle of the twentieth century (1961) with the merger of the Unitarians and Universalists that the original six principles confirming the ethical basis of Unitarianism were adopted with the seventh principle added later in 1985.

I asked Sara to do Olympia Brown as the UU moment because it seemed to me that she was a good example of the kind of activism that the Unitarian Church represents. She was a Universalist which is one of the three origins of the modern UU church. She persevered on becoming ordained a minister when her seminary refused to ordain her. She turned to the Universalists who in a regional assembly by vote agreed to ordain her. A radical action on the part of the denomination. Many of us can remember the fuss over the Episcopal Churches decision to ordain women a full century after Olympia Brown had been ordained by the Universalists. Olympia Brown then went on to serve in several churches as minister in an era when it was just becoming acceptable for women to speak in public. She became very active in the women's suffrage movement. In terms of her times by far her most radical action was the choice to keep her own last name when she married. Just as an aside the only legal right harder for women to get than the right to keep their name was the right to vote. Most of the women activists in this era did not marry, or if they did they retired from active political or work life. Olympia Brown, whose active life covers a swath of almost sixty years as an active Universalist, shows very clearly openness to change not only on her part but on the part of the denomination. She represents the constant willingness to accept the new and to expand boundaries within the denomination and to new and marginalized groups which is typical of Unitarian Universalism.

Advent is a coming together of a number of strands ranging from early Christian fasting having nothing to do with Christmas except the time of year to Martin Luther maintaining a non-biblical pagan Germanic custom

In the same way advent has undergone a process of metamorphosis the UU has also been undergoing an ongoing process of Change. We have changed as we merged and developed the seven principles. We have changed in the causes which we support but we have always supported the rights of EVERY individual.

In all the writings of Priestley, Channing, and Murray there is an emphasis on basic emotions of Hope, Love, Joy, and Peace. Those four emotions the advent candles celebrate. Because we are a comparatively new denomination which has broken in a number of significant ways with our Christian past, we sometimes tend to feel as if we have no past and tradition. But we have a tradition of searching, adapting, ethics, and action. Those traditions of searching, adapting, ethics, and action are what we mostly emphasize. Olympia Brown in an early sermon said that it is God's love for all his children which is the life of our denomination which distinguishes us from other sects. The reading reflects her constant call for action throughout her life but it also reflects a sense that our faith provides emotional support. That emotional support sometimes gets lost in the midst of principles and action but advent for UU is a re-embrace and celebration of the basic emotional values of hope, love, joy, and peace. We have taken advent and made it our own. Our advent candles do not represent the birth of Christ and the second coming but rather those basic emotions.

We have an evolving tradition out of which we created relatively recently principles, we have a history of vigorous action as embodied by Olympia Brown, but we also by lighting our four advent candles represent hope, love, joy, and peace.