

Christmas Eve Service, December, 2005

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Opening Words – Christmas Eve

Nine years ago I was new to this community. I had only six months previously turned my back on the church I had been raised in, and all that it stood for. It was getting close to Christmas, and I was floundering. I had no idea how to celebrate a holiday that I no longer believed in. Then I stumbled onto this quote, and as so often happens, it was just what I needed, when I needed it. As far as I know, it is anonymous.

If, as Herod, we fill our lives with things, and again with things: if we consider ourselves so unimportant that we must fill every moment of our lives with action, when will we have the time to make the long, slow journey across the desert as did the Magi? Or sit and watch the stars as did the shepherds? Or brood over the coming of the child as did Mary? For each of us, there is a desert to travel. A star to discover. And a being within ourselves to bring to life.

This quote planted the seed for a way to rethink Christmas. Knowing that the story of the birth of Jesus is not historical fact, how could I still find meaning in what it had to tell?

So I started to look at the Christmas story the way you would look at any myth, or even a dream. First, you put yourself into each of the major roles and see if they have lessons that speak to you. And that is what we are going to do tonight – examine the different parts of the story and try to reclaim this holy night. In the words of Sophia Lyon Fahs:

For so the children come
And so they have been coming.
Always in the same way they come,
born of the seed of man and woman.
No angels herald their beginnings.
No prophets predict their future courses.
No wisemen see a star to show where to find the babe that will save humankind.
Yet each night a child is born is a holy night,
Fathers and mothers –
sitting beside their children's cribs
feel glory in the sight of a new life beginning.
They ask, "Where and how will this new life end?"
Each night a child is born is a holy night –
A time for singing,
A time for wondering,
A time for worshipping.

The Angels

When Amanda and I started planning this service, we were going to sing "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing!" But would you believe it, it's not in the hymnal! I guess the words

are just too “Christian” for the UU hymnal. And that is a very good reason for talking about reclaiming the language of Christmas.

I don’t know about you, but the music of Christmas has always been one of the most important parts of the holiday for me. I’m one of those people who starts playing the Christmas CD’s before Thanksgiving, and I’m sorry to put them away in January. I don’t think this really has anything to do with the fact that I’m a musician – it’s not that I enjoy playing the music. It’s the words and the music together. They are part of my heritage, and part of who I am. And they are beautiful.

Hark! The herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn King;
Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!”
Joyful, all ye nations rise, Join the triumph of the skies;
With the angelic host proclaim, “Christ is born in Bethlehem!”
Hark! The herald angels sing, “Glory to the new-born King!”

The angels in the story are easy to interpret. Angels are messengers of God. That which is divine in each one of us, our souls if you will, greet the child with singing. They tell the world of its birth. They fill the sky in a heavenly chorus.

An angel appears to Mary, to tell her not to be afraid – that that which is conceived in her is from God. And an angel appears to Joseph, in a dream, to tell him to go ahead with his plans and take Mary as his wife.

It’s not hard for me to equate the Angels in the story with the soul. My soul tells me not to be afraid, to leap and to trust. And the link between the angels and music is an easy one – music touches our souls in wondrous ways.

The Shepherds

The shepherds are the common, ordinary parts of our lives. They carried their possessions with them when they followed their flocks. They lived in huts or caves, or when the weather was fine, they probably lived outdoors.

The Angels appeared to the shepherds and told them about the birth of the child. And the shepherds left their flocks and went to see the baby. So if the imagery is to continue, then the interpretation of this part of the story is that the messengers of God come to the common, ordinary parts of our lives to tell us to acknowledge the child.

These are the words from the third verse of “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear”:
O ye, beneath life’s crushing load, whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way, with painful steps and slow.
Look now, for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing.
Oh rest beside the weary road and hear the angels sing.

We need to look for the child in our daily lives. We need to make room for what the child can bring to us.

This next reading is by Margaret Starkey, and is entitled “One Small Face”.

With mounds of greenery, the brightest ornaments, we bring high summer to our rooms,
as if to spite the somberness of winter come.

In time of want, when life is boarding up against the next uncertain spring, we celebrate
and give of what we have away.

All creatures bend to rules, even the stars constrained.

There is a blessed madness in the human need to go against the grain of cold and scarcity.

We make a holiday, the rituals varied as the hopes of humanity,

The reasons as obscure as the ancient solar festivals, as clear as joy on one small face.

The Wise Men

The Wise Men seek the child. They follow the star, they bring gifts, they find the child,
and then they protect it from Herod, who seeks it to kill it. I think it's really interesting
that the story says “Wise Men”, even though we interpret it to mean kings.

If we are wise, we too seek the child. We bring it gifts – we give it time and space to be
part of our lives. We honor it and protect it from a society that demands that we grow up
– that we be adults.

This reading is titled “Why Not A Star”, by Margaret Gooding

They told me that when Jesus was born a star appeared in the heavens above the place
where the young child lay.

When I was very young I had no trouble believing wondrous things; I believed in the star.

It was a wonderful miracle, part of a long ago story, foretelling an uncommon life.

They told me a super nova appeared in the heavens in its dying burst of fire.

When I was older and believed in science and reason I believed the story of the star
explained.

But I found I was unwilling to give up the star, fitting symbol for the birth of one whose
uncommon life has been long remembered.

The star explained became the star understood, for Jesus, for Buddha, for Zarathustra.

Why not a star? Some bright star shines somewhere in the heavens each time a child is
born.

Who knows what it may foretell?

Who knows what uncommon life may yet again unfold, if we but give it a chance?

The Child

The birth of the child is, of course, the culmination of all the other elements in the story.
The Angels praise it, the Shepherds worship it, and the Wise Men seek it and bring it
gifts. So how can we interpret the child?

In his book, Care of the Soul, Thomas Moore talks about the importance of honoring the child within us. This reading is from that book.

“The child is not honored if we always expect him to grow up, because a child is not grown up.... To embrace the child may threaten the adult who values information above wonder, entertainment above play, and intelligence above ignorance. If we were really to care for the child, we would have to face our own lower natures – our indomitable emotions, our insane desires, and the vast range of our incapacity.... We live in a hierarchical world in which we defend ourselves from our primitive nature by looking down on less developed cultures, and from our eternal infancy and childhood by insisting on a graded, necessary elevation through learning and technological sophistication out of the child into the adult. This is not a true initiation that values both the previous form of existence and the newly attained one; it is a defense against the humiliating reality of the child, a humility that embarrasses the Promethean longing for adult control of life but nevertheless is full of soul. We are not caring for the soul when we fabricate ways of denying its inferior stations, childhood prominent among them. We care for the soul by acknowledging the place of eternal childhood, seeing its disadvantages to be virtuous and its inadequacies to be the conduits of soulful sensitivity.”

The child represents innocence, faith, trust, and unconditional love. The child is alive with wonder and joy. It knows how to play. It lives completely in the present, with no worries or cares. It seems to me that we could all do with a little more of that.

I think that the true magic of Christmas is embodied in the image of the child, and it would be a good spiritual practice to try to keep some of the child's qualities in our daily lives. Let us not be afraid to trust, for it is in trusting that we connect to others. Let us not be afraid to be vulnerable, for it is in being vulnerable that we become strong. Let us not be afraid to love, for it is in loving that we are made whole.

So how do we give birth to the child within? We give birth to the child when we become the Angels, praising and honoring the child. We give birth to the child when we become the Shepherds, bringing the child into our ordinary, common days. We give birth to the child when we become the Wise Men, searching the world for the child, bringing it gifts of time and resources, and allowing it to remain part of who we are. And we give birth to the child when we purposefully celebrate Christmas, and honor the Child as the gift of spirit that it is.

In the words of Sara Moores Campbell:

Give us the spirit of the child.

Give us the child who lives within;

The child who trusts, the child who imagines, the child who sings.

The child who receives without reservation, the child who gives without judgment.

Give us a child's eyes, that we may receive the beauty and freshness of this day like a sunrise;

Give us a child's ears, that we may hear the music of mythical times;

Give us a child's heart that we may be filled with wonder and delight;

Give us a child's faith, that we may be cured of our cynicism;

Give us the spirit of the child, who is not afraid to need; who is not afraid to love.

Passing the Flame

We come now to the part of our Christmas Eve service when we traditionally pass the flame of peace. We will sing “Silent Night” as the flame is passed, and when all the candles are lit, we will follow the choir and take our flame out into the world. Before we do that, I have one more reading for you. This is called “The Work of Christmas”, by Howard Thurman.

When the song of angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
 to find the lost,
 to heal the broken,
 to feed the hungry,
 to release the prisoner,
 to rebuild the nations,
 to bring peace among the brothers,
 to make music in the heart.