

The Miracles of Christmas

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD December 24, 2022

I am reminded, again, in this season of wonder, of the night sky – that blanket of darkness peppered with tiny, minute images of ancient stars burning lightyears away. A beautiful tapestry of our unknowable universe and an invitation to imagine all that is beyond, a truly awe-inspiring array of glittering stars, perhaps the faint glow of the milky way. I am drawn to this image on Christmas Eve because it is the very same night sky seen by both mother and father, infant and wizened shepherd, angel and farm animal alike in the long-ago tale of Christmas – the same night sky that cloaked this sacred manger in darkness; the same star that directed the impoverished group to the humble birthing ground of the Christian savior. The same stars that we observe; that any of those in our midst observe – wealthy or impoverished, healthy or ill, old or young, joyful or sorrowful. The night sky connects us all. I wonder what else, on this eve of Christmas, can unite us all. Those of any faith, of any time, past, present, or future. What lessons can we all glean from the infant savior fabled to be born on this holiday? I'll share with you what stands out as universal to me – hope and love. May each person in our web of life be blessed with hope and held in love. That which was found in the manger – that hope of new life amidst oppression and poverty, of a babe brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, the hope found in awe of new life or the love of new parents and angels alike. And this hope, this love, was carried beyond the manger and into the lives of millions throughout millennia by the stories and teachings of Jesus as he lived and died. We are all held by the night sky; we are all invited to carry within us an unceasing hope that we can welcome the sacred into our midst just as Christians welcome their Son of God.

What else can we share in this Christmas season? Earlier last month, a group of us gathered to explore the holidays and our December worship theme of Wonder. We spoke of the wonder of the night sky, we spoke of reindeer, cookies, and carols – of the unique joy that comes during this time of year – that of the excitement, delight, and jubilation we can experience as we draw from childhood wonder and incorporate this magic into our adult lives. Is that not the intention

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith December 2022

of lights strung from a tree, carols sung to unassuming recipients, cookies baked and exchanged and eaten with delight? To me – these simple wonders are held sacred, in a way, as we connect with basic goodness and awe. Christmas is a time for joy, just as it is a time for hope and love. And, on this day, we also share hope and love and joy in unexpected places – in brothels and in inner cities, in homeless shelters and prisons. Anywhere the night sky can reach, so too can we find hope and love.

For this, too, is the tale of Christmas – the sacred celebrated on this day – the birth of a savior in the Christian faith. Christmas is a celebration of love and acceptance of the least of these, emulated by a savior. What is Jesus to us, to Unitarian Universalists – to the faith that historically claims a single God, not a trinity – to the faith that understands Jesus as fully human, not divine? Jesus is held to us among the prophets throughout the ages – Gandhi, Buddha, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. These prophets are all examples of love and compassion to be emulated. They provide us with a wealth of wisdom stories as well as concrete examples of justice and love and hope prevailing. To me, this understanding of Jesus as fully human is even more profound than if he were truly divine. Jesus was guided by the same love and compassion and hope we each hold within us – nothing more, nothing less. We, too, can touch all the night sky can touch, healing a broken world. Each baby a miracle, each impoverished manger a holy place.

The story of Jesus is important to us because of the love and compassion and care we see illuminated in the New Testament, that we can observe in the stories of this ancient man. When exploring the historical Jesus, several key highlights stand out – where and how he ate, the miracles he performed, and a different interpretation of life after death.

In the bible there are stories illuminating the people with whom Jesus ate. And we need to highlight these stories alongside the traditions and norms of this ancient culture, where with whom one ate reflected one's status in society. The dinner table illuminated deeply held discriminations, stigmas, and social hierarchies – separating the least of these from everyone

else. And yet this man – Jesus – he did not see, when engaging with people, the chosen versus the ostracized – he made no meaningful distinction between wealthy and poor. He shared his meals with everyone and was, in doing so, labeled “a glutton, a drunkard, and a friend of tax collectors and sinners” – the worst insults offered in that day and time.¹ What does this story mean today? Who are we taught to avoid? Are there not still addicts and prisoners? We are, today, separated by jail cells, by the suburbs lining the inner cities, by the shadowed, hidden places in society – just as the diner tables created boundaries millennia ago. Can we, too, be intentional in welcoming anyone into our midst? Eating with the least of these – everyone equal and worthy. Everyone offered hope and love just as we share the moon and the stars.

Or the miracles – how do we as Unitarian Universalists respond to the parables highlighting the healing powers of Jesus? These were not acts of magic gifted to a savior held divine. They were miracles that occurred when an ostracized person was treated with care and respect, when an outsider was treated as an insider, when the rejected were deemed worthy. Those who were seen as unclean – those with leprosy, for example – suddenly became fully human. Through the acts of Jesus, those with status were forced to accept those who had been rejected. This is the healing he performed. He reworked the social hierarchies, changing the understandings of that which was deemed acceptable.² This man offered universal hope and love.

In reflecting on Jesus, I wonder of the Christian idea of heaven, and how we can interpret this in our own faith. Heaven is not a place where the wealthy are free to be gluttonous, where the privileged are rewarded for lives of wealth or prestige. Heaven is a place where all are equal – where poverty is eliminated and the least of these are treasured with all of us. Where those who have suffered find solace and rest. Heaven is like the night sky – touching us all, illuminating us. It is hope, it is love, it is joy. No matter what our idea of life after death may be, we are called to create our own heaven here – in this realm – not to hope for something in

¹ *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* by John Dominic Crossan pg. 69

² *ibid*, pg. 82

the beyond. We are each called to be the change we want to see in this world. Heaven becomes life after death not in the sense of another worldly place to reside – but life after death in that the ostracized are offered a chance to reawaken and re-engage with their own hopes, their own destinies, and all their potential held within.³

I think of the parable of the mustard seed, and how this plant – this weed – represents heaven. The mustard plant, born of a tiny seed, takes over, gets “out of control,” attracting birds and other creatures to areas where they are not desired. This – this mustard plant – is what Jesus saw as the kingdom of heaven. I quote, from New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan, that heaven is like a “repugnant shrub with dangerous take-over properties.”⁴ Jesus brought tax collectors and lepers and unwed women to the table – bringing those birds where they were not wanted. We are called to welcome those from unwanted spaces into our own midst – opening our tables to all. We don’t hide addicts or send away those asking for help or stigmatize the ill. We practice radical welcome, unconditional love. Everyone has a seat at our table. Everyone is worthy. That is how heaven spreads.

We have wonder and awe on this night – this eve of Christmas– celebrating the birth of a baby destined to be a savior – this child that would eventually eat with all and welcome the least of these into heaven. This is wonder, and this is magic. And I want to return to that childhood awe as well. To children, miracles are reindeer on the rooftops; a miracle is St. Nick squeezing his way down the chimney with presents in tow. To Jesus, miracles were when the outcast are met with love and treated as equals. Today, may we celebrate them both. May the simple, innocent awe of children become our own miracles – may the sheer delight in a snowstorm, the cookies left out for Santa, offer joy in these cold, dark days. And may they meld together with those other miracles – that universal love and unrelenting hope. Each day immersed in awe. May we be reminded to engage with each person with love, kindness, and acceptance. May strings of lights donning our houses become tiny offerings of love, delicate signs of peace. May cookies

³ *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* by John Dominic Crossan pg. 95

⁴ *Ibid* pg. 65

and eggnog be shared by all. Just as the night sky touches all, so, too, does heaven. May we welcome the sacred into our own lives, just as the parents and angels and animals at that ancient manger welcomed theirs. May this day, and every day, offer us hope, love, and joy.

May it be so, and Amen.