

Christmas Eve Homily

Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
First Parish Unitarian Universalist
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I'm guessing that each of us here tonight was once a baby, a newborn baby, and that each newborn face met gazes every bit as worshipful as that first gaze of the long traveling shepherds and the sages of the East following a star. Your birth was wondrous. Your newborn presence, whatever the economy of your circumstance may have been, was met with its own brand of adoration. Yet year after year we celebrate another birth, a birth rich with legend holding far more stories than the few we have read tonight.

Some say that the child born in a manger in Bethlehem just over two millennia ago was special, very special. Some say he was the Son of God, a miracle child who would later perform miracles, a child whose infant reputation made kings tremble and wise men bow down, a child whose birth was proclaimed by prophets, accompanied by a chorus of angels, and marked by a star.

On Christmas Eve, even those among us who are doggedly humanist or agnostic or Unitarian are seasonally ripe for worship at the manger, so magnetic is the force that bids us in those words of Auden to "run to Bethlehem." We become kindred spirits with those shepherds in the fields watching over their flocks by night, dazed by a celestial song. We say, "Yes, yes!" to those men of the East who followed a star bearing gifts worthy of a king. We catch a whiff of the night air and look up and see a star, and it *is* two thousand years ago. We rush ahead into what we know, which is precious little, of the life of Jesus—reports of water turned into wine, a few loaves and fishes stretched into a banquet, a long-gone Lazarus restored to life; and we wonder at the power of these stories, persisting over the centuries.

Our rational minds remind us that the quartet of Gospel narratives was not alone among ancient texts that rendered the life and teachings and sorry conclusion and mysterious finale of this person known as Jesus. The Apocrypha, the "hidden" narratives, lurk in other rooms, subject to scholarly scrutiny. But this is Christmas Eve! Christmas Eve, when even the most strident rationalist can be swept up by the disarming strains of "Joy to the World," by the sure chill of "a cold winter's night that was so deep," by "the hopes and fears of all the years met in thee tonight." Who was this baby to cause such a fuss?

The child of an unwed mother and a father who was on the scene as Mary's betrothed and birth coach. The child of parents caught up in an ill-timed taxation that took them far from home. The child of a couple whose inelegant planning led to not a single vacancy in lodging on a night when his arrival was imminent. The child who would soon turn fugitive, on the run from a king who did not suffer reputed contenders kindly. Imagine, a baby as fugitive, a baby being ascribed the kind of power that could topple royalty. Who was this baby Jesus?

We have a glimpse, a historical glimpse, of how his life unfolded. He was, we might say, a "problem child," gifted with an inquiring intellect, increasingly attentive to the disparity between wealth and poverty, a young man who kept questionable company, an itinerant in the style of his wandering parents on the night of his birth, and at long last the none too willing victim of an atrocity by the state. Some say he transcended death. Surely the birth and life and death and more of this Bethlehem babe turned man was extraordinary.

Yet on this Christmas Eve, I wonder. I wonder if there might be a deeper miracle veiled by the centuries of legend turned Scripture. What if Jesus was simply and thoroughly human, a birth-to-death human, who nonetheless rose to the most astonishing heights of his oh so human nature? Now this might not shake the pillars of what those of us who are Unitarian take in stride. “This is news?” we might ask with a certain disdain. Yes, yes, this is news that lies in the asking and re-asking of “What if?” For if even the little we presumably know of the life and teachings of Jesus is so, then each of us, each of us whose birth was greeted with some modicum of adoration, some taint of the miraculous, holds the promise of radical love that his held. If we deem him divine, then how easy it is to separate ourselves from the realization of promise that was his! How easy it is to protest, “Well, it’s one thing to be divine and quite another to be me!”

“A child is born among us and we feel a special glow,” we sing out in this Meeting House. It’s an understatement. A child is born among us, a child comes into this community, and we greet this child as nothing shy of a miracle, as hope incarnate. We dedicate ourselves to this child, that he will grow in the way of love and mindful living both for himself and humankind. We trust that he will be a blessing to his parents and this community, but do we really expect or even hope that this child will take to heart the full reaches of love and mindful living for all of humankind?

Go back, back to Bethlehem. A king was expected by the long-suffering Jews. Yet who was born into our midst but a teacher, a teacher with the hardest of lessons and the hardest of demonstrations for how to live in the way of love and mindfulness. He was a child turned man gifted in ways that most of us don’t really want our children to be gifted. So why, why do we turn once again to the story of this child in a manger year after year? What hold does he have on us? Where does legend end and epiphany begin? In what veiled mirrors shall we recognize him?

I wonder if the miracle of Christmas lies in the possibility that Jesus of Nazareth was human, a holy human child of God. I wonder if the miracle of Christmas lies in the possibility that any of us might meet his gaze and see there reflected the sacred realities of how we began, the sacred possibilities for how we might be, for how we can be. I wonder if the miracle of Christmas rings true in some faint echo of angelic song, “Peace on earth, good will to all,” because it’s possible, it’s possible in the altered mode of humanity to which we can yet aspire. It’s possible for us, because it was lived by one of us. On this Christmas Eve, I celebrate the rebirth of human possibility. Amen.

Sources

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