"The Promise of Christmas,"
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill
on December 13, 2009

I asked Claudia this week, "Do you think it's ok to sing 'O come, O come Emmanuel' two weeks in a row?" I think I've told you that when I was a kid I didn't particularly like this hymn--I thought it was kind of sad and dreary. Maybe it's an acquired taste--back then I didn't like naps or girls much either. I still don't like fruitcake, which is something of a tradition where I come from--I guess there are some mysteries beyond our understanding. I do like this hymn's quiet, plaintive tone, and I like the words we just sang, how they recast the traditional words:

"O come, O come Emmanuel, and with your captive children dwell.
Give comfort to all exiles here, to the aching heart bid cheer."

Any of you need some comfort or cheering these days?

"O come, you Wisdom from on high, from depths that hide within a sigh,
to temper knowledge with our care, to render every act a prayer."

Anyone feeling the need for wisdom, the sense that you are here <u>for</u> something, the assurance that, with intention, your actions can be prayers?

Singing this hymn is certainly a prayer for me; an opening, an asking. Emmanuel is a Hebrew word that simply means "God with us." This is so often my prayer: "God, be here, make me mindful of your presence. Be with those I love, be with those in need. Be with us."

This idea of Emmanuel, of God with us, is the heart of the Christmas story. Next Sunday, in our living nativity, we'll tell that story. And on Christmas eve, we'll tell it again, in the readings we'll hear from the gospels of Matthew and Luke, and in the carols we'll sing. The story of Christmas is that God came to earth, and took human form. As the gospel of John says, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." (John 1:14)

I wonder how you hear that story. I used to struggle with it—there was a time I couldn't take claims of a virgin birth and angels and shepherds literally, so I set them aside, and figured I was beyond belief in such things.

This reminds me of a conversation I had with a couple of men at the church where I did my internship, five years ago, at this time of year. I asked, "So, how do you understand Christmas?" One of them said, "I don't really believe it's true, but we celebrate it for the children." I wonder if that is what some of you think too--that you are skeptical of the

Biblical accounts of the story, and find them hard to believe. If you are like most UUs, you see Jesus as a holy man, a prophet, but not the one and only son of God. You may know that the story we tell at Christmas is put together from two different accounts, one in Luke and one in Matthew; that the earliest gospel, Mark, and the latest, John, have no birth story at all. That there are no wise men in Luke's version of the story, and no shepherds in Matthew's, that the story is similar to birth narratives from other traditions.

It's easy to get hung up on the details. Was there really a star in the sky at that time of year--can astronomers find evidence of that? Are the facts of the story verifiable? Is the story true?

This is something, I'm happy to say, I don't worry about any more. I know that the story didn't actually happen the way the gospels or the carols say. It didn't literally happen the way we will tell it next Sunday and on Christmas eve. I know it is more poetry than nonfiction. But still, I know the story is true. That it expresses deep truths about the nature of humans and the nature of God.

Do you know the children's story, *The Polar Express*? It's about a boy who goes on a fantastic journey aboard a train on Christmas Eve to the North Pole, where he meets Santa Claus and is given the first gift of Christmas, a bell from Santa's sleigh. But on the way home he loses the bell. Happily, on Christmas morning, he finds a little box under the tree, and inside is the bell. He says, "I shook the bell. It made the most beautiful sound my sister and I had ever heard. But my mother said, 'Oh, that's too bad.' 'Yes,' said my father, 'it's broken.' When I'd shaken the bell, my parents had not heard a sound."[1]

The man at my internship church is like those parents, who can't hear the bell ringing, because they don't believe. But when he said, "we do it for the children" he spoke the truth--you have to be somewhat like a child to enter into these stories, and to believe.

Listen to how *The Polar Express* ends: "At one time most of my friends could hear the bell, but as years passed, it fell silent for all of them. Even (my sister) Sarah found one Christmas that she could no longer hear its sweet sound. Though I've grown old, the bell still rings for me as it does for all who truly believe."

I wonder about Sarah, who one Christmas finds that she's lost the faith she had as a child. But doesn't this happen to almost all of us? I wonder, isn't it possible that Sarah, after she was grown up, and had her own children perhaps, after she'd experienced some of life's inevitable losses and sorrows, isn't it possible that she heard that bell ring again? Do you think it's possible to come back to faith? I do. Because that's what happened to me.

---

[1] Chris Van Allsburg, *The Polar Express*.

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur has a name for this coming back to faith. He called it a "second naiveté." He doesn't mean that one is naive, in a foolish way. Second naiveté is not going back to a child-like innocence, like the little girl Sharon, in our reading this morning, who is five, "and sure of the facts."[2] It's not going back to what you believed before. Rather, it's knowing what you know, and knowing there's more than what you know, there's mystery; it's about pointing toward the source behind the facts. It's about giving your heart to that mystery, having a "fresh encounter with the divine reality to which the story bears witness."[3]

A second naiveté allows you to get beyond worrying about the exact words we sing in Christmas carols or whether you can verify the facts of the story. It allows you to let go enough that you can enter the wonder and mystery of it, and of this season, and let the spirit of Christmas come into your heart. It sets you free--free to have a fresh encounter with the divine realty.

This idea of Emmanuel, of God with us, is what's called incarnational theology. Incarnate means embodied, in the flesh. There are two basic ways people have understand this idea of incarnation. Over the centuries the more common view has been that it was a one time event, two thousand years ago, when God came to earth for the period of one man's short life, and then went away again. Jesus scholar Marcus Borg says this is the understanding that comes from taking the biblical story quite literally. He says it results in seeing God "as a being 'out there' and not 'here.' ... This view sees Jesus as the unique incarnation of an absent interventionist God, an divine insertion into the natural order."[4] Understanding incarnation this way allows some Christians to claim that Jesus is the one and only way to God, and it is this exclusivist perspective that inclines many UUs, as well as Jews and Muslims, to say that Jesus was a prophet, a man, and not, as Christians claim, the son of God.

The other way of understanding incarnation, what I see as a deeper way, is not as God out there somewhere but right here, as the Spirit in which we live and move and have our being. In this view, Jesus was a person full of the Spirit, uncommonly open to the presence of God, but still, one who was as much a human as we are.

Ron Rolheiser, a writer whom I've found very helpful in understanding this, says the incarnation is the central mystery within all of Christianity. But he says this mystery has often been misunderstood, or rather, under-understood. That first understanding, of Jesus as the only one, is just the tip of the iceberg, he says. It gives the impression that

---

[2] John Shea, "Sharon's Christmas Prayer," available at http://www.1journey.net/stdavids/SW/poetry/sharonsprayer.htm

[3] Mark I. Wallace, "The Second Naiveté': Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology," accessed at http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/jan1992/v48-4-bookreview7.htm

[4] Marcus Borg & N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 145-48.

Jesus was a thirty-year experiment, and misses the greater meaning of God with us in the here and now.[5]

There's a story about a child who's going to bed, and like many children, she is a little afraid of the dark. When her mom starts to close the bedroom door, the child says, "Mommy, don't leave me." The mother knows every child needs to learn how to put themselves to sleep, so even though a part of her would be happy to sit on the edge of the bed and sing her daughter to sleep, she knows her child needs to learn to do this for herself. And she's aware there are dishes to be done, and other things she needs to attend to, before she can go to sleep. So she stands in the doorway, and says, "You know what I always tell you. Even when I go downstairs, even after I turn off the light, you aren't alone. God is here with you."

"I know," the little girl replies. "But tonight I was hoping for God with some skin."

God incarnate is God with skin. It is the radical belief that we have within us sparks of the divine, that we are called to make manifest the presence of God. We do this when we care for one another, when we take a stand for justice, when we see in each other the face of God. Just because Jesus was one filled with the spirit doesn't mean he was the only one.

The stories we will tell in the coming days about the birth of Jesus are ones that developed over time, as people tried to describe the nature of an incarnate God, not out there, but here, with us. Think of the images from that story-- a baby born to an unwed mother, in a barn because there was no room at the inn, laid in a feed trough for a cradle, surrounded by animals and by shepherds, who were the working class folks of that day.

The story of Christmas tells us that no person and no place is beyond God's presence. That you are more likely to find God in a simple and humble setting, in a stable rather than in a palace; in a humble heart, rather than a proud one.

In this season we are invited to look for the presence of God in our midst, to wait and watch and wonder. To pray, "O come, O come Emmanuel."
O come o come Emmanuel, and with your captive children dwell.[6]

Come God, be with us. Help us to sense your presence in our midst; to see you in the face of another, to find you in acts of kindness and generosity and courage.
Give comfort to all exiles here, and to the aching heart bid cheer.

Help us to embody your love; to be the face of God for those we meet; to share that love with a hungry and broken and beautiful world.

---

[5] Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 73-81.

[6] The UUCH choir sang these lines that are printed in italics.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come within as love to dwell.

The promise of Christmas is that there is a great Love in which we live and move and have our being. It is not out there somewhere; it is right here; a Love that will not let you go. The promise of Christmas is that God is with you, now and always.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come within as love to dwell.

Amen.