

A Time for Waiting

December 24, 2004 8:00 p.m.

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The story begins with a young couple not sure just what to do. In a time of great tyranny and repression, they are told to leave their home and return to their ancestral hometown and there report to the authorities because there was to be a new tax.

She is pregnant and he is uncertain. She has been told that her son will be special and she has wondered what this means. They are poor. They can find no place to stay and so they end up in a stable, among the animals. There she gives birth and names the little boy, Jesus.

Out in the fields that night, working in the cold winter's night, probably a night much like up in the mountains tonight here, are shepherds. Shepherds - probably illiterate and with few hopes in life - except to have enough to eat and to stay warm. Their life expectancy is about 35-40 years. And they are watching sheep.

Yet that night they experience something profound. The heavens open and they see angels who tell them that times will get better, that there is hope, that peace and goodwill are possible, and that that message can be found in the birth of a child to unmarried, poor and frightened parents, in a strange town, the birth happening in a stable, surrounded by animals.

Far away, wise men hear the same message and they travel a great distance to see this child. The tyrant of the area, Herod, hears the same message, and is so fearful that he orders that all first born male children in his land be killed.

So, there, that night, this is the scene: a star bright in the sky, shepherds keeping watch

over the flocks, three wise men traveling by caravan over the desolate landscape, a brutal and frightened king worried in his fortress, a young couple wandering from inn to inn looking for a place to stay where she might give birth.

Perhaps as much as any story, this one has captured the imagination. The story has been told in other guises and with other names, but somehow this particular version has lasted. It is a simple story and the elements are none all that spectacular. Compared to the birth narratives of the Buddha, for example, this is charged with a kind of realism. Maybe there is no such thing as a heavenly host, angels announcing good news to shepherds, but people have seen far more spectacular visions than that. I certainly have known a number of angels in my life. And the rest of the story - it is all too common and all too human. Perhaps that is why it touches us so.

We all know how we are humbled and blessed by the birth of a child, of how miraculous a new life can be. We all know that great wisdom is often in the simplest and humblest of things; we all know that being poor does not infer poverty of spirit and that wealth does not confer wisdom. We know that those in power often rule by fear.

There is something about this story – it is, well, so human. This is a story that belongs to us all and not just to one religious tradition. It is, as I said, so human. So for tonight let us all suspend our judgments and conclusions and our biases and think just about the story and what it might mean to us here, in this room, on this night, together.

Of all the words of all the carols we might sing, the line that hits right at the center of tonight is this line from 'O Little Town ...': *'the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.'*

This is a night of hoping and of waiting, a night of expectation. Hope is central to our being human. How many of you here have hopes – hopes that the world can be better, that you can be better, that you and those you love can find peace and joy and love? Perhaps this year more than many others a hope for peace, that war will end and the deepening violence of the world be stilled. Perhaps more than some years, our hopes are that peace will come to places like Iraq and the Sudan, and in the land of the story itself – Israel and Palestine.

The ancient Israelites, Jews like Mary and Joseph and Jesus had hopes, too – they hoped for a messiah, for someone to bring about peace and goodwill. This is their night, too – the hope of their great prophets; the hope that the ancient promise would come true. This is a holiday of hope.

But few of us here are Christians or Jews so this may not be an easy night to be a Unitarian Universalist - this is and isn't our holy day. Yet more people come tonight than to most services. So this can be our story, too.

What is this night about? It is not about the commercialism nor about the cynicism about the commercialism. It is not about the triumph of one religious system. And it is also not about nostalgia or sentimentality.

No, I think that the song is right - this is a night about hopes and fears. Deep and lasting and profound hopes and fears - of being out there on the edge of expectation and possibility.

Look at us - we have possibilities like that night - that in the birth of a child rests our hopes. Our little ones – like Everett or Annaliese or Ethan or Asa or Ethan or Hazel or Joseph Samuel, the babies we have dedicated this Fall - or perhaps some one just stirring within one of us here. Might one of them be the messiah, the way of salvation, might the truth, the fulfillment of peace and goodwill be carried in them? Would we wish that for them?

And yet isn't that just wherein rests our hope? - that we human beings might finally learn to love one another and be at peace. That someone will arise from among us and show us the way and that we all we follow? Isn't that our hope - that we might learn to love one another and be at peace, that we are our own salvation, that each of us and all of us are the messiah? That it is possible? That peace and goodwill might be born?

Peace and goodwill - **but** - it wasn't so 2000 years ago; it is not so now.

Is that the 'fears of all the years' - that it will be always so, that we simply cannot change our ways and that the future will be like the past, filled with fear and hatred and ill will? I fear that; I fear that very much.

And because that is my fear, and because the former are my hopes, each Christmas Eve I look up at the night sky and I look for a star, for a sign that peace and goodwill will indeed be among all peoples. I always hope that tomorrow will dawn in a new way, that we will awake tomorrow morning to a world of peace, that you wake up with only love in your hearts for others and that others will too. Just imagine if that were so - a new dawn, a new day. It is what we hope for so deeply.

And, that it will enter in the most common way, in a communion of the human and the

rest of the natural world, that our birth to peace and goodwill will be witnessed by all of the creation - from animals to angels. Peace and goodwill. I always have this fantasy that come Christmas morning, I will get up early, as I usually do, and start the coffee, then go and get the paper from the end of our driveway. And that there, on the front page of the LA Times and the Pasadena Star news will be the headline: Peace Prevails on Earth.

Imagine.

You of this congregation have given me many gifts these past four months; I feel that you are giving me the gift of your love and your trust, your tolerance and your patience. You have laughed at my jokes, shed a few tears with me, welcomed me into your lives. I am still enjoying the honeymoon – may it long last! You have given me the gift of yourselves - and I coming to love you for it. I do not know how much to give in return. What I want to give you, above all, is some wisdom, but I am not sure if I have much of that.

But what I do believe is this: we need to love each other and it has to start here with us. The truth of the Christmas narrative is that ordinary human beings - a carpenter and his young bride, shepherds, a baby, or an engineer, an actor or actress, a teacher, an artist, an attorney, a librarian, an office administrator, a therapist, a real estate agent, an elderly person, a doctor, a novelist, a teenager, a student, a scientist, an attorney, a UU minister, a houseperson, a health educator, a nurse, a business person, a music leader, a child - that is where our salvation rests.

It rests with us; we are the messiah; each one of us and all of us together; we are the salvation of the world.

The star is out there, waiting for us. If we would just look and see the beauty of a winter's night, see the beauty in the birth of a child, see the beauty in our own lives. The messiah is come and it is all of us; the commonwealth of the holy is here and it resides within.

Tonight, I will go out with you when this service is concluded and look up for a star. How I ache to see it - to believe that in the midst of any dark night, there is still light, that in the midst of any sorrow, there is still hope, that in the midst of strife, there can be peace, that in the midst of doubt, there can be faith.

I will look up and there will be tears in my eyes - there always are. Tears because - perhaps like many of you - life matters so much. I will think about how much I often squander the gifts of my life and how many I really have. I will look up and hope that the star will be clear and bright so that my path might be clear and bright. And I will realize, once again, that no matter how clear the path, no matter how bright the star, no matter how many gifts I have been given, it is still mine to take those steps, receive those gifts, see the way clear.

And that star can lead us, through the dark streets shining, to a life committed to peace and goodwill. The angels said '*Behold, to you this day is born a savior...*' We can say that too, on this starry night. For each of us, in each of us is a new spirit waiting to be born. Each night we choose life, a savior is born; each moment we chose love, a savior is born.

Brooks concludes his carol with these words:

*How silently, how silently
the wonder is made known*

*when God imparts to human hearts
the gift that is our own
No ear may hear the coming
but in this world of din
when souls are truly humble
the dear babe rests within.*

The gift that is our own is our belief that we are called and we are able to incarnate peace and goodwill, love and hope. This does God impart to the human heart. And just as on that night two thousand years ago, in that

manger, in the lowly manger, when we are humble, that babe, that divine star of hope, rests within.

So, on this starry night, on this silent night, this holy night - find your star and follow it - follow it into your own heart and then into the world. On this starry night.

Amen