

ADVENT, HANUKKAH AND CHRISTMAS!

A few of my Favorite Times

I had the song *My Favorite Things* from *The Sound of Music* in mind when I was first thinking about this sermon. I have known that song since I first saw the show on the Big Screen, back when a theater had one big screen. I can't tell you the exact date I first saw *The Sound of Music* but I remember that it was cold and that we went to Hinsdale rather than to LaGrange where we most often went to see shows. My brother lives in Hinsdale so I get reminded of that mid 1960s trip periodically. I also learned a simple version of *My Favorite Things* when I was taking piano lessons, about that same time period! The piano lessons helped me to read music, though I didn't stick with them, but that song as well as a couple others from the show are forever etched in my memories! Watching *The Sound of Music* became something of a favorite holiday tradition when they started showing it on TV.

I happened to record and watch one of Stephen Colbert's shows recently, when he decided to make some confessions to the audience since he hadn't had time to visit his priest recently. Somewhat in that vein I need to confess to you that I am a train fanatic. Yes, big or small, I like trains. Some of you may have suspected it when visiting my office, but the trains in my office and the ones I have put out here this season are really only the tip of the iceberg! I like traveling by train. I like taking the train into the city, though I haven't done it here yet. I like the subways and the Elevated or El in Chicago. I like train museums. And perhaps most of all, I like to see model trains running around train layouts! Oh yes, and when I was in Jr. High, I started going out with some friends to take pictures of trains. I even had my own darkroom for a while, and I still have the equipment to develop and enlarge black and white photos, though I am mostly digitized at this point. Many of my favorite memories have something to do with trains, either trips or building model train layouts or taking and developing pictures of trains. Most of these experiences were shared with family or friends, but I like trains even when I am by myself!

Now I suppose you may be wondering what the connection is between my train obsession and the holidays? My favorite Christmas and birthday gifts were of course trains and cameras! There were sales on trains around and probably after the holidays. I remember going into the city, that would be Chicago, to visit train and camera stores for either my birthday or Christmas gifts! A few times we took the train from Chicago to Minneapolis to visit my grandparents for the holidays. And Christmas has always been an excuse for getting out the model trains, if they aren't out year round! And if you haven't watched trains plow through the snow, you just haven't lived!

Now one or two other categories of my favorite things and times also are prominent in the holiday season. I started out by mentioning songs and shows, so I guess I should tell you that music has been a huge part of my life from the time that I could first carry a tune. My mother, of course, sang to me and taught my brother and me songs. She insisted that we each take at least 3 years of piano lessons, and she encouraged us to play instruments in school bands. I started out on Clarinet but quickly jumped at the chance to play the tuba, which I still play occasionally, as folks from our UU Thursday program last week can attest! I also love to sing and have been singing mostly in church choirs since I was in 3rd grade. I also sang in the school choir in grade school until I was the last Jr. High boy singing and then I still regret that I dropped out to do other things.

The other favorite time that comes in this season, is the Candlelight Christmas Eve Service. Somehow the magic and mystery of that service with the interplay of darkness and light and the beautiful melodic Christmas Carols has always been a favorite time to be with church friends and family. Since the preparation for Christmas Eve for singers and ministers covers most of the 4 week Advent Season, I include that season also among my favorite times. Particularly the Christmas Music sung with a few voices or in choirs with several dozen members always brings me joy. To be part of a band or choir or small musical ensemble is really a joy and often a challenge! As a minister, I enjoy putting together services for Christmas Eve and other holidays and special times, though I would love to have more people working with me to make the services even more meaningful!

In a few minutes, I'm going to invite you to share some of your favorite things and times about the Advent Christmas Hanukkah Yule Humanlight Kwanzaa season, but first I want to share a few words about Hanukkah and Christmas.

Hanukkah has been a minor Jewish festival ever since the Maccabees gathered an army and regained control of Israel for several years a century and a half before Jesus was born. The temple had been desecrated, probably with the slaughter of pigs on the altar, and only one small vessel of oil was found to light the sacred lamps. Miraculously, that oil lasted for 8 days until new supplies could be obtained and blessed. The nine-candle Menorah in which the lighting candle is used to add a candle each day remembers that 8-day miracle. Hanukkah really became more prominent here in the United States, most likely as a Jewish family response to all the festivities around Christmas.

The Yule season comes from the Pagan traditions around Solstice, onto which Christians placed the Advent Season and Christmas as a way of overpowering the Solstice traditions of the people in about the 4th Century. Since Jesus' birth had not become important until after his death, the date and time was never known, though August has been suggested by some scholars. In any case, the celebration became Christmas which has now been passed down for more than a millennium and a half. Bishop Nicholas of Myra, who attended the Council of Nicaea in 325 and died in 343, and later became St. Nicholas was reputed to bring gifts to those in need along with creating the occasional miracle. The real figure behind Santa Claus has been around almost since the time Christmas began to be celebrated at the Solstice, so be careful of those who want to take St. Nick out of Christmas! Santa was around long before Christians borrowed the decorated trees from the Germanic Pagans and even longer before Starbucks disappointed Christians by leaving off the snowflakes on their holiday cups!

On my own, I don't make much of a deal about decorating the house for Christmas any more, just a few lights in the windows and I turn on the lights on the tree in the middle of the little double deck train layout in the corner of the living room. I did find some Christmas Stockings to hang on the music stand by the fireplace since I will have company right after Christmas. One of these years I will get all the decorations out, but it may wait until I know the kids and grandkids will be around!

I love this time of year, from Thanksgiving to my Birthday, then on to Christmas, and ending with New Year's. I remember lots of good times with family and friends, trains large and small, lots of music and carols, quite a few winter camps and retreats, lots of starlit nights, and the candlelight services! A few seasons were a bit blue without a partner, or without the kids, or after some loved ones had died, but most of my Christmases have been Merry, my New Years Happy! I do think of those who are alone, sad or depressed, those who remember more painful times with alcoholic and abusive parents, and I wish for them happier times with chosen family and friends.

I haven't seen the new Star Wars movie yet, but I love that it has come out in this season and I will see it soon! I wish all Star Wars fanatics a beneficent and exciting experience of the Force! It has been a good many years since it last awakened even though there have been many far too many recent disturbances in the Force! When I was younger I dreamed of exploring the heavens, traveling through space, seeing the universe! My reading for fun is often Science Fiction adventures and these too are among my favorite things and times!

Well, those are some of my favorite things and times, so how about you? What are your favorite times, experiences, things?

Thank You for sharing your favorite things!
Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!
Live Long and Prosper and May the Force be with you!