

Dec. 2, 2007

Advent: Deepening The Spiritual Journey

My friend Maureen is in hiding from Christmas. Since before Halloween, she has been worrying about how to avoid the carols, the commercials, the expectation that she “ho ho ho” herself into consumer debt and a façade of good cheer. I don’t blame her. There is plenty about the season to justify cynicism – the commercialism, the pretense that we all have big happy Hallmark families when that is so far from the truth for so many of us, the increasingly shrill voices of a fundamentalist minority that Christmas can have only one set of meanings -- theirs.

So, like Maureen, I avoid stores and shopping malls and commercial radio stations. I do that not because I dread Christmas, though, but because I love it so much. I love the real Christmas, MY Christmas, the one I make for myself and my family out of carefully selected traditions and chosen family. Most of all, I love the nativity story, and the annual opportunity it gives me to consciously deepen my practice of opening to the Mystery of Life.

Although I have journeyed far from the Christmases of my childhood, both geographically and theologically, the Christmas story remains a central part of my own spiritual path. It is a miracle story about Birth, and births don’t just happen, whether or not they are foretold by angels. They come after nine long months of worry and elation, morning sickness and depression, terror and hope. Not to mention the storing up of onesies and baby blankets. And just as a birth follows a period of gestation and preparation, Christmas follows Advent.

Advent is the Christian season of preparation for the birth of Christ. Advent means, literally “drawing near.” It offers the faithful an opportunity to prepare themselves to receive the gift that the Universe has in store. You can think of that gift as Jesus, or Love, or the miracle of recognizing our interdependence. The important thing is that this Gift doesn’t simply come to us on Christmas like a present Santa leaves under the tree. It’s not that kind of a Gift. Not if it’s really going to bring Peace, or Liberation, or the healing of our brokenness. Those things are not given to us, wrapped up with a bow. We have to get on the metaphorical road to Bethlehem ourselves, onto our own individual spiritual paths, and make a journey. There’s work to be done to get ready for this birth.

This month's church newsletter included a message from Rev. Martha about the meaning of Advent, and I want to quote extensively from it here:

So why is it exactly, that we await with such hope during the time of Advent? For the youngest among us, it may be the presents. As I recall though, it was really not about the presents for me, even as a child. It was about the Christmas story itself and the sense that something mysterious and wonderful was coming. I never believed in the literal truth of a baby god born to a virgin, but I believed fully in the feeling behind the story. I intuitively understood that this was a story about longings granted; about the hope for miracles; the wish for something extraordinary to occur, perhaps in the form of a terrifying angel descending to be among us to tell us not to fear; and the possibility that an infant, poor and rejected, might turn out to be everything we most need and desire.

I hope that during this month of December, you will be able to discover or re-discover this sense of wondrous anticipation. Try to shed the exhaustion, the cynicism, the commercialism, and take a moment to ask yourself what it is you hope for. What we long for can teach us who we are. However you understand Divinity or Goodness or Ultimate Reality, try imagining what it would feel like to believe that this was coming to you, that every day brought closer to fulfillment of a promise which you long for – whether that be forgiveness, a sense of belonging in the universe, a feeling of peace, a world of justice and mercy, or the conviction that you are loved for who you truly are. The authors of the Christian gospels knew human nature. They knew that these are things that we long for and the promises of the Jesus story. We don't have to believe in the historical or theological accuracy of the story to believe in its spiritual authenticity.

I want to challenge you this morning to take up Martha's suggestion and set aside time this season, even if just in this service, to contemplate the Gift you long for this Christmas season. Take a deep breath; close your eyes if you like.

“However you understand Divinity, or Goodness, or Ultimate Reality, imagine what it would feel like to believe this was coming to you, that every day brought closer to fulfillment a promise that you long for.” What is it that you long for? [pause] Is it forgiveness? [pause] A sense of belonging in the universe? [pause] A feeling of peace? [pause] A world of justice and mercy? [pause] The knowledge that you are loved for who you really are?

[Pause]

Now here’s my Advent question: What are you willing to do to make room in yourself, in your world, for that gift to appear?

[you may open your eyes]

For me, there are several aspects to this Advent challenge, and they relate to the layers of meaning that I find in the Christmas story. By way of background, my own individual faith journey is shaped by my experience growing up in a liberal Protestant family that embraced the social gospel, celebrating Jesus as an advocate for the poor and oppressed. My journey has also been shaped by an eclectic feminist spirituality that celebrates the sacred in the natural world and in embodied female experience. I’ve also adopted Buddhist teachings and practices that deepen my experience of Interbeing with all. These various perspectives come together powerfully for me in the story of the nativity.

There are two aspects of that story that I am focusing on this Advent. One has to do with my interior spiritual development and the other with my engagement with the world, and my primary message this morning – what I think is the true, essential message of Christmas – is that these are not separable.

First, engagement with the world. The nativity story is the basis for Christian liberation theology. In this great wisdom story, God chooses to reveal herself to humanity as embedded *in* humanity. God appears among us not only as a vulnerable newborn baby, arriving wrinkled and squashed and coated in blood, just as we all arrived – which is amazing enough – but as the child of a poor teenaged mother, far from home, giving birth in a stable among the livestock. The implications of this are nothing short of revolutionary: the poor and the oppressed are the actual face of God, not

objects of charity or pity, but part of us, because part of God. So the birth of Jesus means that God's Love and Social Justice are the same thing.

But that baby in the manger, the gift under the cosmic Christmas tree, is not Peace and Justice wrapped up with a bow. In case you haven't noticed, it's been 2000 years or so and "Peace on Earth, Goodwill To All" hasn't exactly arrived. Not in a once and for all way. I think that is Our job, not Baby Jesus's. Birth is just the beginning, an opportunity. As we know from our experiences as parents, friends, a community, the birth of a child among us means responsibility, commitment. Hard work.

Practicing the lesson of Christmas is hard work. It is hard work recognizing the face of God in the drunk on the corner, the psychotic homeless woman blocking the door to Starbucks, the office bully. At Christmas time we give generously to our local food pantries and homeless shelters, and such giving can be a meaningful spiritual practice. I also think it's important to combine charitable giving with activism to change the social conditions that cause hunger and homelessness. And for me, Advent is a necessary reminder to combine both charity and activism with another sort of practice: looking my neighbor in the face, and recognizing there the face of God. Consciously seeking out God in the face of the drunk on the corner, the homeless schizophrenic, the office bully, not just averting my eyes or hurrying away. Looking, seeing, and saying – aloud or silently, but intentionally -- God Bless You. Namaste. We are part of one another, you and me. This is harder than it sounds. This is what Advent asks of me.

The other important aspect of the Christmas story is about personal spiritual renewal. This is also hard work, sometimes terrifying. In this season I find myself thinking about Mary's reaction to the Angel Gabriels' visit– first fear, then disbelief, then a miracle as great as the miracle of birth that follows: willingness. The willingness to be open to transformation, to be open to what Love brings, even if that means risking social ostracism, risking death in childbirth, risking a child you will love more than your own heart and ultimately losing that child on some cross the world in its brokenness has in store.

When I was trying to become a mother myself, I prayed: "Spirit of Life and Love, move in and through me." Borrowing the beautiful phrase from our hymn, I prayed, "Spirit of Life and Love, I am willing to be changed by what I have started." I thought I knew what I was getting myself into, as a

single woman choosing to bear a child on her own. I thought I understood how my life would be changed, how my heart would be challenged. I thought I knew that parenthood would be hard, but ultimately spiritually edifying.

I had no idea what I was getting myself into. Triplets, for starters. The complete, total inability to even pretend I could do it on my own, or be in charge of the ways my life would change. The terror of the medical risks, the colonization of my body by a horde of aliens, the abject dependency of bedrest. Then having my heart living outside my body in 3 separate much-too-tiny pieces in three separate incubators. The emotional desperation born of sleep deprivation and stress and utter the physical inadequacy of a 3 to 1 infant/mother ratio. I was changed by what I had started, all right.

My story isn't that different from every other story of pregnancy and birth and parenthood. In those early years I got to experience a love bigger and more physical and more spiritually profound than I had ever imagined. And I got to see my own emotional limits, the ugliness of my shadow self, a rage I didn't know I had, even a capacity for violence, all in that most intimate and intense context of parent and child. This was NOT what I had been praying for when I imagined myself as Madonna with Child.

And I think that is the point. Opening myself to Love, inviting the Spirit of Life to move through me, means not only risking but accepting the certainty of pain, and loss, and confrontation with the ugliest corners of my psyche. When I love another individual, for example, I am opening myself to disappointment and hurt and confrontation with my own emotional shortcomings as well as comfort and joy. When I open my mind in sitting meditation practice, I will encounter that mind's almost intolerable restlessness and resistance as well as glimpses of serenity and connectedness. And when I cultivate compassion for other Beings, I will experience the anguish of what we do to each other in this broken world as well as the miracle of interdependence.

And that is all okay. I choose to love anyway. Just as I choose to sit and open my mind, even when it will not empty. I choose to seek out the face of God among my brothers and sisters and allow my heart to be broken, so that I can set about mending not only my own heart but our collective Heart, the heart of the world. That is our collective task, the work of preparing for the Christmas miracle.

So I think of the girl in the story, willing to take the next step into a new life, willing to entertain miracles she does not understand. Inspired by the story, I invite the Spirit of Life to open me, to deepen my experience of connection to other Beings and to the Great Mystery that sustains us all. I affirm my willingness to be transformed by Love, so that on Christmas morning I may be present for the miracle: Light reborn in darkness, the hope for Justice and Peace reborn in the midst of despair. I approach Christmas as a Unitarian Universalist, without expectation of a literal Savior. We're not going to discover peace for our hearts and for our world just lying there in a manger tied up with a bow. But we are being given another opportunity to take up the tasks of peacemaking, the challenge of Love. The Christmas miracle is that we never lose this chance. May each of us, this Advent season, prepare ourselves once again to receive this great Gift.