

A Christmas Story

Given 12/18/06
by Robin Mitchell

Opening Reading

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by;
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light;
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

Presentation

As many of you know, I've been part of the Methodist church in Encinitas for years and years now. And as you can probably imagine given that I choose to go there, it's a very enlightened church – you won't hear Darwin being denounced from the pulpit, or people saying "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." Instead, I've heard wonderful sermons on the importance of doubt and questioning in a mature faith, heard that the Trinity is just a word for a mystery beyond words, and taught their women's group about Buddhism and led them in meditation.

But in spite of all that, it's still capable of startlement from time to time. A few years ago, the Gospel reading early in the service was the story of the loaves and the fishes; how Jesus fed a multitude of people from a few scraps of food and not only fed them all but ended up with more leftover food than he started with. At the beginning of his sermon, the minister reminded us of the reading, looked out at us and said "And this is a true story!"

You could see everyone in the pews jump, and look around a little nervously to make sure we were in the right church, that we hadn't accidentally ended up in Calvary chapel or something. But then he went on to say "I have no idea whether it's factual or not, but I do know it's true." As a story about generosity, about what happens if you give of yourself with an open heart out of the abundance of your spirit, it's true; you will accomplish more than you can imagine and you will end up with more than you started with. If you follow the counterintuitive, illogical logic of this story in the living of your life, you will find yourself making better, more courageous decisions than you might otherwise do and growing in ways that you might otherwise not. And so, a true story.

Here's another story that I believe is true: An angel, a visitation of light, appeared to a young Jewish woman in Galilee and told her that she would bear a son who would reconcile all of humanity with their divine Source, a divinity so holy and so unfathomable that her people wouldn't even speak its name. And when she fully grasped the angel's promise, she burst into the joyful song that we know as the Magnificat:

My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm:
He has scattered those who are proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty.

This is the beginning of the Christmas story – before the manger and the shepherds and the wise men, long before the Christmas carols and the Hallmark cards and the Wal-Mart greeters, there's this wild, joyous song. This is the heart of the story; everything that comes after only confirms it.

And beyond those words, consider the symbolism of the event – when the Divine Source chose to become incarnate, it did so in a stable, to people who were unwelcome even at the inn of a small, provincial town. I know the inn was full, but do you think it would have been full for Joseph and Mary if they'd been rich merchants, or members of Herod's court? God became flesh in a manger, shut out from the light and the warmth of the inn because the people he chose to bear him were nobodies, people with no pride of place, no authority, no claim to the world's greatness.

Now is any of this factual? Who knows? The Gospel stories appear to conflict not only with secular history but even with each other, and 2,000 years later it's almost impossible to know exactly what actually happened. But the great stories – the great myths, religions and otherwise – aren't meant to convey bare facts. Like other forms of art they're meant to point beyond themselves to deeper truths, truths close enough to our hearts that they can't be reached any other way.

So, looking beyond the facts, is there any truth in this story? Is it a story you can base your life on? For me, it is.

At the heart of all the religions I practice is the thing that makes me so in love with them all – the idea that the way to God – to our highest purpose and our deepest meaning, our safest refuge and our purest joy – is to give up precisely those things that we typically count on for refuge and joy. As counterintuitive and illogical as it may sound, we need to look beyond our desire for security to find peace, and we need to look beyond our desire for gratification to find joy. That's the first great truth of the Christmas story, that God is born only outside the bright glare of pride and power.

That's also a central theme in Buddhism, that the root of suffering is indulging and enlarging our egos, and that the root of happiness is letting go of them. It has been one strand of our UU tradition for years; our own Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that the Divine “comes to the lowly and simple; it comes to whosoever will put off what is foreign and proud.” . And it is present all through Christianity, from the story of Christ's birth to that of his death and beyond.

When Jesus said “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”, he wasn't talking about people who were miserable, who never laughed, who were crushed

beneath the burdens of life. To be poor is to have no possessions, so to be poor in spirit is to have no spiritual possessions – no dogmas, no certitudes, no sense of superiority over the unenlightened masses. Instead, it's to open unconditionally to what is; to the universe, to other people, to our own nature; with no resistance, no preconditions, no opinions or demands.

But this doesn't come easily to most of us – we like our opinions, our certitudes, our inner sense of being first among equals. “He has lifted up the humble?” Pride is our entitlement these days – I know lots of people who are proud to be Americans; I know quite a few people who march in Gay Pride parades. (I'm not sure I know any people who do both, but they probably exist!). “He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts?” What on earth are we UU's if not proud in the imagination of our hearts? I mean, we're the Uncommon Denomination!

All of this makes me understand why the carol sings about “the hopes and fears of all the years” being met in Bethlehem that night. It's frightening to give up what we have in order to go out and seek our birthright. So we tend to resist the idea that less might be more, or at least to resist acting on it. That kind of thing may be fine for yogis and monks and people like that, but we don't want to go that far. Is it really so important?

That's the second place where the Christmas story nails us – yes, living up to your spiritual potential is important. It's so important that angels and stars and wise men were marshaled to encourage us, so important to God himself that he gave his only begotten Son that we might have life, and have it more abundantly.

And again, it isn't just Christianity that says so; as a Buddhist I'm taught to behave as if my practice mattered to all beings, as if it could someday liberate them all. As a UU I'd say that the interdependent web of all existence was subtly but permanently changed when Socrates and Gandhi and Martin Luther King did their thing. And also when Hitler and Stalin and the Inquisitors did theirs. What we make of ourselves matters, deeply, and the Christmas story won't let us forget it.

I once had one of our atheist members tell me that this idea, that each of us is somehow specially important to the whole universe, is the grandest lie of them all. Personally, I think that's a bit harsh; I'd say it's one of the grandest stories of them all, one of the grandest ways to live your life. This is what the great myths do – they not only tell us truths but they call us to participate in them.

So we're told that spiritual growth means taking risks we'd rather not take, growing in ways we'd rather not grow. And we're told that it truly matters how well we take on that challenge. But I've still got an out – I'm not a saint, and no matter how hard I try I'll never be one. I've seen myself in action; I've seen my greed, my pride, my dark sides. So I'll do what I can to be a better person, but it just isn't in me to be another Dalai Lama or another Mother Teresa.

And that's where the third great truth of Christmas cuts through our excuses. The whole point of Christmas is that we do have what we need to find God and look him in the eye. In the Christian story, Christ has saved us in whatever way it is that we need saving. Now it's easy to criticize that story for saying that we're not good enough ourselves, that we need "salvation" from our natural state, and as a Buddhist I obviously don't think that's the most skillful way to present things. But I think it's a mistake to get too stuck in that criticism and miss the deeper meaning. If you believe that you were born OK the first time, the important thing is to trust and rejoice in that as much as Christians trust and rejoice in Christ. However it came to you, you have what you need. That's the great joy of Christmas; it's what all those other carols are singing about. O tidings of comfort and joy!

And so, another illogical, counterintuitive true story: that peace comes from giving up the things we cling to and radically opening ourselves to the world and to the truth as they are; that how well we succeed at this is of great importance extending far beyond our own lives; and that we have everything we need to proceed, that where we are right now is the perfect place to start.

It comes here in the guise of a Christian story, and it's why I love Christianity so much in spite of the dark side of its history (and of its present!). But if the story is true, then you can reject its language and still embrace its essence, because it's true no matter what language it's told in. Whether your story is an atheist story, or a Buddhist story, or a Wiccan story, or a humanist story, Christmas can be a celebration of its power to transform your life.

And so my Christmas wish for each of you, whatever story you have chosen, is that you find within yourself a star that guides and encourages you onwards into its transforming heart. Because that story, the story of a star that led wise men to God, is also true...

Merry Christmas!