

ADVENT: THE JOURNEY TO BETHLEHEM

Sunday, December 14, 2008

Allison Claire, Worship Leader

I'm really enjoying telling the children's stories during Advent again this year. I love these stories. For me they are the best part of the Christian tradition in which I was raised, and an important part of our Unitarian Universalist heritage.

I rejected the faith of my childhood as a college student, but I have always loved and celebrated Christmas. And I mean the Baby Jesus Christmas, not just the trees covered with lights and chestnuts roasting on an open fire. I have also gone so far as to reclaim the tradition of Advent -- the four weeks of preparation for the birth of Jesus -- as an annual opportunity to explore the meanings of the Christmas story for my own spiritual development. Like many UUs, I cherish the universal symbolic elements of Christmas, which are shared with Hannukah and with the winter solstice: light burning anew in the darkness, rekindling hope and rededicating hearts to the work of love and justice-making. I also cherish the unique particulars of the Christmas story: the idea that the Divine is made manifest among us in the unlikeliest of places, among the poor and dispossessed, and that hope for a new way of living comes from accepting the challenges of love even when -- especially when -- we do not know or understand how deeply they will change us.

I find several interrelated wisdom teachings in the Christmas stories, none of which depend on accepting Christian doctrine about the divinity of Jesus. This morning I'd like to revisit the stories with you, to tease open some of those layers of meaning. My

goal is to reclaim these stories, to save them from commercialization on the one hand and fundamentalism on the other. So I invite you to empty your mind as best you can of other people's assumptions about what these stories mean. I'll share with you what they mean to me, and I hope that over the course of the season you will share with me and with each other what they mean to you.

The Annunciation

On the first two Sundays of Advent I told the children the stories of the Angel Gabriel appearing first to Zechariah and Elizabeth, then to Mary and Joseph, announcing miraculous – impossible – births. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, a kinswoman of Mary, were the elderly parents of John the Baptist. Elizabeth was too old to conceive, but conceive she did, just as Gabriel foretold. Young Mary, on the other hand, was a virgin. In both cases, pregnancy was impossible – and in both cases, it happened. The way I told it to the kids, the mortals who received Gabriels' message were terrified, both because they'd never seen an angel before and because the angel was foretelling something that they knew was impossible.

“Impossible!” each one cried. And to each Gabriel said, “It's not your job to decide what's possible and what's impossible. This is a gift from God.” (Those are my words, not Luke's, but I think they're true to the spirit of the text.) And Mary and Joseph felt the love of God pouring over them, and *even though* they were afraid, and *even though* they did not understand how it could be possible, that great love opened their

hearts and they said “Yes” to God. And so Elizabeth got pregnant. And Mary got pregnant. And Joseph stepped up and became the husband a frightened pregnant teenager needed.

Wow.

Now, did I tell our UUCC children these stories because I want them to believe literally in such supernatural events? Of course not. I am a good rational Unitarian. I know the value of distinguishing the possible from the impossible in the realm of material reality. But kids know sometimes better than adults that myths about miracles and magic represent great truths of another order. And here’s the great truth I find in the story of the Annunciation (Gabriel’s announcement to Mary of the baby God would spark in her womb):

There are times – some of the most important times in life, in fact – when bearing or welcoming a child, when committing oneself to a relationship, joining a community, taking action for peace or justice – when *we do not need to first determine whether the goal is possible or impossible*. That is not our job. Our job is to show up with our hearts open, even if we are scared, and even if we don’t understand how it will work out, and do the next right thing.

That was Gabriel’s message to Zechariah and Elizabeth, and to Mary and Joseph, and it is the Advent message for us, as we huddle here in the darkness longing for a better world. The message is this: Don’t get hung up on whether the world we long for as

Unitarian Universalists – a Beloved Community, with compassion and justice for all – is possible or not. We are called to build it, to work toward it and make room for it, without evaluating our chances of success. Gabriel tells us: Just say yes. You never know what miracles will happen when you say “yes” to love.

And here’s another thing. The births that Gabriel announced to Zechariah and Mary were gifts from God. All births are gifts. They are also huge responsibilities. For a present, a baby sure requires a lot of work. It’s much more complicated than those packages under the Christmas tree that say “some assembly required.” And that’s another part of the message. Gifts from God, from the Universe, are also calls to do the work of the holy -- that’s the work of mending the world, of ministering to one another. And just as the gifts of spirit are inseparable from the call to do God’s work in the world, saying “yes, thank you” is inseparable from saying “yes, I will.” Gratitude and commitment must go hand in hand, and gratitude, in my experience, provides the spiritual fuel to keep acting on the commitment. Whether it’s having a baby or building a movement for social change.

The Journey to Bethlehem

Today’s installment of the Advent story is about the journey to Bethlehem, a long road over tough terrain during frightening times. Think about it. The distance from Nazareth to Bethlehem is about 80 miles. That’s nothing to us in the modern world of

freeways and airplanes, but how long would it take on foot, and for a woman in her ninth month of pregnancy who's riding a donkey? A week? More?

I invite you, as I invited the children, to really think about what that trip would have involved. Imagine being a young woman pregnant with her first child, learning that just when you're due you have to leave home and all the female relatives who would have assisted you in labor, and travel to a far away city where you know nobody? And don't even have a hotel reservation! Joking aside, we adults know in ways the kids do not what childbirth actually involves. And this was a time in human history when childbirth was seriously dangerous, maternal mortality was high, and there were no drugs for pain or to prevent infection. That is the context, and now Mary has lost any ability she might have had at home to control the circumstances of the birth. She would have been terrified.

Cold comfort, I think, to remember a vision you had nine months ago, an angel talking about how this baby was going to be Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. If that had been real, don't you think the angel would have had a magic wand to turn your house into a palace and make sure your lying-in was attended by a bevy of heavenly host plumping your pillows and making sure the Son of God arrived safely? Frankly, if I found myself on that donkey's back headed toward Bethlehem, I would have concluded that I had made the whole thing up and was now in very deep trouble.

And think about Joseph. He's married this young woman against his better judgment, has no idea how she got herself pregnant, but has taken on the role of husband and father. He's probably no less scared and no less confused than he was when the angel appeared to him nine months ago. And now it's rubbed in his face that, under Roman occupation, he has no ability to protect the health and safety of his young wife and the baby that is coming. This journey into the unknown is putting Mary's life at risk, he has to know that, and he is powerless to do anything but comply with the Emperor's edict.

I imagine that as they travel, both Mary and Joseph are remembering the angel's words, and wrestling with their doubts and fears the whole way. The angel said this baby was the Son of God. What does that mean? The angel said that this baby was the light the world was waiting for. What does that mean? What on earth is about to happen to them?

No parents ever know what they are getting themselves into. I know this very well from my own experience. I was single when I got pregnant, and though it was a deliberate pregnancy I had never imagined the possibility of triplets. The whole time that I was trying to conceive, longing for a family, I prayed borrowing the words of a UU hymn: "Spirit of the Universe, I am willing to be changed by what I've started." Well, didn't the Universe just take me up on that! A child is a gift, but parenthood is always more than we've bargained for. And birth is only the beginning.

Mary and Joseph make their way toward Bethlehem knowing even more than most parents-to-be how much they do not know about what lies ahead. And yet they proceed, one foot in front of the other. Even though they're scared, even though they don't understand, even though their immediate circumstances bear no resemblance to the prophecy they've received, they move toward God's gift and into God's challenge.

For me, this is another essential lesson of Advent. The key to following a religious path, the key to both spiritual practice and social action, is "steady on." Scared? That's okay, just keep putting one foot in front of the other. Don't get where this is taking us? That's okay, just keep putting one foot in front of the other. For me, the journey to Bethlehem is a metaphor for the journey toward God, both the journey of deepening spiritual experience and the journey toward a more just society. In times of fear and doubt, I think of Mary and Joseph on the road, simply keeping on. Dramatic moments of inspiration are great when you get them – burning bushes, visits from angels, experiences of transcendence – but we don't control those. What we are in charge of is putting one foot in front of the other. Sometimes the best we can do is trudge, but that gets us to Bethlehem.

I also think of Mary and Joseph making do with scant resources once they arrive in Bethlehem, being treated like livestock but not (I imagine) letting this treatment bow them. The message? If a stable is the only place to stay, be grateful to be out of the cold. Take shelter where you can find it. Because that baby will come when it is ready,

whether you are ready or not. Transformation happens, not always on our timetable or according to our plan. But it happens. The key is being open to it. After all, there are some things for which you can never be adequately prepared, but to which you can still say “Yes.” A baby. Love. God.

Christmas

Now, we have one advantage over Mary and Joseph as we look for meaning in the story of their journey. We know as they do not, yet, on this third Sunday of Advent, what is coming. We can already anticipate the angels appearing to shepherds as they guard their flocks by night -- that’s next week’s story -- and the babe lying in the manger on Christmas morn. So let’s look ahead briefly, and see what it is we’ve been preparing for during Advent.

The most radical aspect of the Christmas story is that the Son of God, the symbol of divine love manifest in and among humanity, is born in the lowliest imaginable circumstances: in the dirt and straw with the animals, under circumstances befitting an outcast or refugee rather than a “King.” The implications of this are really breathtaking. As Christian liberation theologians have argued, Jesus’s humble origins demonstrate God’s “option for the poor,” and indicate that Jesus’s mission -- God’s will for humankind -- is primarily about social justice. Certainly the nativity story is consistent with Jesus’s own teachings that in the Kingdom of God, the last shall be first and the first last. I don’t think this means that God just inverts the old dualisms of rich and poor,

powerful and powerless. I think it means that those dualisms are themselves contrary to the way Spirit works, contrary to the divine energy that some religions call “God’s will” and I call the “interdependent web.”

But that’s pretty abstract, and this story is all about the concrete. Christmas is about the Divine being made flesh – another shattered dualism. God and humanity are not separate, they are literally part of one another. And the face of God is first recognized in the form of a newborn baby, helpless and bloody and squalling and animal (which is the way babies come in real life, despite all those Renaissance paintings of a clean and shiny Madonna and child.) Those who come to worship at the manger are those who are willing to see the face of God in a newborn baby born in a barn among an occupied people. And that means being willing to see God in the poor, in the oppressed, and in the displaced even after the choirs of angels have gone. And if God is there, God’s call to love and mend the world requires us to go there, long after Christmas is over.

When we welcome a child, we always get more than we had bargained for. The gift comes with responsibility, and with unavoidable heartache and loss and lessons we could never have anticipated, both joyful and painful. So it is with this child. In case you hadn’t noticed, the birth of Jesus 2000-odd years ago did not magically ring in a permanent state of world peace, social justice, and goodwill to all. The baby in the manger is not a Christmas present tied up with a bow – voila! Salvation! It doesn’t work that way. God is not Santa Claus. No, what we get instead from our trek to Bethlehem is

another chance to say “Yes” to God’s love, to the job of healing our hearts and our world. That opportunity is God’s gift to us, and it is God’s call to us.

“Impossible,” you say? I say, It’s not up to us to decide what’s possible or impossible. Love happens. When we make room for love, for compassion, for greater justice, the world moves from darkness into light. Love happens. It happened 2000 years ago in Bethlehem, and it happens every time people recognize the face of God in each other. It happens every time regular people like you and me come together to build community, to fight for clean water, to insist on the right to marry, to repair what is broken in our relationships or in our neighborhoods or between our nations.

Love happens. Let every heart prepare it room.