



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Ears to Hear and Eyes to See,”

a homily given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson and Julie Lombard
on Christmas Eve, December 24, 2013

Frank: A few years ago, I was in church on Christmas Eve, and around this time in the service, a child nearby said to her mother, in a loud whisper, “When do we get to light the candles?” If you’re wondering that too, the answer is soon, real soon. That act, of being here together on this night, of watching the light spread through our darkened sanctuary and then singing “Silent Night,” there is beauty and power in that moment, isn’t there? Isn’t that why you’re here, to touch, and be touched by, that beauty and that power?

Our candle lighting is a good symbol for Christmas--the promise that light does shine in the darkness, the promise that God is not out there somewhere, but with us, here and now, in the midst of our sometimes messy, sometimes blessed lives.

Julie Lombard, our ministerial intern for this year and next, and I are going to reflect with you very briefly about this, using the anthem the choir just sang as our text. “If we walked the hills the shepherds walked, would we have eyes to see? If we saw the things the shepherds saw, would we have eyes to see?”¹

Sometimes, seeing is a choice, isn’t it? Sometimes we choose to look away, to avert our eyes, especially if what we see is frightening or troubling or annoying. Sometimes this is an act of preservation or self-care. But what do we miss, if we close our eyes and shut ourselves off from life--from the messiness and the mystery and the wonder of it?

Julie: Hearing our choir sing, I wonder, would I have eyes to see? My immediate response is to say, “Of course!” I would use these eyes, sharpened by my spectacles and capable of witnessing many truths. My privilege may blind me to some things at times, but will not paralyze me for long. My own perspective will certainly shape what I see, but I want to be open; I want to see.

But then I wonder, how many miracles have I overlooked in my lifetime thus far? How many chances have I missed to walk the hills that the shepherds walked, to see what they saw? Then I wonder--will I ever be ready to fully see? Will I ever be strong enough, hopeful enough, to look for miracles in the midst of daily life?

And what about you? Are you open to the beauty and wonder of this life? Or has life hardened you, made you weary and wary, skeptical even? Have you forgotten how to see?

¹ “Would We Have Eyes to See,” words and music by Joyce Poley.

Frank: The Buddha was an ordinary human who became enlightened; that is, he woke up to how miraculous and amazing this life is. You could say the same thing about Jesus. His ministry was about helping people to wake up. Jesus said too many people look but don't see; they hear, but don't listen or understand (Matthew 13:13). There's a hymn about this, that says:

Fill us with a living vision, heal our wounds that we may be
bound as one beyond division in the struggle to be free,
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, ears to hear and eyes to see.²

Julie: I have been blessed to be pulled toward that which I must see, not always because I wanted to see but because something much larger than myself wants me to see. I have trust in that force that pulls me towards truth, and I find comfort in that new, found vision that comes as both mystery and understanding. It takes tangible form in a baby, lying in a cold manger, because there was no room at the inn. It causes us to ask, "Who would I welcome into my vision, my life, my home? Who will I prepare room for this Christmas?"

Don't we each want to be able to say, "Let me tell you how I have walked through holy hills, like the shepherds did"? Don't we want to be able to say, "I was awake to seeing mysteries, like the shepherds saw"? Isn't that the invitation of this life? To be open to its mysteries, awake to its joys and sorrows; to be present to it all, as best we can.

I'm not saying this is always easy--it can take strength and courage and even a leap of faith to live these lives we have been given. But that's why a good and faithful life is usually not a solo pursuit. We have those who have gone before us, and we have each other, to help us to have ears to hear and eyes to see.

Frank: And isn't that what Christmas asks of us? To be open to these mysteries? To have faith, that we are part of a great Love which will never let us go. To remember that this Love often comes to us in the most humble and human forms and places.

The promise of Christmas is that God is not out there somewhere, but here, with us, here and now. In each of us, and not just there; in the spaces between us. In those we will gather with this Christmas, and in those we would just as soon avoid. Jesus' birth in a stable reminds us that God meets us especially in those time and places when we are most in need.

You have a choice. You always do. You can be open to this presence, you can seek after it. Or not. You have that choice. But you are here. You have heard the old story. You are ready, aren't you? Open to the wonder and the possibility of this night. Ready to affirm that a light does shine in the darkness.

Julie: Our prayer for you is this: that tonight, and in the days to come, you will be awake. Because beauty and blessing abound. Grace is present and possible, if you will be open to it.

² "God of Grace and God of Glory," words by Harry Emerson Fosdick, #115 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

Frank: Our prayer is that you will have ears to hear and eyes to see, and hands ready to help heal and bless our world. Because this world needs you. And God needs all of us, to be bearers of that light and love we celebrate this night. That's why we're here. To behold the light, to take it into our selves, to carry it with us. So we can let it shine.

Both: Amen.