

## Dwelling Among Us

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD December 24, 2024

Christmas is the Christian celebration of God incarnate – of all that is sacred, divine, immortal, and infinite becoming flesh in the form of Jesus. The narrative of this ancient tale, held foundational and eminently significant to those of the Christian faith, narrates God entering this finite realm through the form of a baby steeped in poverty, born in a manger surrounded by farm animals, by shepherds, by unexpected parents fleeing oppression and violence. Born of humble origins of a virgin mother understood to be impregnated by God, the Christian God entered this earth through a man who soon became steeped in a deep, unceasing love. God incarnate. Today we wonder, if God can enter this world through an unassuming babe, how else can we find divinity around us and within us?

I use the word “God” today because that is the language of Christianity from which this story arises. Among those of the Unitarian Universalist faith, including those of us in this sanctuary, there is a vast array of understandings of divinity and the holy, and a multitude of ways of expressing the name of a divine essence. Perhaps nature is most sacred and holy, or Goddess, or Allah, or simply a higher power. Today we use the name “God” to describe a divine entity. Mystery, nature, love, spirit of life, that divine source of all that is – this permeates our world as well.

I lift up the sentiments of Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Gretchen Haley, who offers, quote, “God is not residing in some celestial heaven, God abides here, fully present with us, in us.”<sup>1</sup> What do we imagine this celestial heaven to be? Idealistically, whether or not we find heaven to be our ultimate truth, it may be, and is often understood, as a belief of a sacred closeness to all that is divine, or a way to reunite with those of whom we have tragically lost, or an eternal life unceasingly steeped in beauty and awe and divinity. Just like the idea of the

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<sup>1</sup> “When God Had a Body” Rev. Gretchen Haley

sacred, interpretations of this celestial realm are endless and unique. Yet in this Christian story God decided, God chose, God intended, not to live in an infinite and immortal and holy realm, but within and among humanity, an imperfect and flawed and sorrowful humanity, at times destitute or violent or impoverished. In this story, God - our divine spirit of love, an eternal essence - made the choice to enter this broken and beautiful world. Why? There is sacred and holy work to be done.

I offer Rev. Haley's reflections once again. Through the wonder and magic of Christmas, as all that is holy, divine, and sacred entered the world, becoming an intimate piece of all that is finite. Quote, "instead of an untouchable transcendence that occasionally comes over us in a great and rare sacred shiver, this story says that the holy knows human life intimately."<sup>2</sup> The story of all that is sacred entering the world through the mortal, revolutionary, and fully human being of Jesus lifts up the presence of God - a presence that will never leave this finite realm. In our own interpretation of this story, all that is holy is no longer untouchable, unknowable, residing solely in some form of eternity, but is among us, within us, surrounding us. Neither is the sacred experience sporadically – one prayer, one moment of awe, one moment of death, at a time, but available to each of us in each blessed moment of each holy and mundane day. Within every person. Within every experience. It can be comforting, imagining divinity among and within us. Each celebration or moment of awe. Each argument or time of mourning, each moment of exhaustion or anguish, each relapsing addict, each doubt, each embarrassment, each imperfect and blessed being known intimately by the "infinite universe." From moment-to-moment this holy entity knows the intricacies of human existence, the devastation and detriments listed above, all of the love and joy and sorrow and monotony found in human existence.

Christianity rests on the idea of God incarnate in Jesus, the prophet and savior of the Christian faith. In the context of this Unitarian Universalist sermon, I wonder what teachings are most relevant to us. What can we learn as we celebrate the fully human, fully loving person of Jesus?

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<sup>2</sup> "When God Had a Body" Rev. Gretchen Haley

What can we learn as we honor the idea of this God in the flesh? Jesus is but one prophet among many, held alongside the Buddha, Muhammad, Moses. This particular prophet offers us this: Love thy neighbor; love all others as you would love yourself. Love your enemies. I think of this teaching particularly among the current divisiveness of our nation today. Live a life that practices forgiveness, for forgiveness can be saving and healing. Serve the least of these as we work to tend to all of those on this finite realm. Love the ostracized. Heal the wounded. Know that God is accessible to all. Be unconditionally kind, caring, and helpful. This is our God incarnate.

In this midst of this reflection on Christmas, I want to touch upon the ideas of American Franciscan priest and author Father Richard Rohr. Father Rohr, a lifelong Christian, talks about the understanding of incarnation. He offers that when most Christians hear the word “incarnation,” they reflect upon the idea of Jesus, whom they believe demonstrated God’s union with all in this realm – the incarnation celebrated on Christmas. He suggests there was a previous incarnation, offered in the book of Genesis, when, quote, “God joined in unity with the physical universe and became the light inside of everything.” Well before the birth of this Christian savior, we each had a spark of the divine within us. Within each body, heart, soul, and mind – divinity. We are each a sacred entity.<sup>3</sup> This in no way takes away from the wonder, magic, and awe of Christmas, when this divine prophet entered the world. It is simply to say that the spark of the divine has been within each of us from the start. Jesus of the Christian faith remains a different, unique, and holy presence of God. But so, too, are we divine.

I want to continue the reflections of Father Rohr that serves to re-frame this sacred and beloved story of the birth of a savior. Rohr offers that, instead of saying that a sacred, divine entity entered the world through the one holy being of Jesus, perhaps it is better to say that this Messiah was birthed of the beauty, love, and wonder already held in this world. Jesus – whatever it may be that we hold most sacred – did not come from a realm beyond us but was

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<sup>3</sup> *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe* by Richard Rohr

born in this earthly realm, emerging from the goodness and faith and held intrinsically within.<sup>4</sup> In Christianity, Jesus remains a divine being sent by God, but I think can simultaneously be understood as a manifestation of all that is good and whole and loving and fully human; a manifestation of all the goodness and holiness that has ever been - a manifestation of the love of this world. This manifestation of love is Christmas.

The manifestation of love is Christmas. I believe Jesus to be a fully human being imbued, not with God, but with a spirit of eternal, unceasing, unlimited love – a love so powerful that it presents itself as miracles or magic. Love dwells among us, and just as we hold a spark of the divine so, too, do we hold an essence of love. It is held inherent within each of us, accessible with each inhalation. We are both divinely loved and divinely loving. We can touch the untouchable, love the unlovable, heal the unhealable. On that fabled day in a humble manger, love was born, emanating far beyond that newborn babe, touching the lives of all of those yet to come.

And just as Christians believe Jesus to be God in the flesh, so too can we hold a belief in divinity among us. To many of those our faith, it held within all, trees and mountains and humans alike. Beneath the masks of the natural world is held all that is sacred and profoundly holy. We breathe divinity, see divinity, smell divinity. That which is most sacred and holy is right within our touch.

We also spoke about God choosing to leave a celestial heaven to dwell among us. And yet I wonder if part of that eternal, holy realm is present in this finite world. Perhaps that was birthed with Jesus on this sacred day. Found in wonderment and awe – the brief arc of light of a fleeting, shooting star, the crash of a foamy, blue, powerful ocean wave. That is heaven. A world of compassion and kindness and inherent worthiness. One of love between strangers and kin alike. This is but a piece of heaven.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe* by Richard Rohr

And yet I deviate from this idealistic picture for a moment, for neither love nor divinity holds a favoritism for that which is beautiful, awesome, or full of apparent wonder. So, too, is divinity found in poverty, violence, war, and addiction. The sacred dwells among all. No one – nothing – is ever abandoned but held in the embrace of all that was birthed on this holy day - a manifestation of love. There is perhaps even more divinity held within the destitute and the distraught, as taught and embodied in Jesus' preferential love for the least of these. God, Goddess, spirit of life, all that is holy - favors and resides amongst the broken and the poor and the ill.

And so today we celebrate that Christian story of God incarnate in the form of an impoverished infant – an infant of refugees born in but a manger. What does this mean in our faith? I do not understand Jesus as God, but as love. All that is love was birthed among us in the flesh on that sacred and holy day. It is a story of wonder and divinity and unceasing, unconditional, everlasting love entering this broken and beautiful world. It is all that is holy not residing in a celestial realm of beauty and awe, but instead intentionally found in this imperfect world of violence and poverty and war and addiction – intent on caring for the least of these. So may we, in turn, do the same. May that be our lesson of Christmas, one of justice and peace and loving our neighbors; may that be incarnate in us today. Of leaning into the pain of all of our earthly siblings so we can help heal our world. Christmas is a tale of an incarnation - perhaps not the first incarnation, but an incarnation none the less of all that embodies love and divinity and faith. Love and divinity and faith observed under that dark, velvety, starry night through the eyes of camel and shepherd alike, contemplating a newborn babe laying in straw as the humblest being among us. So, on this day of incarnation may we see love and divinity both around us and within us, a spark of the divine in our spirits, in our prayers, in the trees and rocks surrounding us, as we embody the holy and embrace the transcendent. May we celebrate love incarnate on this sacred, holy day.

May it be so, and Amen.