

“The Lessons of Christmas”

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD December 24, 2023

Christmas celebrates the sacred birth that Christians understand to have brought their God to the world of the flesh and the finite. This story narrates a birth of sacred yet humble origins. The tale begins with an innocent, virtuous, virgin, impregnated by the divine. It follows this impoverished, refugee family, father and virgin mother as they searched for a place to give birth to the child. Searching for an inn, the dejected family is instead forced to welcome this child held within the confines of a stable surrounded by farm animals. A birth of holy origins begun in poverty, witnessed by angels who proclaimed the wonder and glory of this new and divine life to shepherds of the land.

Focusing on this celebration of the birth of a savior through the lens of our own Unitarian Universalist faith, we reimagine and reframe the prophet Jesus. Our Unitarian forebears and adherents of our faith to this day do not see Jesus as a divine figure. We see Jesus – I see Jesus – as an exemplar of love in this world. A model of compassion, vulnerability, and of a deeply held faith. And yet we can navigate this celebration reconsidering Christian metaphors. We examine this holiday through our own faith, asking What is God? What does it mean for Jesus to be incarnate? How does this life foster a deep and powerful call for justice and healing in our broken and beautiful world? I use the term God today because that is the language Christians use. I invite you to interpret with whatever term for the sacred holds true for you.

What is God? There is not one answer to this question of such great magnitude, and yet if we engage with liberal Christianity, we see an entity similar to the ones held in some of our own hearts and spirits. The most profound idea, perhaps, is that God, as narrated in the liberal telling of Christmas, is not one of absolute power, not one who rules of fear, punishment, or damnation. God’s two most powerful qualities are love and vulnerability. There was an aching world – a desperate world – one of poverty, oppression, and danger. There was a world that

the sacred entered, not as a ruler, not as a dictator, but as an infant; an impoverished infant, at that – an innocent, humble being – both of mind and of body.¹ Vulnerability is held in stark contrast with this idea of an omniscient, omnipotent entity, and instead offers a companion. The sacred does not establish rules for us to follow, but instead offers a love for us to immerse ourselves in.

What does the world become when engaging with this unknowable essence? Father Richard Rohr reflected, “Once we know that the entire physical world around us, all of creation, is both the hiding place and the revelation place for God, this world becomes home, safe, enchanted, offering grace to any who look deeply.”² Note those words for later - “grace” and “revelation.” As these words note, the sacred hides among us. We find what we hold holy in the beauty, in awe, in wonder – tucked away. We find the sacred in the mundane, if only we look. This makes our world safe and a place of enchantment, of wonder, of mystery – each day. And yet, more importantly, we find God in the dangerous places, the impoverished places, the places of addiction abundant and violence prevalent – cloaked in hardship yet shining in divinity. In unpacking this quote I wonder, what is grace to adherents of our faith? It is something freely given from whatever we hold sacred – offered awe, love, wonder, mystery, companionship. What does revelation mean in our faith? It means we are taught or shown something we did not know, comprehend, or notice before. It is a way our sacred reveals itself. It is the sacred saying – look at this – this impoverished birth – for this is beautiful. It is the sacred saying - look at the powerless, for this is where I reside.

What does it mean for Jesus to be incarnate? For Christians, the man Jesus was how an eternal, creative, loving, mysterious, vulnerable God became one with this imperfect, finite world. It was God as an entity becoming Jesus in the flesh. There are parallels in our faith, regardless of our rejection of the trinity. God, to me, can be seen in Jesus as the unconditional, universal love he held deep in his heart. God becomes synonymous with love. In this way we each

¹ Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes

² “All Creation Has Soul” adapted from Richard Rohr

become incarnate. God enters this world not through one man but as the spark held within each of us, the love that allows us to see each person as inherently worthy, the spark that offers us the ability to embrace the awe and wonder of a sunset or a newborn child. God still enters this realm as creative, mysterious, and vulnerable. Jesus, for us, is, however, still held sacred and holy in that he teaches a love so overwhelming and pure it seems to be divinely inspired. Jesus becomes a teacher, showing us how love can heal, instructing us on how to see each person as deserving of unconditional compassion.

Father Richard Rohr offers this – “instead of saying that God came into the world through Jesus, maybe it would be better to say that Jesus came out of an already Christ-soaked world.”³ I love this idea of a Christ-soaked world as I imagine it through the lens of our faith. It is the world we encounter when we act with unconditional love. It is the world we encounter when we understand ourselves as siblings with all of humanity. It did not take a single man to bring this to the world – we were and are already innately good, loving, and compassionate. So why did Jesus become incarnate? In my mind, in reflecting upon this particular faith tradition, Jesus came to this world because God wanted to reside amidst that of which God created and that of which God loved so very much. As Unitarian Universalists – how does God reside among us? Does some essence or entity love us unconditionally? God is with us in the air, the trees, the compassion we hold in our hearts, the strength to overcome, the still, small spark within us that guides us home. We are held in love eternal, that which creates beauty amidst the darkness, strength amidst the greatest of hardships. We do not need the Christian understanding of God or the Trinity to reside within a world of unconditional love or to understand that our sacred is among us, although these metaphors offer a tangible, beautiful, and deeply faithful way to remind us of this. What this story offers us is an exemplar of love – Jesus.

The story of Christmas introduces a call for justice, as we reflect upon the man this child became. I want to reflect upon the sentiments of pastor, theologian, and anti-Nazi dissident Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer offered the sentiments that any attack on the least of these is

³ All Creation Has Soul” adapted from Richard Rohr

an attack on the sacred. Jesus, in Bonhoeffer's belief, took the form of human beings and as such resides in each of us – most importantly those on the bottom rungs of society.⁴ I offer two reflections on these ideas, the ideas that committed this man to justice: The sacred resides in each of us, whether as love or as a spark of light or a moment of wonder, so to direct violence, hate, or animosity to any being is to offer it directly to what we hold sacred. Second, individualism becomes immoral, a transgression from the divine. If all we are concerned with is ourselves and our own trials and tribulations, we ignore, with disdain or indifference, the sacred that is all around us. We are, instead, siblings with all of humanity. As such, just as the Christian savior did, we are called to love, and we are called to heal. The sex worker becomes our sister, and we love her as such. The addict becomes our brother, and we love him as such. The love of Jesus allowed the dying and the ostracized to heal and return to society. May our love do the same. And may we foster acts of tangible care and compassion, for people need help receiving medical aid. People need help with food and shelter and childcare and steady jobs and all of that which sustains life. We can offer this. We are called to offer this. The trials and sorrows of our siblings become weight upon our own shoulders – they become our burdens to bear. That is what Christmas demonstrates and makes real; makes tangible; makes of utmost importance. The birth of love and compassion into this struggling and aching world.

So, on this day, in this moment, may we celebrate the vulnerability and love birthed into this world of ours, for this is God, this is the sacred. May we honor Christmas, and may we celebrate a man whose unconditional love and compassion healed the least of these in this broken, imperfect, and beautiful world, a life incarnate, a life of love. May we follow these teachings and bring the power of the transcendent into our small and precious lives. May the sacred within and among us lead us towards justice. Today, we celebrate. Today, we love.

May it be so, and Amen.

⁴ From *Soul Matters Worship Resources: December 2023*