

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Minimalist Christmas?”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore December 4, 2016

Call to Celebration

Today we're highlighting the value of simplicity in our lives. We'll explore how that might relate to the season we're entering. Our prelude which will move us emotionally that direction is titled Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening. It puts the words of Robert Frost's famous poem into music and song.

There is a quiet, soft, elegance to this poem – I'll read for you in a moment. It harkens back to simpler times ... even though we might consider the sentimental attitude described in the poem a reference to simpler times too. That seems to be the turn of mind that happens when considering simplicity – to look backward to the past when travel was slower and life was far less complex.

Whether our horse thinks it queer as we pull it to a stop or if we pull over to the side of the road, turn off the cell phone and car engine, the experience of sitting quietly on the darkest evening, watching snow fall can be a timeless moment that brings us into a holy sense of presence.

Let that image of snow falling silently in the woods be an invitation to our service this morning as I now read Frost's poem: Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Whose woods these are ... I think I know.
 His house is in the village though;
 He will not see me ... stopping **here**
 To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
 To stop without a farmhouse near
 Between the woods and frozen lake
 The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
 To ask if there is some mistake.
 The only other sound's the sweep
 Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
 But I have promises to keep,
 And miles to go before I sleep,
 And miles to go before I sleep.

Sermon

First, I do not have a personal agenda in speaking of a minimalist Christmas this morning. I do not want to criticize *in any way* those who love a maximalist Christmas experience. If you like covering your house in lights, putting up an ornate tree, baking hundreds of Christmas cookies and desserts, cooking up big meals and giving away many presents, more power to you. I celebrate your pleasure and delight.

And I have no bone to pick with those who loath Christmas whether for sound and analytical or warped and twisted reasons. If you are Jewish, at least this year the first day of Hanukkah is on Christmas Day so both Christian and Jew will be able to celebrate on December 25th. If you find a personal avatar in Dickens depiction of Scrooge, I'll keep my judgment to myself. This, after all, is the Unitarian Universalist way, honoring, even celebrating, our differences and learning from each other.

My words this morning are really for the people who are attracted to celebrating Christmas but get overwhelmed by the holiday and its many demands. Maybe you're not as flush with cash this year so you can't splurge the way you'd like. Or maybe you just don't have the interest or energy for all the activity of making your house as fair as you are able, trim the hearth and set the table. (Those are the words from one of my favorite advent hymns we'll sing in two weeks, People, Look East) Or maybe you've lost a loved one this year and you just aren't feeling the inspiration of the season. This sermon is for the people who want to simplify their Christmas experience this year, to strip it down to the bare essentials.

If you google minimalist Christmas, you'll get a lot of advice about how to do it. What those articles and blog posts mostly miss is the theory of just what the minimalist movement was trying to achieve. Let me give you a little minimalism background and then return to the idea of a minimalist Christmas.

Minimalism appeared on the art scene after World War Two, mostly in the 1960's and 70's. It was partly inspired as a reaction to the abstract impressionist artists. A central feature of impressionism is the feeling and mood of the artist. The art communicates an inner subjective experience of the artist full of symbolism, metaphor, nuance, subtlety and depth. The minimalists rejected the idea of art communicating something of the artist. They wanted to create art that was completely objective, that said nothing about the artist but everything about the material itself. There would be nothing to understand or interpret about the art – what you see is what you get.

To communicate this intention, they preferred very simple geometric forms, with the line and the cube being favorites. An unadorned primary colored cube has little if any metaphoric content. These artists liked to use repetition, neutral surfaces and commercially available, industrial materials.

They liked to exclude images, representations, or fictional characters in favor of blank literalism. A geometric shape and a line are just what you see – that is all. These artistic expressions avoided overt symbolism and emotional content. The goal was to point the viewer's attention to the materiality of the work.

This change of visual experience is very important. The viewer is expected to encounter the physicality of the art, its height and weight, its use of light as just light itself rather than to communicate something else, as is true with shadows and using light to create perspective for a subject. Minimalists also worked to eliminate the line between painting and sculpture as both are material substances. A blank white or black canvass has its own meaning separate from its use as a representative basis.

An example of this is Emerson Community Hall which has minimalist elements. The wood panels express the maple character of the wood rather than are representative of some other form or meaning.

(I sense the art critics in the room raising their eyebrows.) Actually, the wood is an example of Post-Minimalism to be precise. Rather than using just iron, steel and concrete materials and impersonal methods, they opened up to using more natural materials, again allowing those materials to speak for themselves rather than as expressions of the artist's ego. They like to shape materials in ways that appear to be unprocessed or uncomposed, as if the material is speaking rather than the artist. They are open to those materials expressing qualities of the body even sexuality rather than being only cold, sterile, metallic, geometric forms.

Examples of this kind of art are found on the Empire State Plaza between the Capital and the New York State Museum. If you want to immerse yourself in minimalist art, spend an afternoon contemplating the huge display of [Sol Lewitt's](#) wall sized drawings and paintings at MassMoca in North Adams. There you can see wall after wall filled with lines and solid colors. We were just there last Saturday and saw a great example of this kind of art – rotating shiny metal discs with hand etched lines in circular patterns created by [Tristan Duke](#). When a spotlight shines on each disk, a holographic geometric form leaps up and appears to rotate before your eyes.

So what does this have to do with Christmas, you might be asking? I had a similar question myself as I studied minimalism and started regretting choosing this sermon title. But I don't think minimalism need be associated only with the Charlie Brown like Christmas tree representations you'll find on the cover of the order of service. I wonder if the nativity story itself has elements of minimalism.

Mary gives birth in an ordinary stable. There is nothing special about that stable. By itself, it has no subjective meaning, though we can project many layers of meaning if we so choose. The animals are just animals if we filter out any hint that they start talking that night. Any stable would have had a manger and the hay wouldn't have been special either. From the lack of reference in the text, we can assume the way Jesus was born into the world was the same as any normal birth process

happens. Again, we need to assume once out of the womb he didn't stand up, make the sign of the cross and give a sermon to the donkeys, sheep and cows.

We can also see Joseph and Mary as ordinary people, who have an ordinary child, no different from you or me. In fact the more Jesus is of the same stuff, the same materiality as you and me, the more relatable he becomes. His way and his truth come out of him, not as something supernatural and beyond our ability or comprehension. His way and his truth are no different from the way and truth we can experience in our bodies – completely naturally. In this way, what he senses, we can sense, what he knows, we can know, and what he does might be possible for us to do too. There isn't distance between us in time and space but unity of presence we can experience.

So, while decorated evergreen trees, yule logs, and figgy pudding are all well and good, the essence of Christmas might be a little less about us and our creative expression. A minimalist approach to Christmas might be a little more about letting the story speak for itself without a lot of interpretation. Perhaps there is light and truth already there that we don't need to add with candles and carols, fine and enjoyable as they might be.

Perhaps there is something so elemental and basic in the (probably made up) story of the nativity that it is independent of the story's subjectivity. In the birth of a holy child, of any child really, is pure possibility and pure promise. It is the archetypal nature of birth itself, separate from any individual infant, that we celebrate in a minimalist Christmas. No matter what happens to any of us, whether we become President or whether we die in obscurity barely leaving our breath on a mirror, babies will still come into the world, as life asserts its primal drive to be rather than not to be. And out of the womb we spring forth, to live, to love, to create, and to sustain life.

And all this happens at the most minimalist time of the year. We have the least sun as we endure long nights. Animals hibernate in their burrows. The bare trees sequester their sap deep underground away from the cold. Seeds wait patiently in the dark, biding their time. Song birds have flown south. Dull, gray, barren mornings are quiet and still. And when the snow comes it erases expressions of subjectivity in a blanket of white.

Perhaps this is the miraculous nature of a minimalist Christmas. No matter how much the cold weather and the disappearing sun frightened our ancestors, they knew the birth of a new year was coming. They had faith in the cycles of the seasons independent of human subjectivity. It all happens with us – or without us – as the seasons have their own nature independent of humanity.

(That is, up till now. Our profound ability to affect these seasons and cycles through human activity, especially by changing the composition of the atmosphere, will be inserting humanity into the equation. But still, even that subjective human component doesn't tell the story of any one person but a collective love for fire and ice.)

So a minimalist approach to Christmas finds inspiration not through the individual characters in the story and their actions or inactions. It finds inspiration in the objective, impersonal dimension of the holiday that connects to its universal components. This isn't a better or worse way to celebrate Christmas. It is a way to connect to elements of the holiday that can touch our hearts independent of the characters. We don't need to know if Jesus was the son of God or not. We don't need to know if Mary was a virgin or not. And we don't need to know if Joseph was Jesus' father or not. We can appreciate the objective content of the story without knowing or believing the supernatural bits. A stable is just a stable. A manger is just a manger. A baby is just a baby. And perhaps, just perhaps, the universality of the story creates an openness for us to recognize our likeness to Jesus. Perhaps it encourages us to recognize our inner light, that is materially the same as the inner light in baby Jesus.

And just perhaps remembering this story will encourage us to allow that inner light to illuminate our lives and will encourage us to be inspired by following Jesus' example, a presence he repeatedly reminded people was already within them.

Benediction

Go forth in simplicity,
 minimally encumbered by your subjectivity.
Find and walk the objectively direct path
 that leads to compassion and wisdom,
 that leads to happiness, peace and ease.
Welcome the stranger and
 open your heart to a world in need of healing.
Be courageous before the forces of hate.
Hold and embody a vision of the common good that
 serves the needs of all people.