



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Because We Forget,”
a homily given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on December 18, 2011

Today we are going to tell and act out a familiar story. Familiar to all but the youngest of us. Do you ever wonder, why do we tell this story every year? We are part of a tradition that has been telling this story for almost two thousand years. That's a long time. It's an old story. That's probably part of the reason we tell it, because it's a tradition. But traditions fall away unless they mean something to people. This story isn't going away.

One reason we tell it is because it's a good story. Any story that lasts this long has to be. It has twists and turns, amazing things happening to ordinary people. This story makes the audacious claim that God, the spirit of life and love, is not out there somewhere, but here, in our midst. That God is not so much like a king as like a little child. We tell this story because we want and need to be reminded of this. It warms our hearts to be reminded of this. Because we forget.

There's a story about a little boy who couldn't wait for his baby sister to be born. He wanted to be near her, to talk to her. He was maybe about three or four years old. After she had come home from the hospital, he started asking his parents about this, wanting to be alone with her for a few minutes. They were naturally concerned. Was he resenting his new sibling? Was he planning to do something to make her go away? That didn't seem like what was going on, so finally the parents relented. And they did have that baby monitor so they could listen in!

Well, the little boy went into his sister's room where she was lying in her crib. He went up to her and said, “Tell me about God. I'm starting to forget.”

We tell the nativity story, of an angel speaking to Mary, of the baby Jesus being born in a stable, or shepherds and angels, of God's love for this world, because we forget. We forget that we are worthy of love, just as we are. We forget the call to love our neighbors as ourselves. We forget what the angels sang: “Peace on earth, goodwill toward all.” We forget to look for the presence of God in unexpected places and people.

Today we who are adults are asking something of you children, especially you who are helping to act out the nativity. We are saying, “Tell us this story, because we forget.”

Two weeks ago, when we welcomed and blessed James Henry Manuel, who has the leading role in our living nativity today, I quoted William Wordsworth, who said, “Trailing clouds of glory do we

come from God who is our home.” In the same poem, Wordsworth said, “Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting.”

We observe and celebrate Christmas because we want and need to remember that we are part of a great and abiding Love. The nativity is a story of incarnation, the belief that if God is anywhere, God is right here with us. And especially in places like stables, and with animals, and with working folks like shepherds. And especially among children.

There are all kinds of parts in our living nativity. Any of you, if you feel moved, are welcome to take up a part and inhabit it as best you can. You’ll get invited, at several different times, to join in. So don’t be shy, if you want to be part of the story!

The author Sue Monk Kidd tells about a time when her daughter was going to be part of a Nativity pageant. Unlike ours, this one had rehearsals. She writes that her daughter, “got the dubious part of the Bethlehem star in a Christmas play.” It sounds like Sue Monk Kidd had higher aspirations for her young thespian than that. But she tried to make the best of it, and not convey her disappointment to her child. She describes what happened next. “After her first rehearsal she burst through the door with her costume, a five-pointed star lined in shiny gold tinsel designed to drape over her like a sandwich board.” And her mom, trying to be upbeat, asked her, “What exactly will you be doing in the play?” And she responds, “I just stand there and shine.”

Out of the mouths of babes, as they say.

We forget, that we come into this world trailing clouds of glory. We forget that our lives are for something; that we do have a role to play, that we are part of a great and abiding Love.

What a gift that we have this yearly retelling, this invitation to remember who we are and whose we are. This invitation to inhabit the spirit of a child, the awe and wonder of this season. This invitation and this reminder, to be filled with light, and to shine.

Amen.