

Christmas Eve: The True Gifts of Christmas

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD, Dec. 24, 2020

In the scene of the manger lies a newborn babe. His parents lean over the infant with love in their eyes. Scattered around this new family are sheep, shepherds watching their flock, wise men, and angels, heads bowed in prayer! For this scene, common in so many Christian churches, depicts the story of a miracle. The story of Christmas depicts the birth of a Messiah – of Jesus – a baby born to a virgin mother named Mary conceived by the holy spirit. This is the story of when the Christian God comes to earth to take human form. The infant child born on that day was a savior to Christians. To me, he was an exemplar because of the life he lived – what he modeled through his actions, filled unconditional love. On that day a boy was born, a baby who grew to bring to the world peace, hope and love – and who continues to bring peace, hope and love to those who embrace and share this story to this very day.

The language of the Gospel of John describes Jesus as the “light of the world” – the “light that enlightens every person.” That night – the night of Jesus’s birth – there was a star in the sky.¹ That special light – that twinkling light in the vast darkness. I like this metaphor of Jesus as light. Light has no boundaries – just as the light of a star billions of miles away still provides light, warmth, and sustenance! The light of Jesus also illuminated that which may often be hidden – the lives of the marginalized. Jesus centered these lives – he dedicated himself to shining this light on those in the shadows – light without boundaries illuminating even the most remote of corners. Even in the story of this miraculous birth – humble shepherds tending their flock were present.² From birth until death, Jesus lived by the sides of those who needed him most. A beacon of goodness and love that ultimately stretched continents and

¹ *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* Marcus J. Borg 53

² *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* Marcus J. Borg 53

millennia – just like those precious rays of sun. A flame of love. A spark of compassion and hope. A blaze of enlightenment. His love and healing knew no boundaries – just as the light of a star illuminates a velvety night sky with no constraints.

And so I wonder. Today has become a day of sharing gifts – of boxes wrapped in paper and tied in bows below evergreen trees decorated by lights and ornaments of stars and shining bulbs. Sweaters, toys, and gadgets placed carefully under the tree. I think, however, about the true gifts of Christmas. Those gifts available to every person – those gifts that change the world – peace, hope, love and goodwill. Gifts illuminated when that star lit up the night sky – when shepherds and wisemen watched the new parents coo over their baby. The true gifts are those lessons we can learn from this man – a man named Jesus who lived his adult years showing everyone unconditional love, a man who saw inherent worth and dignity in every single person, a man who loved humanity so deeply he was able cure lepers and restore sight to the blind. These lessons and gifts are so profound that we still celebrate them two thousand years later.

The light of the world. And just as a flickering candle chases away darkness from far reaching corners so too does the goodness and holiness of Jesus squeeze out that which causes harm! Just as our poem read, “May the presence of the holy crowd out fear, hate, and worry.”³ In this context, holy is understood as Jesus and the Christian understanding of God. Yet the gifts of good and hope and peace illuminate the night sky of people of so many faiths – of so many understandings of the holy.

“Holy” can mean so many things, and if whatever this word means to you brings you kindness and goodness, that holy is perfect. When the holy is present that light squeezes out those things that cause

³ *Breathed into the World* Rev. Sandra Fees

harm – that hate that is pervasive or that fear that hovers over us like a shadow or that worry we may carry in our hearts or our stomachs – squeezed away from a source of light so good it is other-worldly.

And let us bring these gifts and this light out into the world! For Jesus lived to heal the marginalized and I believe the best way to maintain this sacred legacy is to do the same. That miraculous love Jesus had spread to everyone – especially the least of these. And Jesus cared for everyone and loved everyone and in doing so healed what was thought to be unhealable. During this season let us each bring those gifts to every aching soul – to help feed the hungry, shelter the unhoused, bring those packages of sweaters and toys to families who have little of each. This is a yearly reminder to seek out ways to volunteer our time and to offer money – if one can – to those who need it most. A sacred reminder. Let us hold these gifts of kindness and charity deep in our hearts. On Christmas a child was born who serves as an emblem for how to live in this world – for how to love. Christmas is when that light shines and pushes the veil of darkness out of the remote corners and shines rays of love, peace, and hope instead.

As we reflect on those gifts of goodness and love that are ample during Christmas, I am reminded of the story of Ebenezer Scrooge from the novel “A Christmas Story” written by Charles Dickens. Scrooge – a businessman bent on making money and running his business and nothing else – hated Christmas. Years previous, his business partner Jacob Marley – with the same greedy spirit as Ebenezer Scrooge – passed away. This Christmas, the ghost of Jacob Marley comes to visit Scrooge – and shows him that if he continues to live in this way he will spend eternity in shackles, forced to roam the earth in misery. It was Christmas that would save him – three Christmas spirits taking him, respectively, through Christmas past, Christmas present, and Christmas future. He saw in Christmas past remnants of his life before greed took over – when he still loved people. He saw in Christmas present how his greed was affecting those around him, causing pain, and he saw in Christmas future how his greed would lead to a lonely death! He saw his life – past, present, and future, pass before his eyes. He saw pain and he saw hardship

and he saw a life he no longer wanted to live. And yet through the power of Christmas and those three Christmas spirits – through the love, hope, peace, and goodness that they depicted – he healed. Through those spirits who showed him the true power of compassion and hope and the power of goodwill he learned to care, and love, and be kind, and help those in need. To become a loving soul who became a beacon of goodness.⁴ Is acquiring this ability to love not the greatest of Christmas gifts? Is not changing from greed to giving a gift we could all use? That pure goodness that comes when we live into the love exemplified by that man – that exemplar – named Jesus.

So when we see those sacred scenes on church lawns or within cathedrals or placed on a mantelpiece – those scenes of an impoverished family kneeling around a brand new babe – let us be reminded of the true gifts given us that day. The birth of a man who was light – whose life exemplified goodness and love and care and charity. Whose lessons are available to all who care to listen. Who loved everyone – especially the least of these. Let these lessons bring gifts of peace, hope, and love to our own lives, this day and every day.

May it be so, and Amen.

⁴ *A Christmas Carol* Charles Dickens