

Bringing Heaven to Earth
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If you came expecting a tame story, you came to the wrong place.

This story - one of registrations and taxes, one of homelessness and displaced people, one of an infant and mother without proper medical care, of unwed parents, one of poverty... Well, it doesn't seem too out of place here, in the United States in 2017.

Can you imagine a family, coming through Mexico, across the harsh terrain of the Mexico-Arizona Border. The parents hoping to bring a better life to their child than they could provide in their homeland, the poverty of Central America. They stop because Maria is in labor. She's young - only 18 years. Their child born of the side of the road, perhaps, not yet in the United States. A few days later the family travels just over the Border to Arizona. Perhaps they are going north to reunite with family. Perhaps they are going all the way to Massachusetts, to Chelsea, or to Malden.

This is today's holy family.

And this undocumented family, who is simply trying to provide the best life they know how for their child, their young son, in these first few days of their life they fear ICE - immigration and customs enforcement - knocking at the door. All three of them are living in a small one-bedroom apartment with Maria's sister, who is supporting all of them working double shifts cleaning houses.

This is today's holy family.

Now imagine for a moment, this baby, an infant, not knowing anything of the world and the circumstances that brought him here.

If this story were happening today, it would.

Somehow, this baby starts to get a lot of attention. The circumstances of his birth are noticed by a few noteworthy people. Perhaps he's being called the next "king," in whatever sense of the word, the one who would be our next freedom fighter, our symbol of liberation, for all people, not just undocumented immigrants from Central America, but everyone. All refugee souls, green souls, disabled souls, Black souls, transgender souls.

And imagine this child was suddenly getting all this attention. Wise people - some might call them Magi - from our land and others, priests and prophets, came to the aid of this family and this child, sending them much needed funds. And if these was today, these Magi, they aren't kings like we think of them, but Muslim leaders battling the reality of Islamophobia and Black preachers seeing that their liberation is tied up with that of the child, and wise women coming out after decades of silence finally being listened too when they tell their tales of abuse by those in power. For the wise men, the magi of the bible, they were not quite "kings" not to those in

power in those days. Not to King Herod, of course. Because HE was the center of attention. Or at least he should be.

And how would he feel when suddenly this young child, this symbol of liberation, well, he had more followers on Twitter than he did.

And so this person in power finds out that the attention is being taken away from *him*. He's the one who should be in power. He's the one people should be paying attention to, the one the Magi should be bowing to. "Deport them!" He cries. "Deport the baby! Deport ALL the babies who don't belong!" He says. Which to many is a death sentence, a sentence that splits families apart.

For this is what our story, this story, of Jesus, of God made flesh, would look like if it were happening today. This is today's holy family.

These Magi, these wise men, this Joseph and Mary, they were the marginalized. And they made room for the holy in unexpected places and welcome God as one of them. And the powerful King Herod, of the time, threatened by all this attention this baby was getting, called for his destruction. The idea that there are those who would pray and knee before a child and not before Herod was threatening to him, that he called for the death of ALL babies in Bethlehem in order to kill this "King Jesus."

So here, we have a ruthless King upset that someone else, a child, a refugee child is getting more attention than him. And so he acts out. Makes a ridiculous declaration to kill all children.

If this is our holy family today, perhaps we can find today's King Herod amongst our own leaders.

And so, are we to side with the King in his acts of cruelty, or with the oppressed, those glorifying the infant and all he represents? The hope, the promise of peace and liberation, for ALL people.

Because this is the way the story was written.

For as we said, the story of Christmas is not a tame one. That the God of the Christian Scriptures chooses to come to earth in the form of a vulnerable child, and to an unwed teenage mother, homeless, in a stable surrounded by animals, is a subversive act.

Ok, let me backup just a little bit. This is a Unitarian Universalist church, after all, and we accept and celebrate many different paths and beliefs about God and God(s). So what is this about "God coming down to Earth in the form of a human?"

Now, both Unitarianism and Universalism were Christian Traditions. The general consensus, these days, in the Christian tradition is that God is both one, and three. As in, there is God the Father (or Parent), this is the God in the sky we think of, God the Son, which is Jesus, or as some would say that God that came and lived among us, and then is God the Holy Spirit, which acts in the world. One God in three parts. And they would say about Jesus that he was not part-God, or part-man, but fully God and fully human. And that God needed to have that experience to

become fully human, and to become fully human in one of the most vulnerable and oppressed bodies there was, to understand the human experience.

And I really hope this isn't getting boring because this is what I went to seminary to learn how to talk about. So at least I'M getting exciting.

Now, the Unitarians, which are one part of our collective religious inheritance, did not agree with this very accepted part of Christian doctrine - that Jesus was fully God and fully Man, but rather that Jesus was man, and that there was only one God, God the parent. And a lot of Unitarian Universalists like this kind of reasoning because, yes, Jesus was a prophet and, yes, Jesus may have been an especially holy man, but he was just a human, like the rest of us. So surely we are just as good. And I have, and still do in many ways, count myself among the folks who believe this.

Ok, so that was the Unitarians. Are you following?

So, this isn't a competition, but I would say that the most important, or perhaps the more *relevant* part of our *our* religious tradition, the religious tradition of this church in particular, is that of our Universalist heritage. And in the Universalist belief, Jesus IS God. God is literally coming into our world and making God-self - and yes, God IS God's pronoun - God made God-self into flesh as one of the most vulnerable, marginalized, oppressed people at the time.

And guess what. Other vulnerable and oppressed people noticed. But the rulers of the time? They set out to kill him. Be they King Herod, who ordered all baby boys to be killed, or Pontius Pilate who eventually finishes the job 33 years later, his mere existence was a threat to those in power.

And Universalists believe that that God, that loving God who would make God-self flesh as one of the people of the time that would be least considered worthy or worthwhile, the Universalists believe that THAT loving God would not damn anyone to hell. That literally every person, immigrant, Muslim, Queer, criminal, prostitute, addict, even these ruthless tyrants in power, are going to Heaven. Not just going to Heaven, but literally being reunited with Christ himself.

The ultimate goal is to be reunited with the God that became human, here on earth.

Now, I'm going to be real with you about this story. This story of God becoming flesh in Bethlehem over 2000 years ago, when Herod was King and in a stable with animals and Magi, etc, etc.

It's pretty conclusive and many biblical scholars agree that this didn't actually happen.

Not in this way at least.

Not in the way the Gospels, which are the four books of the Bible that tell the story of Jesus' life, are written, it's clear that the sections about his birth were added much later than those of his public ministry and death, in part, to fit with the prophecies about the Jewish messiah, and, in

fact, that these sections were added hundreds of years after his death. There were no witnesses to this birth, no records of it, and it's unlikely that any of it really happened in the way it's written.

But - and this is really important - factually accuracy is not synonymous with truth and meaning. It is factually accurate that I had a sandwich for lunch today. But that statement lacks meaning, and I hardly think people will be looking over this sermon in 2000 years analyzing what I mean by that.

But truth, truth is found in poetry, in epics, in fiction. Truth is found in the Odyssey and Beowulf and Star Wars. It's found in the Quran and the Torah and in the Darmapotta, and yes it's found in the Gospels and their accounts of the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

So consider this truth. God - whatever you conceptualize God to be - God shows up in the souls and bodies of the marginalized, the vulnerable, and the oppressed. And that means that, as our advent candles symbolize, Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love show up in them as well.

And we - Unitarian Universalists, or Americans, or Humans - don't recognize that enough.

If it is Universalists who believe that all on earth will go to Heaven, it is Unitarian Universalist today who believe that we must bring heaven TO earth.

Will we join the bold movement, lead by the marginalized, those Jesus' of our time, holy families of our time - the bold movement that promises that no child will be born in a literal or figurative stable; that all children will have access to a loving home with health care and educational opportunities; a world in which those like Jesus are not killed by the state before they reach old age; a world where women are believed and honored when making choices and decision about their own bodies; a world where our homeless are never told "there is no room in the inn?"

This indeed is the call of our Christian heritage, and the true meaning of Christmas. Can we see God in the face of a vulnerable child, and, in turn, can it move us enough to bring heaven here, to earth? For that child. And for all of us.

And I ask you - how might a revelation like that transform you? How might it transform our world? If we truly looked at the most marginalized and the most vulnerable as the ones to follow? The ones with prophecies? The wise ones, the honored one?

Perhaps we truly could bring Heaven to Earth.

And so, let us say together, Amen. Amen.