

IN A DARK TIME THE EYE BEGINS TO SEE

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist
Christmas Eve, Sunday, December 24, 2006, at 9 pm
The Rev. John A. Buehrens
Matthew 1:18 – 2:23

*Once in royal David's city stood a lowly cattle shed,
Where a mother laid her baby in a manger for his bed;
So may we when life turns hard find in love our stay and guard.*

*In that happy Christmas spirit, hear the angels from on high
Sing their ancient salutations: joy's a gift you cannot buy.
So may we, with heart that sings, share the truth this season brings.*

Joy is a gift you cannot buy. It comes by grace. And so let me begin with the hope that for each of you, you are able to find in this Christmastide grace-filled moments of peace, of quiet joy, of love and deeper meaning. Do not ask for more than moments, however. Sometime I think our blessings may be as numerous as the very stars in the heavens, but unless we look up, against the backdrop of the darkened sky, we may not see them.

“May your longest list this Christmas . . . be the one that counts your blessings,” said the card my wife and I sent out to distant friends this year.

“When it gets darkest, the stars come out.” That proverb was the title of a sermon given here some fifteen years ago by my good friend Ed Lane. This week one of you told me that you could still remember the whole sermon, and how it affected you. I can't hope for that reaction, but I am reminded that the poet Theodore Roethke put a little differently: “In a dark time the eye begins to see.” Whether it is that the stars shine brighter, or that the eye sees more acutely when it is dark, may be debated. But there are many ways to despise the world, and the life we share, and one of them is to deny or despise the dark. Without the night, after all, when would we rest, and dream? Without the shortened days of winter, how could Earth herself slumber and replenish?

Tonight I am reminded that, like many stories in the Bible, the one that brings us here is not literally true; perhaps just eternally true. We have heard the version of the story told by Matthew. Whatever else he was, he was certainly no reporter for *The Bethlehem Star!*

Writing decades after Jesus died, wanting to proclaim the meaning of his life and death, he knew little about his birth. Only that his father was named Joseph, his mother, Mary. That there were rumors that they had not been married when Jesus was born; that they'd raised him in Nazareth. Which was not the right place. The messiah had to come from Bethlehem, the city of David.

To solve this problem, what Matthew gives us is an almost dreamlike *midrash* – based on the notion that Joseph the father must have been a dreamer, like his namesake who went down to Egypt before him. A dream adorned with mythic elements -- like the star above, and the magi who follow it – a dream set against the dark backdrop of King Herod behaving like Pharaoh in the Passover story, slaughtering the children. It's not popular to notice this dark part of the Christmas story, but that doesn't mean that it isn't what one might call "a true myth."

The poets remind us of that. William Blake said that if there is an incarnation of unconditional love in the Christmas story, then it's not in the baby, it's in oft-neglected Joseph, who asks Mary no questions about the father of her baby, but accepts the child as his own. He does this against the backdrop of what must have been some dark suspicions.

And surely in times of trouble, especially in wartime, the poets remind us, we have no chance of seeing the star, or of hearing the message the angels bring unless we acknowledge that we too often seem to live in a dark time. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the Unitarian poet, during the unjustified war on Mexico wrote, "I heard the bells on Christmas Day their old familiar carols play . . . and in despair, I bowed my head, 'There is no peace on earth,' I said, 'for hate is strong, and mocks the song, of peace on earth, goodwill to men.'" Yet he did not stop at cynicism. Instead, he listened more deeply still. "Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: God is not dead, nor doth God sleep; the wrong shall fail, the right prevail, with peace on earth, goodwill to all." And so he affirmed the ancient truth within the myth. In a dark time, the eye begins to see.

Similarly, four years ago, when I stood in this pulpit for the very first time, I said

It's been an ominous Advent this year. Caesar is gathering his legions again.
A slaughter of innocents looms. What can one do but follow another star?
Hearken to more angelic voices. And keep the faith – that a New Possibility
waits still in human hearts to be born.

Two days later, I went to Iraq, joining Bob Edgar and other American religious leaders in doing 'humanitarian inspections' while weapons inspections continued. We returned predicting far too much of what has happened since. But in a dark time eyes begin to see. Too slowly, no doubt. But as Abe Lincoln said, politicians can fool some of the people all of the time; and all of the people some of the time, but not all the people all of the time. Ultimately, reality prevails over denial. The wheels grind slow, but they grind exceedingly fine.

It's too easy to wallow in cynicism. Easier still to be anesthetized by the sentimentality and materialism of a commercialized Christmas, until all the deeper, inconvenient truths are ignored. Some may want to keep believing in Santa Claus, or in a God who intervenes with miracles, well into what should be their spiritual maturity. And then, when such a God doesn't answer their prayers, they give up on faith. But what a shallow form of faith!

I know: at the next election for Ruler of the Universe, if I am chosen, I plan to change the rules, so that we human beings no longer have to learn from our mistakes, individual or collective. Instead, we will all be inspired from youth onward immediately and fully by the wisdom and example of those who have lit the way before us.

But in the meantime, perhaps we should try to see that the deepest truth of the Christmas myth may have been summarized by Thomas Merton when he said, ““God took on the weakness and ordinariness of [hu]man[ity], and . . . hid Himself, becoming an anonymous and unimportant man in a very unimportant place, and refusing at any time to

lord it over [others], or to be a King . . . or in any way superior to his own creatures. . . and nothing but their brother, counselor, servant, and friend.”

If that’s the case, then who is there to perform the miracles? To answer the prayers?

Perhaps only ordinary unimportant humans, like us. For as Mother Theresa once said, “God now has no eyes on earth with which to see what needs to be done but our eyes.” Nor ears to hear. Nor hands nor feet with which to go about feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, comforting the sick, protesting for peace, or calling on everyone to remember that the Kingdom of God cannot be coerced into existence, much less by violent means. Yet it is already among us – wherever and whenever human beings transcend boundaries to treat one another as true sisters and brothers, children of the same Divine Creativity that moves through all life, and through the poetry and wisdom of all ages and cultures. There is no one but us to bring what we yearn for to fulfillment. There never has been. Ordinary human beings; children of God. That’s the real truth of this holy season. Only us. Yet each of us is capable of shining like a star. At least in grace-filled moments.

Take a young man I know. He’s been home on leave from the Peace Corps. The village where he teaches in Africa is very poor, and devoutly Muslim. Before he left, the elders at the corrugated shack that serves as a mosque told him that they were praying for him. Since he was the only person they knew from the rich West, they were praying for him to somehow find the resources so that their village could have a water pump and a well -- because too many children were dying, as he had pointed out, from water-born disease. Now it happens that Robert’s mother is a Unitarian minister, who told her congregation and her local clergy colleagues. And was deeply touched when a Roman Catholic parish sent a large check to her Unitarian church to help answer the prayers of African Muslims. And as she said, “That’s as close to the kingdom of God as I’m likely to see very soon.” Her son went back with enough funding to help *three* villages gain access to clean water.

But what allowed everyone involved to see that miracle of generosity was one young man looking clearly at a human need, and hearing the longing of some real human hearts, darkened by the reality of dying children.

My friends, if you have been downcast in spirit this holiday season, I don't in any way want to add to it. But if you have, I would ask you not to despise the dark even when you feel it inside. Who knows? It may just be helping you prepare to see something new. Like a more creative and meaningful way of embracing life more fully. It's happened before.

So don't deny the reality of human need and vulnerability, including your own. Instead, "let us by one consent," as Charles Dickens put it, use this season to "open our shut-up hearts [and eyes], and see all our fellow mortals as our fellow passengers to the grave. Then perhaps Christmas may be once more a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time." But let us not expect it to be only sweetness and light. For it is in dark times that eyes begin to see. See that "the common welfare is our business: charity, mercy, forbearance," peace-making, all are our business.

In the New Year then, let this be your resolution: Do what you can. Love what you have. Be who you are. Do not deny the darkness. Nor curse it. Use it to better see all the stars. And then to light one candle – first in your own soul, then, God willing, in some other mortal's time of need. Turning some portion of human suffering into a small miracle, and thereby, a joy. Re-kindling, in so doing, your own light, lest it go out.

Blessed are those who in the midnight hours of life have the ears to hear angelic voices, the hearts to understand the truth in ancient stories, and the eyes to see the shining stars. May such blessings come to you and yours this Christmas. Amen, and amen.