



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“What Child is This?”  
a homily given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on December 23, 2012

Eleven years ago, I was in my first year in divinity school, and my family gave me a Jesus action figure for Christmas. It's something every seminary student needs, right? He lives in my office here at church. That year, on Christmas morning, our son Will, who was eight then, was talking on the phone with my mom, telling her about some of the presents we had received. When he got around to the Jesus action figure, apparently my mom got confused. I think she said, “You gave him what for Christmas?” You know how it is, only hearing one side of the conversation; you have to imagine the other part. But from what we heard, it seemed that Will thought his grandmother was asking him to explain to her who Jesus was. So on Christmas morning our son Will, this young Unitarian Universalist, told his grandmother, who happens to be an Episcopal priest, who Jesus was. And that is a nice Christmas memory for us.

The prophet Isaiah describes a time when the usual order of things will be turned upside down: “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid . . . and a little child shall lead them” (Is 11:6).

We're about to tell and act out the the story of the birth of Jesus. You children and youth, you are the ones who are playing the central parts. We're asking you to help us, to lead us, as we re-enter this story once again.

We tell this story to remind ourselves that, sometimes in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, there is good in the world. There is reason for hope, and even for joy. And we grownups, we need you children to help us with this. Because sometimes we have lived too long and seen too much, and we lose track of what matters.

The other night, some of gathered in cozy candlelit room here to share memories and stories of some of the joys of Christmas. Someone spoke of an elaborate manger scene her Italian grandmother used to create, and how, once her grandmother died, they never had that again. This reminded me of a story about another manger scene, told by Rev. Carl Scovel, who was the pastor at King's Chapel, a UU church in downtown Boston.

He and his family lived in the church parsonage, and like many families in New England, they had ongoing disagreements about how warm a house should be. But Carl, who called himself “the benevolent despot of 23 Beacon Street,” ruled the thermostat. One day, one of his daughters said, “Behold, a decree went out from Carl Augustus, that all the world should be frozen, and

each went to her own room to be frozen.”

That year Carl had decided to introduce a creche to the Christmas decorations in the sanctuary. But on Christmas Eve, he was dismayed to hear that someone had taken the baby Jesus from the manger. On closer inspection, he found a tiny note. It said, “We’ve got Jesus. Turn up the heat and you can have him back for the Christmas service.”

Carl says “the heat went up at the parsonage, the infant reappeared, and everything returned to normal. Well, not quite normal. The benevolent despot of the parsonage sits less certainly upon his throne. That is probably not surprising,” Carl observes. No monarch, indeed no despot, and ever be quite sure of his rule when the child has been born.”<sup>1</sup>

What child is this we celebrate today? He is the one who grew up to be a loving troublemaker--who turned over the tables of the moneychangers in the temple, because they had defiled the sanctuary by turning it into a place for commerce. He was one said, “Judge not, lest you be judged,” and “Whoever is without sin, let him cast the first stone.” He is the one who fed people, and who, in his presence, found themselves healed. He is the one who was willing to die rather than betray his friends or his God.

Every Sunday we are companioned by this lovely stained-glass image of the grownup Jesus. Our Jesus, whose feet, we like to say, are firmly planted on the ground. Our Jesus, who is fair-skinned by day, and whose skin turns brown at night. This Jesus, who reminds us that we are called to love one another, to love God and love our neighbors, especially those in need, whom he called “the least of these.” Today, as we tell the story of his birth, let us be filled with the joy of this season, and the power of the Spirit. May that spirit with Jesus embodied, that spirit of love and of justice, live in us and in this place, this day, and in the days to come.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> This story can be found in Carl Scovel's book *Never Far From Home: Stories From the Radio Pulpit*.