

"Christmas for Humanists"

A talk given by Rev. Jim Foti
First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
Sunday, December 24, 2017

<http://firstunitarian.org/assembly-december-24-christmas-for-humanists/>

The reading was "A Complicated Christmas," by Bruce T. Marshall, from his book "Taking Pictures of God: Meditations."

So, this is my first time spending Christmas Eve at First Unitarian Society, even though I've been here for almost four years. Most years, our Christmas Eve service is held after dark, and I've typically left town by then, so I can travel to my hometown for a family dinner. Celebrating Christmas Eve on a Sunday morning is an unusual gift, an opportunity that only comes around every five or six years. I'm grateful for that gift and for being here with you.

I may not identify as a Christian or even as a theist, but I like Christmas. I like Christmas carols and the other artistry of this holiday season. And I like to talk about and examine the traditional Christmas story. And there's no better day than this.

Observing Christmas Eve before noon is not without its complications. The hottest topic this week in one of the UU minister chat groups was this: Can you sing "Silent Night" in the morning? As with anything remotely religious, there were strong opinions on either side. "It's just not Christmas without 'Silent Night'" versus "You can't sleep in heavenly peace during the day." My ever-diplomatic partner pointed out that hey, it's already nighttime in Bethlehem, so you're covered either way. I brought up this topic at a holiday party the other day, and pagans who had not set foot inside a church in decades suddenly had all sorts of opinions about when it was acceptable to sing "Silent Night."

That's one of the things about Christmas. Even if you don't believe a word of the Biblical Christmas story (and a lot of humanists do tune out as soon as they hear "virgin birth") – even if you reject the narrative as not factual or historical, you may still have some very strong views about how the day and the season should be celebrated. Christmas taps into an ingrained human tendency toward ritual. And personal and cultural traditions that are deep and meaningful often accompany the Christmas story and holiday.

The story itself is a powerful one, a story with universal themes and elements. Every single one of us has a birth story of our own, and every single one of us started out as a

vulnerable baby. Every one of us humans at some point or another has wanted someone to come along and save us. And every one of us needs hope to keep going and carry on. Whether or not we believe the Christmas story as factual, it still addresses many truths about the human condition, truths that seem especially relevant during this frightening time in our national life. Theologically, personally, politically, emotionally – Christmas is complicated.

Before we go on: I think most of us know the basics of the Christmas narrative, but with more and more people in the U.S. growing up outside of Christianity, let me quickly go over the commonly accepted bullet points: The story takes place two thousand years ago in the Middle East. Mary, a virgin, is pregnant because God has made her so. Mary and Joseph aren't married, and they need to go to Bethlehem because the emperor put out a decree calling each man to his hometown for a census. There are no empty rooms for them to stay in in Bethlehem, and so after Jesus is born, he is placed in a manger, which is a box that farm animals eat from. Angels announce the birth to nearby shepherds, who come to see the baby. A bright star above Bethlehem helps draw some wise men to the site, and they bring the famous gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Soon after, King Herod, feeling threatened by the power of this newly arrived messiah, issues a decree to have all baby boys killed. But Mary, Joseph, and Jesus escape and make it safely to Egypt.

Like many people, I've heard this story all my life. But until I went to seminary, I simply accepted this popular narration of events, and I never took a serious look at how the story is actually told in the Bible. Once I studied the Gospels, here are some of the things that surprised me.

In the four books of the Bible dedicated to the life of Jesus, only two include the story of his birth, and they tell it quite differently. The decree that sends the family to Bethlehem is in one version, and King Herod's death decree is in the other. The gold, frankincense, and myrrh are in one Gospel; the manger is in another. And it's just a manger – there's no reference to a stable or a barn; some sources have it as a cave, and there's actually no mention of animals at all – no ox, no lamb, no drummer boy. Also, the version with the bright star and the wise men is not the same as the version with the angels and the shepherds. So despite what a nativity set may show you, the shepherds and wise men never actually hang out together in the Bible. Also, although the wise men are commonly described as being a group of three, the Bible doesn't actually provide a number, and the word for "wise men" can also be translated as "astrologers." (Wouldn't it be cool to have a carol called "We Three Astrologers"?)

These kinds of differences and discrepancies can make you realize that Christianity is, in a sense, the world's largest and longest-running book club, with people on every continent analyzing and debating the words, stories, and details, often over wine. It can be tempting to dismiss the finer points of Christianity as minutiae irrelevant to a scientific worldview, and to dismiss Christianity entirely as too malleable to have any meaning – how can any religious movement count people as different as our past and current presidents as believers?

These are worthy questions. But even with the complications, it's still not a bad idea to have a working knowledge of the Christmas story and its bookend, the Easter story, because the fact is that Christianity is on the rise globally.

Unlike in centuries past, when Christianity was forced upon conquered peoples, today's human beings are opting in, particularly outside the United States and Europe. The Pew Research Center estimates that between 2010 and 2050, the number of atheist/agnostic/unaffiliated people in the world will rise by about 100 million, to more than 1.2 billion. Over the same period, the number of Christians is expected to rise by 750 million, pushing the total close to 3 billion. That means that unaffiliated folks – folks who, theologically, tend to be more like the people here at FUS – will decline as a percentage of the global population.

So it's good for us to have some knowledge of what so much of the world is talking about, to understand the appeal, and to see where our humanist values intersect with the heavy hitters of world religions. (In fact, next month at FUS we'll begin a series of classes exploring just that, starting with humanism and Islam.)

John Dietrich, who founded congregational humanism here at FUS a hundred years ago, understood the importance of learning from all religions, including the Christianity he had left behind (he was defrocked by the Reformed Church before becoming a Unitarian). Speaking before this society in 1924, Dietrich gave a talk called "What and Why Is Christmas." He described Christmas and Christianity as having been born into a world where carols and garlands and gift-giving and decorated trees already had long existed and were old news. Also, virgin births and saviors were not uncommon in the religions and mythologies of the time.

So the story of Christmas and the holiday's trappings were not fully original to begin with, were recorded differently by different biblical authors, and then had more traditions and trappings added on -- and that was well before modern industrialized commerce took the holiday over. So the basic narrative at the core is easily drowned

out amid the cultural noise. We can lose sight of the fact that, as Dietrich said long ago, “this festival is universal and human rather than sectarian and theological.”

And indeed, what could be more human than hoping for a savior during a time of cold and dark? What could be more human than the joy of a new baby? What could be more universal than a feeling that there’s no room at the inn, no place for us to simply be as we are?

And while the infinite interpretations of the life of Jesus may seem like a downside, the upside is that there are radical and liberating interpretations to be found, perspectives that provide comfort and inspiration to people who need them.

The internet abounds with such versions this time of year, describing Jesus as a brown-skinned, non-violent, anti-authoritarian, anti-wealth revolutionary who was opposed to public prayer. All those claims have evidence in scripture or history. Jesus’ family members were Middle Easterners with nowhere to stay; his mother was unmarried and pregnant. It’s not surprising that the Christmas story is embraced in communities and parts of the world where daily life is the most challenging; it speaks to the conditions that too many human beings find themselves in.

So how might a humanist respond to this complicated holiday called Christmas? Here are just a few thoughts.

First, of course, celebrate however you want to. If you are grieving and not in the mood, be low-key without apology. Maybe Christmas never took hold in your family or in your imagination and it’s just another day; that’s OK, too. Maybe solstice is your thing. Maybe you’re like me – a non-theist who went to Orchestra Hall to sing along with Handel’s entire “Messiah.” In Japan, where there are almost no Christians, millions of people celebrate Christmas by eating KFC and singing Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. At this point in history, Christmas is pretty wide-open. Don’t buy into the Hallmark movies or consumerist expectations. Do what feeds your spirit, what gives you a sense of connection, what helps you live out your values.

Second, it’s good for humanists to know and understand the basics of Christmas and Christianity, even if they represent a way of thinking that has hurt you in the past. There are not nearly enough humanists or Unitarian Universalists to save this country or this planet on our own; we need to be allies, and to be part of alliances. There are large segments of Christianity that believe, like we do, in the inherent worth and dignity of all people, Christians who believe in a sort of lower-case humanism, that human effort

rather than divine intervention is the way the world moves forward. Right action over right thinking.

A quote from St. Teresa of Avila, who lived in the 1500s, is an example of a humanist approach to Christianity. She had this to say to her followers:

Christ now has no body but yours, No hands, no feet on earth but yours, Yours are the eyes through which his compassion looks out on this world, Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good, Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.

What she's saying is that, while Jesus was born and died and was reborn in her theology and beliefs, there's still plenty for humans to do. It's very humanist to realize that, day-to-day, the saviors are us.

Third, we can all help humanism tell a better story. There's definitely an arc of improvement going on in this area among humanists, atheists, and agnostics. The dominant story, or at least the loudest story, used to be "There's no god, most people are wrong, and aren't we awesome for figuring it out?" It's not surprising that that didn't catch fire.

Fortunately, there's been something of a shift, away from negation and toward the story of the universe – the story of evolution, the story of nature, and how we humans fit into that narrative in micro and macro ways. These are beautiful, awe-inspiring evidence-based stories of the magnificent forces at work and the humbling place we humans hold in the grand scheme of time and space. Such stories are a step in the right direction, leaving triumphalism behind and emphasizing humans' connections to each other and to the world.

However, providing explanation and a sense of wonder is not the same as providing hope or comfort, which so many people in the world need. Our storytelling will never have resurrections or virgin births, so hope must come from human sources. This is especially challenging right now, when powerful human beings are in the process of destroying so much, testing our faith in humanity every day. But we can still start by believing in ourselves and our communities, by putting our humanism into practice, and by acting in ways that keep hope alive. We must tell the stories and live them.

It seems fitting to conclude with these words by Howard Thurman. Thurman was an African-American theologian, Baptist minister, and civil rights advocate who was a

mentor to Dr. Martin Luther King. He wrote a brief poem called "The Work of Christmas."

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers,
To make music in the heart.

May it be so.