

Christmas Eve: With Love and Faith

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD December 24, 2025

Christmas celebrates a flicker of hope, strength, and love in the most trying of times. A tale of a young virgin mother with child. Of a birth amidst farm animals, a newborn babe laid in but a bed of straw. Of immigrant parents fleeing through the desert to safety. Of sheep, cattle, angels and wisemen, gathered for the birth of a savior. Stars twinkling in the velvety night sky. Christmas, to some, is an annual reminder of loss or estrangement or familial strife or loneliness. We hold this tenderly in our hearts. We may feel immersed in all things commercial – lights and persistent advertisements and sales, an overindulgence in food or an expectation for elaborate gifts. And yet I invite each of us into the Christmas of two millennia ago. One that culminates in the birth of Jesus, which is meaningful to Christians and Unitarian Universalists alike.

I offer an interpretation that brings this story to our faith. In our history of Unitarianism, we have never embraced the trinity. Rather, the Unitarian view is that Jesus is not God incarnate, but fully human. He is but one prophet among many, alongside Muhammad and Moses and the Buddha, to be revered by the people of the world. An incarnation, not of God, but of eternal and everlasting hope and love. This was a man living a life of compassion, peace, and faith. Healing the unhealable, yes - one of his greatest legacies. Yet this healing was not an act of God, but of love to those who never knew love. Jesus remained a human who acted selflessly to heal and accept the broken people who resided alongside him. We can still embody his lessons today.

I wonder about the juxtaposition of the Christmas story; one of hardship and destitution alongside beauty both finite and infinite. A family held in but a manger when a light shined. A family, not in an inn as they had aspired, not in any sort of true shelter, but in a stable alongside

camels and sheep. This contrast between poverty and divinity is not arbitrary. Jesus' birth was a beacon that shows us and the shepherds and the expectant parents the possibility of what can be. Amidst profound hardship comes love, peace, and light. This birth that is that flicker in the darkness that illuminates the way, the promise of unconditional divine companionship no matter how destitute one may feel.

What is the significance of the star of Bethlehem? This glimmer in the sky guided the Wise Men. Throughout the velvety blackness perhaps synonymous to sorrow, this small light brought these men to Jesus. This distant star became the smallest flicker of hope. Upon their arrival, they offered gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the babe whom they understood to be King of the Jews, in tangible gratitude for the hope they felt.

And it is this - beyond love and faith. The exploration of what compassion is the catalyst to. Jesus embodied life-giving, life-sustaining hope. Not simply as a child, but as a man. This hope is what Jesus offered in abundance to the marginalized. This was not hope for himself, but for those who are struggling. No one is promised a better future, but we can offer a vision of what the future has the potential to hold. We are called to act, like Jesus, with each decision inspired by love, forgiveness, and faith, if we are to offer hope to those who need it. Giving of our time and our resources and the compassion we hold within. Simply acknowledging the often overlooked. In each person we encounter, we need to offer that sacred flicker – a reminder of the finite nature of hopelessness and sorrow, a reminder of the impermanence of despondency.

I believe Jesus to be love incarnate – embodying a love that serves to heal. Jesus' miracles are often ascribed as magical acts offered through the power of his divinity as the Son of God. Healing the outcasts was his livelihood – the sick, the poor, the sinners. But I counter this idea of divine magic. The unimagined power of love, compassion, and acceptance was truly the catalyst to this change. There were, not lepers, not schizophrenics, not the unhoused - but individual people. Those with dreams and families and aspirations, to be treated as such. Jesus

touched them, loved them, cared for them. How often do we offer quick judgement? Condemnation? Indifference? Even subconsciously. To those on the streets. To those regularly found in the bars. To sex workers. To the imprisoned. So many among us today are met with disdain or even open hostility – just as in the time of Jesus. Jesus showing outcasts of society the acceptance they had never before received released them from their afflictions.

This reflection leads me to think of the Kingdom of God, regularly interpreted as the Kingdom of Heaven. Heaven is believed by some to be an eternal and otherworldly place of peace and joy, residing alongside the divine. Yet, what if this state was not awaiting us, but imminent? What if the Kingdom of Heaven is held within our very beings – a spark of the divine in our spirit or soul? It is that still, small voice within. It is when we persevere with divine strength. When hope whispers, all will be well, one way or the other. The Kingdom of God is that call that takes us beyond ourselves and into our community. Each of us holds love and peace and joy deep within, in each moment, just as Jesus did. So, we are called to create the Kingdom of Heaven here, on earth. To be the change we want to see in this world. To create a space where each being knows abundance and healing and compassion and peace. We are called to act for justice and equity. To act for immigrant rights and bodily autonomy and racial justice and prison reform. To avoid the trap of complacency as we live our faith's principles and values of justice, equity, generosity, and interdependence. We need one another.

It is through these seemingly holy acts that we see Jesus and the prophets mirrored within us - Buddha, Muhammad, Moses. Attributes imbued in divinity are found emanating from our very own hearts and spirits. These holy acts illuminate us, just as they did the sages throughout millennia. We act as holy beings when we work for justice or offer unconditional love or treat everyone with compassion; when we offer glimmers of hope to the hopeless. Similarly, we realize that divine love – whether through an interpersonal connection with the holy or an overarching love for all of humanity – is infinite. With no beginning and no ending, this love does not start with birth nor end with death. We feel this love right here, right now, at any moment we need to call upon it.

So may we celebrate this moment of Christmas. This sacred and hallowed time where unconditional faith, compassion and love are born, in the shape of Jesus. When the shepherds and their flock joined with expectant parents and a savior emerged amidst the straw and farm animals. When a star offered a flicker of hope in the darkness. May we celebrate this blessed and beloved day by creating the Kingdom of Heaven here, on earth. We live out the teachings of Jesus when we view a person as a person, not an affliction. When our compassion touches the least of these - the sick, the unhoused, the ostracized - through activism and volunteering and donations. When we create change through voting and political engagement. Even through simple, unexpected acts of kindness - for these are blessed too. May we smile, may we offer a sandwich, may we simply say "hello." It is when we focus our energy on beloved communities held in equity as we are inspired by the prophets of the ages. We do not need divine magic to create true and lasting change. We simply need to open our hearts. This is Christmas, dear ones. So, go forth! Engage with the world and all finite beings with faith and compassion. Go forth, with a hope that is the seed of possibility. Go, with love both sacred and profane. Go forth, and Merry Christmas.

May it be so, and Amen.