

“From Heaven to Earth,”
a homily by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
given on Christmas Eve, December 24, 2000
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill

It's great, isn't it, that we are here, on this night, together? Those words we just sang never fail to move me:

“All glory be to God on high and to the earth be peace
Good will henceforth from heaven to earth, begin and never cease!”¹

I am most touched by the parts of the Christmas story that are about relationship, and especially about reconciliation. It makes me glad, it gives me hope to sing of God as not out there somewhere, but here in our midst, a source of love, a force for justice.

Why do you think we tell the Christmas story every year? Because it makes us feel good? Because of tradition? Maybe, but there's another reason.

Let me tell you about a man, an artist, who has a daughter who's about seven years old. One day she asks him what he does at work. He says he works at the college – that his job is to teaching people how to draw. She's amazed; she stares at him, incredulous, and says “You mean they forget?”²

There's another story of a couple with a new baby. When they bring her home from the hospital, their older child, who's about three years old, says he want to talk to the baby alone. Afraid that he might be jealous of the new baby his parents put him off for a few days, but he keeps asking and so the parents finally say ok. They turn up the baby monitor so that they can listen in. They hear their three year old talking to his sister. He says, “Baby, I need you to tell me what God looks like because I'm starting to forget.”

We tell the Christmas story because we forget. We forget that we are part of this awesome creation, that life itself is a miracle, that we have in us stardust and sparks of the divine. And the church hasn't helped. The church has done a job on God, over the centuries. God has been pushed away to heaven, out of touch with our daily lives. God has been confined to and contained in rituals and books that many don't have the time or energy to interpret, in sacraments that most are not allowed to touch. It's no wonder that people are suspicious of organized religion and that churches are becoming increasingly irrelevant. And too often people have given up on God when it was not God, but organized religion, that failed them.

¹ The last verse of the carol *While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night*.

² This story is told by Howard Ikemoto.

We have domesticated the Christmas story over the years, and romanticized it. We forget that it would not be easy, or pretty, to give birth on a cold night in a stable on a bed of straw. One would not choose to lay your new baby in a trough that normally was used for animal feed. One would probably not invite shepherds to be the first ones to witness the beauty of your new child. A modern day equivalent would be a public works crew, dirty and smelly from their hard work, trooping in to see your new baby. We forget the radical message of the incarnation—that God is here with us, here in the midst of our gritty, dirty, messy lives.

It's pretty clear that Jesus the teacher and prophet never intended to start a new religion. He was one with a particularly close relationship with God, he was certainly one filled with the Spirit, but it doesn't appear that he thought of himself as divine. What he cared about was helping people be awake to the miracle of it all. I love these words attributed to Jesus: "I came that you might have life and have it abundantly." The stories we tell tonight about the birth of Jesus tell us what the early Christians wanted to say about the nature of God--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.

The story we tell tonight says that God is not just an airy spirit, out there somewhere, but that God is incarnate, embodied, with us in our lives. The gospel according to John puts this in beautiful, mystical language:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

But Jesus didn't say he was the light. In his Sermon on the Mount, speaking to his ragtag group of followers, to people as ordinary as you and me, he said. "You are the light of the world." He said, "Let your light shine..."

Your job is to let your own light shine. To be who you were born to be. Jesus said, "Let your light shine so people may see your good works and glorify our God who is in heaven." In other words, be fully yourself, because that will show others that there is meaning to life and reason for hope. The great minister Howard Thurman said, "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

Your job is to remember, to know that you are beloved on this earth. You do this, not only for yourself, but because our world needs you. Incarnation means we are the ones to make manifest the presence of the holy here on earth. We are God's hands and feet. When you let your own light shine, you help to build the beloved community right here, you help to make heaven on earth.

There is a spirit of Love in the world, That love is what I call God. You may have a

different name, a different understanding, and that's fine. Being human means we can't understand the fullness of what God is. We only get little glimpses from time to time.

The promise of Christmas is that God is with you, here and now and always. The story we hear tonight, the carols we sing, remind us that we are part of a great Love that will not let us go. On this night, we tell the story of God coming to earth. We sing

All glory be to God on high and to the earth be peace
God will henceforth from heaven to earth, begin and never cease!

On this holy night, can't you see that heaven is not far away? It is very near you. It is right here, if you will but open your eyes and minds and hearts. If you will remember who you are and whose you are. There is a light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. You are that light. You are that love. We are here, on this earth, together, with so many opportunities to spread and increase that love. For that let us be grateful and let us be glad.

Amen.