



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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### “Light Bearers,”

a homily given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson on Christmas Eve,  
December 24, 2012

For lo! the days are hastening on,  
by prophets seen of old,  
When with the ever-circling years  
shall come the time foretold,  
When peace shall over all the earth  
its ancient splendors fling,  
And the whole world give back the song  
which now the angels sing.<sup>1</sup>

That is the promise of Christmas, those words we just sang, that peace shall come over all the earth. That is what prophets have been hoping for and calling for, down through the ages. Thousands of years ago, the prophet Isaiah articulated that hope this way:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them (Isaiah 11:6).

Aren't we here, on this night, because, just like the prophets, we are longing for some peace, in our hearts, in our homes, and on this earth? Especially this year, when there is so much we could be discouraged about, when there is plenty to mourn?

And yet, we live in relative comfort and privilege, compared to much of the world. Back when Jesus was born, his country was occupied by the Roman empire, which ruled with brutal force. By comparison, our world is safer and more peaceful. Humans have made progress. But we have also created ways to do more harm to one another, and to our world.

And so we come to this night, mindful of the our own blessings and our own troubles, mindful of the sorrows of this world. We come to affirm that is not the whole story. That a light does shine in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. The truth is, it is

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<sup>1</sup> “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear,” words by Edmund Hamilton Sears.

the darkness that helps us see the light. Isn't it true, that in tough times, you often see the best in people?

Think of the stories we tell, of God appearing to humankind. Where does God tend to show up? Where and when are we most likely to sense the presence of that source of life and love? It is often in the dark and broken places of our lives. When we are lost and afraid, when we have been pushed to our knees--it is then we are more able to apprehend the presence of the holy in our lives. It is then we are able to give up the illusion that we are in control and in charge.

This is reflected in the nativity story--Jesus was born in a stable, of all places, not a comfortable inn. Bethlehem was a town on the wrong side of the tracks. The shepherds were the working poor of their day. This story tells the essential and liberating truth that we meet God at the margins, not in the safe center.

The last words the Buddha said to his followers were, "Make of yourself a light.". Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." But do we believe it? And are we acting like it?

Neither of these sages was suggesting that we should think too highly of ourselves, that we should put ourselves at the center in an egotistical way. But neither should we put ourselves down, and diminish or disregard the gifts we have been given.

Marianne Williamson said, "It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us." But we tend to doubt our gifts. We ask, "Who am I, to shine?" She responds, "Who are you not to? You are a child of God... We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone and as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give others permission to do the same."

The incarnation, this story we tell tonight of God come to earth, is central to the Christian faith. But what the tradition, and we, have often failed to appreciate, is that the incarnation is not something that happened just once, two thousand years ago. The life of Jesus was not meant, as one theologian put it, to be a one-time incursion into this world, after which God withdrew back to the heavens.<sup>2</sup> No, Jesus' life on this earth, and the love and justice and liberation he shared, was a beginning, that shifted and changed human understanding, that helped people to see that if we find the holy anywhere, it is in the most down to earth places.

But we forget this, and the church has often forgotten this, and so we neglect to look for God where we ought to, right here in our midst, in the mess and muck of our lives. We

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<sup>2</sup> This understanding of the incarnation is articulated by Ronald Rolheiser in *The Holy Longing: the Search for a Christian Spirituality*.

forget that we are the ones to be bearers of God's love and light in the world; we are God's hands and feet.

The incarnation is not a past event, but an invitation--to look for the presence of the holy right here, and to be who we were born to be. The poet Bill Collins, remembering his childhood, wrote,

It seems only yesterday I used to believe  
there was nothing under my skin but light.  
If you cut me I could shine.

It's easy, given life's inevitable struggles and disappointments, to give up on that image of one's self. The invitation of Christmas is to remember who you are, who you were born to be. To wake up to your own nature as a bringer and bearer of light.

Make of yourself a light, the Buddha instructed. You are the light of the world, Jesus said. We are here, on this night, and the rest of the year too, to be light bearers. To sing songs of joy and peace, not only with our lips but in our lives. You have a light. So in these days, uncover it, please. Let it shine.

Amen.