

The Last Illusion
Sermon by Rev. Hannah Petrie
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For traditional Christians, **Advent** (from the Latin word *adventus*, meaning "coming") is the period of expectant waiting and preparation for the birth of Jesus. The readings and teachings during Advent may also prepare Christians for the Second Coming of Christ, while commemorating the First Coming of Christ at Christmas.

We religious liberals, however, tend to refute the first coming, and have no idea what a 'second coming' could possibly entail. We are not traditional Christians, and a good many of us do not identify as Christians, period. For most Unitarians, Jesus does not play a central role in our spiritual lives; indeed many of us don't know what spiritual life I might be referring to. We are a rather reductionist bunch, and comfortable with the post-Christian stage of our evolution.

Even so, Advent presents an opportunity to each of us. I made some effort to ensure that the music in today's service is both contemplative and inspiring, for the worship theme of December is Hope. Today's is the sermon of the month that our Chalice Circles will be discussing. Hope is my middle name – I mean, it's my real middle name on my birth certificate, Hannah Hope. The adoration of alliteration runs in the family.

Hope was chosen for December because, indeed, the traditional take on Jesus is that this one man Jesus saved us from our sins, and since we are sinful as human beings, the coming of Christ meant that there was hope for us, after all.

Today I want to talk about how this way of thinking about the Christ story is half wrong and half right; this is a theological sermon. There are things profoundly right about the best Christian theology. If any kind of theology leads people to live more lovingly, even if the facts are wrong, their lives aren't wrong. So I use the word 'wrong' in a critical manner of the finer points of theology, but I hope not in an insulting or judgmental manner. The last thing I want to do today is sound snarky about Christianity. Christianity after all, is our theological heritage, and UUs often forget that Jesus and Christian theology has great value for many UU members. They should not feel they have to be silent.

I will not be silent about Jesus today, but I will offer some theological and historical critique. For those of you who have concluded at some point in your lives, that there's just something not sound with Christian theology, your instincts are correct, and I will offer an explanation of why. I also want to tease out some other instincts we all have, and affirm those. These are our innate instincts for hope – that it is legitimate to have hope, both in ourselves and in humanity as a whole.

However, the way things are in the world today, our instincts for hope may feel weak at times, and that is understandable. Will the stocks return to their original value? Will the over half-million jobs lost in November be replaced? And this time of year really compounds the anxiety when we're supposed to buy lots of stuff for presents. Take a moment to consider the specific anxieties you have this morning. Your anxieties are valid, and if you can, I invite you to set them aside for a bit.

As my second reading purported, a surprising amount of the Judeo Christian tradition had precursors. If you want to know more about this, I can point you to the sources. It's plausible to me, and if it is true, I don't find it threatening. But as you can imagine, there has been considerable interest in concealing this – the power of the Christian church might be greatly reduced if its followers understood that the Bible is not exactly the original word of God. The Church of the third and fourth centuries, when challenged by its Pagan critics as to the real sources of the gospels, dogmas, and rites, reacted with fierce hostility, systematically hunting down and eliminating all traces of its Pagan past.¹ This is in part how the word Pagan originally acquired its negative connotations.

¹ The Pagan Christ by Tom Harpur, Thomas Allen Publishers, Toronto, 2004, p. 12.

Whether the Bible is original or not is irrelevant when more and more people don't care about the Bible anyway. Tom Harpur says The Church is failing to relate to people in a post-modern world. At the same time, he notes, *the religious and spiritual longing of people has never been stronger*. He worries about the longevity of Christianity in the western world, "' because'" he writes, " 'there is a system . . . which is more concerned with preserving its own power than exploring the truth.'"²

So, with some humility, let's explore what the truth may be. You who are here today, I assume, are among the people for whom a longing of some sort is present. Perhaps you long for an affirmation of a transcendent, divine presence in the universe, or you long to discover the divine purpose of your own life. Maybe it's as simple as a longing for deeper connection to good people, a longing for greater understanding, strength, affirmation, peace. Whether we are pagans, theists, Christians, atheists, or agnostics, it is our longings that bring us together, to this place.

Take a moment to consider what you really long for, in a spiritual or religious sense. Now, hold on to this longing.

Your longing is likely legitimate, and it should be the source of your inspiration, what drives you to search more deeply for what you long for. During this time of advent, contemplate your longing. It will prepare yourself for the birth of what you may come to know, or may come to be.

The reason Jesus is such a powerful figure of hope for so many people, is because he set such an example for us. Jesus followed his longing for truth until he awakened to the divine presence within himself.

Now it might seem like I just painted myself into a corner. Here I am saying that Jesus was probably a myth, so how could it matter what he likely didn't do since he quite possibly didn't exist? And I know there are some of you who don't give a hoot about some 'divine presence' either way. I hope I can get myself out of this one.

I shall call on Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell to come to my rescue. Thanks to their 6 part series about myth that has been broadcast many times, and Campbell's extensive writings, there is some public awareness about the importance of mythology for human culture and progress. But as Tom Harpur notes, it is surprising that our negative view of the word myth has not changed much. He says, "Mention 'myth' or 'mythology' to the average person, and he or she will assume that you are speaking of remote, insubstantial, irrelevant matters. In our culture, the word is synonymous with, at best, fairy tales and, at worst, outright lies and deception."³ How often do you hear someone say, "it's only a myth"?

But as Campbell says, the deepest truths about life, the soul, personal meaning, our place in the universe, our struggle to evolve to higher levels of insight and understanding, can be described only by means of a story, a mythos, or a ritual drama.⁴

Here is an account, or a myth, of how the Bible came to be. Well before the Bible was written, several thousand years ago, in the same region of the middle East, ancient spirituality had these tenets:

Each of us is born with a divine spark within. Think of it as a seed, that lays dormant. The spiritual aim then in life, was to invite or give permission to the seed to germinate, to release the potential power of our innate, divine nature. The metaphor of the seed I'm using is important, because ancient spirituality was much more in harmony with nature, and aware of our proper place – than it is today. Much later, Christos was the name given to this divine spark, or the incarnate presence of God within. Christ in English.

Early Egyptian society *did* recognize the power of myth to transmit deeper truths, and was the cradle of many stories, archetypes, and rituals that could illustrate powerful ideas. These mythologies endured. Here is the nutshell truth according to Tom Harpur:

² Same.

³ P. 16

⁴ P. 17

"The Gospels are indeed the old manuscripts of the dramatized rituals of the incarnation and resurrection of the sun god Osiris/Horus, rituals that were first Egyptian, later Gnostic and Hellenic, then Hebrew, and finally adopted ignorantly by the Christian movement and transferred to the arena of history."

While other groups adopted the stories, presumably under the illusion that they were their own, it was the Christian church that applied the last illusion, the illusion of actual history.

What seems to have happened around the 4th century was that those who would gain power by *literalizing* the Jesus Christ story, did so. Essentially, they stole the copyright, and took advantage of *owning* the Christ story; they made some edits and claimed a 'history' that was not real. But it served their purpose. By sensationalizing an historical Christ story as exclusive to Jesus, it made people think that *only* a superhero could realize his or her spiritual nature and power. For if the commons knew of their potential power, it might mean trouble for those in power. The literalizing of the Christ story then, was a way to render the commons powerless.

It's sad to think this is what may have happened, because a spirituality that was so hopeful, that was *common property to all of humanity*, was co-opted almost into a commodity. The original Christ story belongs to everybody; it is universal! We can all learn from its power, whether it's through Jesus and the church, or through another sacred path.

Harpur believes that the more truly spiritual Christianity of the first two centuries can be recovered. He says, "the view of faith outlined here is one that knows no boundaries of sect or creed because it is based on the universal truth of the 'light that lighteth every person coming into the world'; it belongs to all, regardless of ethnicity, colour, or clime . . ." ⁵

Now, I understand if the word Christ just cannot sit well for you, let alone the concept, and therefore is not useful. Of course the world religions all have different names for the same thing, but names are just names. My mentor has taught me that any worthwhile idea in a sermon ought to be able to be described in plain language, so let me do that.

Let's go back to your longings. If you were to do what I suggested before, and contemplate your longing – during this Advent season and beyond - eventually, it would point you in the direction of your potential. Eventually you would discover that only you could reach that potential; in other words, you would see that you have to take responsibility for nurturing that seed of potential within you, and coaxing it into fruition. Of course, almost nobody does this alone – it's done in the support of communities of all sorts, in sangas and churches and synagogues, in mosques, in temples, in 12-step meetings, in countless other venues. But while community support plays a huge role, only *you* make the decision to commit yourself to this effort, to this hard work of personal progress.

Have you ever considered that there's a reason why all of us are born with particular talents? Do you ever get that nagging feeling of being disappointed in yourself because you are not reaching your potential? That you are not doing the things you are supposed to be doing, that you could do? This is the voice of our longing to become; it is also the longing of the world to become. We are the instruments of what the world could become. Quite simply, if we have enough hope in ourselves, we bring forth hope for the world and for humanity. But it all starts with that little seed within – that powerful little pit of potential.

To slip back into theological jargon, this is about working out our own salvation, an idea that is central to religious liberals. Unfortunately, we Unitarians are so liberal that we may not effectively impress upon you how important it is to actually try to do this – to wrestle with it, to struggle, to work up a sweat. To perhaps take on some spiritual practice and discipline, or simply to try new things, learn something new. You will notice that both Jim and I will be speaking more about spiritual retreating in the months to come.

⁵ P. 183

Now let's get back to Jesus before this sermon has to end. It's important that I leave you with this thought. I know that many, many Christians would say that, whatever the history of the Bible is, they have not been short-changed in the least. While we're critical of the fundamentalist approach to Christianity, we celebrate the fact that plenty of Christians DO get it; they know that the glory of the Christ story is not about suffering and exclusion, but that it *is* hopeful, that it *does* empower us to be proactive, and to serve a vision of greater peace and love.

And that's because the heart of the Jesus story will forever be beautiful and powerful. But it is, most likely, just a story – it is the latest mythos to transmit what is far more enduring and non-illusory. And because this is true, we have much to gain from it, even if much of it needs to be pruned off because it is so dated and locked in the time it was written. Even if pronouns need to be altered throughout. We westerners are very attached to empirical facts and actual history – perhaps the way Christianity was transmitted has something to do with this. It gets in the way of seeing what is most relevant. The Bible is a light bulb, but it's not the light.

A timeless truth is a timeless truth, and we throw the baby out with the bathwater if we discard the sacred text we inherited. Historical or not, the Bible is the cradle of Western Civilization; it is one of the great keys to understanding ourselves better. We forfeit much power when we forfeit our own say in what it's really about. We need to be at the table. We know what destruction a literalist interpretation of the Bible can lead to, from actual history. When are the religious liberals, we who seek to embrace a loving and tolerant view, going to reclaim a more open and universal interpretation?

Here are the first two sayings from the Gospel of Thomas:

1 And he said, Whoever finds the correct interpretation of these sayings will never die. 2 Jesus said, "The seeker should not stop until he finds. When he does find, he will be disturbed. After having been disturbed, he will be astonished. Then he will reign over everything.

As Christmas approaches this year, and our anxieties return to us, as we know they will, let us take time to give ourselves the present we deserve, and that every human being deserves. It's the gift we've already been given, deep within us, that is opened a little bit at a time. *Contemplate your longings and potential, and prepare for your becoming.* Look forward to the places this will lead you to, and the people you will touch. You are the hope of the world – do not stop until you find it.

Happy Advent!