



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“With You,”
a homily given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on Christmas Eve,
December 24, 2010

Here we are, on this beautiful night, in this beautiful place, singing carols together and hearing again the old and sacred story. I wonder how you hear this story. I wonder, who do you identify with in it? Is it Mary, the faithful maiden? Or Joseph, her supportive and understanding partner? Is it the shepherds, or the innkeeper, who turns the young couple away because he can't help them, or the wise ones who travel so far to bring gifts to the child?

Or maybe you identify with Jesus, the messiah, the one called to bring God's love into the world. Would any of us admit to that? People might think you are delusional if you started telling them you are, like Jesus, here to make manifest the presence of God in the world. They might ask, “Who do you think you are?”

But that is precisely what the Christmas story calls us to do. And it's consistent with our faith tradition, in which we don't think Jesus is the only one. We affirm that we are all called, in our own ways, to embody that spirit of love and of justice here on earth.

What I love about the story of Jesus' birth is its core message, that if we meet God anywhere, it is right here, right now in the real world where we live every day. This is what's called incarnational theology—incarnate means embodied--and it's the theology that makes sense to me. Incarnational theology says that God is not out there somewhere; that the place we meet God is here, in the physical world, in the face of the friend and the stranger.

When I was in college, I played on the school rugby team. Rugby is kind of a combination between soccer and American football. It started in England when a frustrated soccer player, tired of using his feet, picked up the ball and ran with it until the others tackled him. That's pretty much what rugby is, and it's great fun to play. I wasn't particularly good at it, but I loved it. As I've told some of you, one of my teammates, a friend, summed it up one day when he said, “Frank, you're not big, but you're slow.”

Unlike football, in rugby you can only pass the ball backwards, to someone behind you—so you don't do your teammates any good by getting ahead of them. It's important to be in support of the person with the ball. And unlike football, when someone is tackled, the play doesn't stop—you have to let go of the ball before you hit the ground. Preferably you pass it off to a teammate, rather than having to fumble it, before you're smothered under a pile of bodies.

The idea is to carry the ball down the field, and when you're about to be tackled, to give it up to someone who will continue to move it forward. Occasionally someone makes a long pass, but more often it's a short, underhanded flip to a player a few yards away. The idea is to draw that tackler toward you, and as he's crashing into you, to pass the ball away.

But when you're about to be tackled, you don't want to be looking backwards. So your teammates call out to you, letting you know when they are close in support. The way we did this was simple. Running along behind or beside the one with the ball, we'd yell, "With you!" so he'd know you were there. The message was clear—I am with you, right here. You are moving and I am moving, in a kind of dance. Here I am, with you, when you need me.

That is the message of the incarnation. An angel appears to Mary and says "God is with you." The shepherds are at work in the fields, doing what shepherds do, and out of nowhere appears an angel with news from God. What says, "I am with you" more clearly than a chorus of angels singing? The wise men see a star in the east, and once they embark on their journey, the star goes before them. Traveling across that barren land, its light sent them the clear message, "I am with you."

It shouldn't be hard to hear that message on this holy night. "I am with you." But Christmas is not supposed to end when the celebration is over and the decorations are put away. The incarnation is an invitation to live in a new way. To act as if God is right here, in our midst. To remember, especially when you are lonely or discouraged or in trouble, the promise of Christmas: "I am with you. I am not out there in the clouds, I am not stuck between the pages of a book, or closed up in the walls of a church, no, I am here, right here, with you."

If I had only one sermon to preach, it would be this. God loves you. So please, start acting like it. You have been given this incredible gift—a life on this earth. What are you going to do with it? If you have never heard this before, hear it now: You were created in the image of God. You are not a mistake, or an accident. You are a child of God.

What gave Jesus his power was that he knew this, and he lived it. But he was not the only one. His life is supposed to be an example to us, an invitation to live into our fullness too.

I understand about brokenness and despair. It's part of being human. But it's not the whole story. What would happen if you took the Christmas story to heart, if you accepted the fact that the incarnation is not a one-shot deal? The story of Jesus' birth, like the story of his life, is to remind us that we are called to see ourselves as sons and daughters of God. Jesus said, "I came that you might have life and have it abundantly."

The message of Christmas is simple. "I am with you". So let's be people acting like it. Let's do some good with these lives we have been given. "I am with you." Let us be grateful, and let us be glad.

Amen.