



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Like a Child,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on December 8, 2013

I’m not always a fan of the ways hymn words are adapted, to make them fresh or more relevant. Sometimes doing this only waters down the message. But I don’t feel that way about the words we just sang for “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”¹ I appreciate their more mystical, and less literal, approach to the incarnation.

Do you remember what “Emmanuel” means? It’s a Hebrew word that translates, “God with us.” That’s the promise and the reminder of Christmas: that God is not out there somewhere, but with us, here and now. One of the lines from Handel’s *Messiah*, which I love to listen to this time of year, says “Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel, God with us.” That line, from the Hebrew prophet Isaiah, got used later to describe the birth of Jesus. What we just sang puts in a less concrete form: “Emmanuel shall come within as Love, as Truth, as Light, as Hope, to dwell.”

Here’s my question for you, on this second Sunday in Advent: how do you celebrate Christmas? I’m not talking about the cultural Christmas, the wonderful acts of bringing trees indoors and putting up lights and giving presents. I’m not talking about the commercial Christmas, with its overwhelming pressure to do and buy more. No, I’m talking about the religious Christmas, the story told in the gospels of Matthew and Luke about Jesus’ birth. That old story of an unusual conception, and a long journey, of a baby arriving at an inconvenient time and place, with no room at the inn. The story of shepherds and angels and wise people bringing symbolic gifts and going home by another way.

What I wonder is how hear that story. Do its fantastic claims cause you to wonder, “Is any of it true?” If so, you’re in good company. Almost anyone with a seminary education understands that this is a good story, but is not factually true, not by today’s standards, anyway. The thing is, most of these seminary-trained preachers never tell this to the people in the congregations they serve.

And neither will, I on Christmas Eve. The last thing I want to do, on that night, is deconstruct the nativity story. It’s not the right time. That night is for inhabiting the mystery the story invites us into; being together here that evening, singing carols and lighting candles. I’m never going to stand here on Christmas Eve and say, “We know this story isn’t really true.” Because we want and need this story of light in the darkness, of God with us. And just because the facts don’t all line up, doesn’t mean the story isn’t true, in a deeper, more mystical sense.

¹ Hymn #225 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

But I worry that many of you, because you are good, thinking, rational Unitarian Universalists, you don't know what to do with the Christmas story, because you can't square the facts. Since Advent is a time of preparation, let's prepare for Christmas by finding a new way through this. I'm happy to say today what I won't say on Christmas Eve, that I don't think Jesus was born to a virgin, or in a manger. I don't think shepherds heard angels sing or wise men came bearing gifts. I don't think any of these things are factually true.

And still, I identify as Christian--I find the stories of Jesus' life and ministry inspiring and compelling. The seasons of the liturgical year nurture and sustain me. This time of year, I love listening to Handel's Messiah, and singing along, and in that music I experience the presence of God. I don't worry anymore about every claim the story makes, if it is empirically true; nor do I think pre-scientific people worried about these things. They understood, in ways we do not, that a story can be true without all the facts lining up.

For example, did you ever notice how some numbers show up regularly in the Bible? Why Jesus fasted for 40 days, and the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years? Back then, no one thought that number was literally true--they knew that 40 was just a big number, so when that number showed up, they understood it meant "a long time."

I chose today's readings (Matthew 18:1-5, Mark 10:13-16), Jesus telling his disciples that they had to be like children to enter the kingdom of God, because that's how Christmas works too. You have to have the spirit of a child, a sense of mystery and wonder. You can't treat it like a science project.

Jesus seemed to delight in turning the traditional power structure upside-down. In the Sermon on the Mount, he says, over and over, "you have heard it said..., but I say to you..." The God that Jesus knew was partial to those at the margins: widows and orphans, lepers and tax collectors. No wonder he tried to teach his disciples, who thought following him would bring them power and prestige, that they should be humble, like children.

He understood that an openhearted spiritual life is not possible for those who are too proud, too full of themselves, too sure of how things are, have too much to lose. When he said "You need to change and become like children," what he meant was you need to be open, the way a child is.

When Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it," I don't hear that as an excluding statement. He's saying, "You have to be like a child to be open to the way of thinking the kingdom of God requires--when the sick are healed, the hungry are fed, where sadness is turned to joy, where love and justice reign."

Of course, for any of us who have been around the block a few times, this is hard! It is hard to keep our hearts so open! To live in this world, you inevitably have to learn to survive disappointment and betrayal. It's natural to become more realistic, more skeptical, more hardened. Isn't that one of the amazing things about Nelson Mandela--the fact that his 27 years in prison, rather than hardening his heart, transformed him into the man who healed and reconciled a broken nation?

Robert Johnson, a Jungian analyst says we go through several stages in life. He says, “First comes the simple and happy stage of innocent childhood. Then we lose our naïveté and happiness and fall into a difficult second stage in which we worry and become anxious; life becomes a difficult process. Finally, if all goes well, we may enter a third stage in which we regain happiness and simplicity.

“In a modern psychological sense, these three stages can be seen as three steps of consciousness: (1) simple consciousness, (2) complex consciousness, and (3) divine or illumined consciousness.”

He says, “There’s a proverb that illustrates this: ... the simple man on his way home after work is wondering what’s for dinner. The complex man on his way home is debating the complexities and the imponderables of life. The enlightened man on his way home from work is wondering what’s for dinner.”²

How do we get to that place of illumined consciousness? You can’t just go back to the simple naïveté of a child. It’s just not possible, and that’s not what Jesus meant.

The philosopher Paul Ricoeur says there’s another way: what he calls a “second naïveté. By this he doesn’t mean that one is naive, in a foolish way. Second naïveté is not going back to a child-like innocence, it’s not going back to what you believed before. It’s knowing what you know, and knowing there’s more than what you know, that there’s mystery; it’s about pointing toward the source behind the myth. It’s about giving your heart to the mystery, having a “fresh encounter with the divine reality to which the story bears witness.”³

Let me say that again. It’s about giving your heart to the mystery, having a fresh encounter with the divine reality to which the story bears witness.

This is not about giving up your mind. The Christian philosopher John Lennox said, “When Jesus told us to have a child-like faith, he wasn’t telling us to be stupid.” It’s about being free to do your own work of interpreting and meaning-making, so you can find your way into the story, and touch the wonder and beauty and blessing of this season.

Isn’t that what you really want for Christmas? As we sang a few minutes ago, for love and truth and light and hope to come and dwell within? For there to be peace, in our hearts and in our homes and in our world? That’s what I’m waiting for, hoping for, longing for, this Advent.

A second naïveté allows you to get beyond worrying about the exact words we sing in Christmas carols. It’s allows you to let go enough that you can enter the wonder and mystery of this season, and let the spirit of Christmas come into your heart. It’s about giving your heart to something that this tired old world seems to have given up on—believing that peace is possible, that there is more that unites us that divides us, that there is a force, a source; that is still, that is always, trying

² Robert Johnson, *Balancing Heaven and Earth*, p. 130-31.

³ Mark I. Wallace, “The Second Naivete’: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology,” accessed at <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/jan1992/v48-4-bookreview7.htm>

to break into the world, a force on the side of love and justice. A force that is more likely to be born, and be recognized, in a stable than in a castle. But that can break in anywhere, even into our hardened hearts.

Can we, this season, let go of our grown-up cynicism and resignation? Can we approach Christmas with the spirit of a child; that is, with a second naiveté?

That's the invitation of this season. And if you accept it, it will be the best present you get this Christmas.

Amen.