

“What Would Happen If?”

On a morning when we're hearing the sweet Christmas music
Of John Rutter;
On a morning when we're two nights into Hanukkah,
and twelve days out from Christmas
(oh my, do I have shopping to do);
On this morning when some of our Massachusetts towns,
Including Holliston where I live,
Are making the news for the religious symbols that are and that aren't
Hanging from the Fire house;
On this morning when I'm re-reading the news about Sweden
Banning minarets, just in time for the Islamic new year
Beginning this Thursday;
On this morning when we're thinking of speeches we've heard about Just War
Given on the night of the Nobel Peace Prize;
On this morning in these weeks of Advent,
Of expectation, of waiting;
On this morning in this season of light
When we could do without reading the paper,
When we could do without hearing a litany from the headlines;
On this morning when music with titles like
Angel's Carol and *The Very Best Time of Year* preach to us the
Messages of lightness and light that we need;
On this morning in a church of people with different traditions
and different beliefs,
Who try along with your ministers to live out
Our Unitarian Universalist claim that we need not believe alike to love alike;

On this morning in a room that is full
With all our own music and stories and thoughts and wishes,
Not all of it related to Rutter or the readings or whatever I'm saying;
On this morning, with all this going on and more,
this is what I'm wondering:
what would happen if this season, for these next three weeks,
we allowed ourselves to shake free?
To use our imaginations?
To dream?

I found myself pulled toward asking this question
By my colleague in ministry, Jane Rzepka,
Who recounts this moment from her childhood:

*"I was a ten-year-old, Jane writes, doing my best to be pious,
Or at least well-behaved,
Walking with my very proper grandmother down the aisle of her
Church on Christmas Eve.
The choir was singing 'O Little Town of Bethlehem,'
'Silent Night,' that sort of thing.
And what did my grandmother say just a little bit louder
Than one would wish?
She said: 'Not a breath of fresh air in the place!'"*

*Traditions are great during the holidays, writes Jane,
But sometimes don't you just want to bust out of them and shake free?*
Well, I know I do. Maybe you do, too.
Because for as busy and chaotic as December feels,
It also sometimes can feel fairly predictable,

With few surprises:

Will there be the familiar stories about Jesus? – check, on Christmas Eve.

Will there be warm sermons about light from clergy who call themselves spiritual but not religious (whatever that means)? – in some churches, check.

Will there be impossibly cute children in cute pageant costumes? –

Yes, next Sunday, check.

Will we hear glorious music from our glorious choir? – Yes, every Sunday, but particularly today, check.

*But could it be, says Jane, the winter holidays are also a good time to break free
From what's expected?*

Not only in favor of flights of fancy,

But also in favor of depth, of brooding, of outrageous "What would happen ifs."

I find myself drawn to this challenge

of asking *what would happen if*.

And here, between the movements of the choir,

A few ideas:

I'm thinking first of the wonderful story I read about this week,

Of the Republican Senator, devout Mormon, and prolific writer

Of Christian spirituals Orrin Hatch –

Yes, that Orrin Hatch -

Who spent part of his week recording a new song he wrote

At the request of a Jewish friend who complained to him

About the dearth of decent Hanukkah music.

The title of the song is "*Eight Days of Hanukkah*" and

In the video of it you can watch on YouTube

He is singing with his collaborator Madeline Stone,

a Jewish writer who normally writes Christian music,
and Rasheeda Azar, who is Syrian-American.

And I'm wondering:

*What would happen if, instead of fighting over what religious
Symbols we display in our towns in December,
we embodied this kind of willful and joyful celebration
of other people's traditions?*

Next I'm thinking of our own choir this morning,

They, like us, who call themselves Christians and Jews and Agnostics
And Humanists, and who gather under the big umbrella that is our faith
To sing songs this morning about the Jesus Child and the Christmas Lullaby.
Not to toot our horn,

But this is what I'm wondering:

*Shat would happen if more of us – more churches, more temples,
More mosques – were challenged to sing songs from traditions not their own
Once in a while?*

And now I'm thinking of the stories from the Bible we will read and share
This season, of the various ways you in the pews tune in or tune out when
You hear them.

This is wondering:

*What would happen if, this season,
we tried to hear these stories more like
Poetry than prose,
More like the lyrics from a song and less like the literal truth
That we must either believe or deny?*

And now I'm thinking how we heard the name 'Jesus' this morning,
And how we live in a culture that allows us hear his name
And believe that he only belongs to the conservatives or even the
Christians.

And this is what I'm wondering:

*What would happen if we remembered
that Jesus was a Jew preaching to Jews,
And that his preaching reads more like Karl Marx
Than Karl Rove?*

And finally I'm thinking how in less than two weeks we will
Be here on Christmas Eve singing Silent Night, Holy Night,
Holding candles and worrying (rightly so, maybe)
More about the melting wax than about the words we are saying.
But this is what I'm wondering:

*What would happen if imagined those words "Silent Night,
All is calm, All is bright" were less a weather forecast,
And more a prayer spoken on the lips of every soldier,
Written in the trenches of every battlefield,
written on every bullet, inscribed on every bomb?
Would happen then?*

What I mean is (to echo our readings):

what would happen if we had more imagination
during these holidays?

If we allowed ourselves to think in ways we have
Never thought before?

We need to ask these questions, I believe,

We need to stretch ourselves to dream,
Because at the same time we can go to the CVS and buy cards
That say “Happy Christmakkuk”
We are also confronted on daily, if not hourly basis
With a world that reminds us our imagination and new ideas
Are needed at least as much as our cheery slogans.

In this season of light, of distinctive traditions worth celebrating,
of stories more ancient than all of us, of songs new and old,
of words repeated and heard again,
and of Rutter and of the ministry
that is music:
May we breathe fresh air.
May we change and be changed.
May we ask and answer: what would happen if?
And may we listen, once again, to the blessings of voices: