



## Sermon

One year when I was quite young my mother bought one of those paper nativity sets, where you popped out the figures from a glossy sheets of paper. We put it together and set it under the Christmas Tree and it became a tradition that I took on as my own. Every year I would resurrect the increasingly fragile paper figures and palm trees, tape up the star onto the wobbly paper stable, and set it under the tree. At that age, I took the stories literally, believing they had actually happened the way it was written in the Bible, and I would try to immerse myself in that time and place and feel what it would have been like to be there.

I no longer assume the Christmas Story and other stories in the Bible are literally true. We know too much about history and the way the Bible was written to make such an assumption anymore. For some, that would mean the story has no meaning and that the magic was for nothing. But I see it a different way. When we no longer put the burden of factual truth on stories like the birth of Jesus, the stories get to be more true. It's no longer dangerous to use our imaginations. No longer heretical to play with ideas, thoughts, and possibilities. It's no longer a problematic issue to read the scriptures, sing the songs, or explore the story's meaning for our lives. And, that feeling of wonder and magic is still there for us, waiting to be touched.

And so in that spirit of holy possibility, I think about all the characters who surrounded Jesus. Mary, a young woman shocked out of innocence by a pregnancy she never asked for. Joseph being ordered by God to stand by his new wife who carried a child that was not his. The Wise Men who travelled from far away following a star. They expected to find the king in a castle. What an act of faith it must have been to give those precious gifts of frankincense, gold and myrrh to the lowly man, woman and child from Nazareth.

I once read a Christmas Sermon by a colleague of mine called "What Good Ever Came Out of Nazareth." This turn of phrase comes from the Book of John Chapter 1 verse 42. When Jesus has grown and begun his work, a man named Nathaniel who has heard of Jesus says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Apparently, Nazareth was this poor, unremarkable, unmemorable small rural village, consigned to obscurity. The people who came from Nazareth were equally unremarkable and unmemorable. Nazareth was considered a backwater and yet it was a child from this unremarkable place that the shepherds and wisemen found themselves kneeling before. And in the spirit of holy creativity, I find myself thinking, what is our Nazareth? What have we consigned to obscurity and unremarkableness. Where are those places from which we expect no good. Those places we have written off. The people we have written off, or perhaps things in our own lives we have pushed to the side as being unworthy. The magic of Christmas is that the promise of new life comes from that kind of place, a place judged as unworthy. The story of Christmas asks us to question our assumptions and to look with new eyes into old places so we can see seeds of our own salvation.

There is a great deal asked of every character in the Christmas Story and I find myself thinking that isn't this the case for anyone involved in the creation of new life. With every child conceived and born, a woman's body is given over into the formation of new life. Not only that, but everyone around her also finds that their lives have been brought to the service of this new developing life. Joseph had to sacrifice his pride. Mary had to sacrifice her reputation. The Wise Men sacrificed their comfort and left what they knew for a strange land. The Shepherd's sacrificed the routine normality of their lives. Some were unable to sacrifice. King Herod was so threatened by the possibility of a new king that he would stop at nothing to protect himself and the power he wielded from the change that was to come.

We too are in a place of change. Economically, socially, politically, spiritually. These changes are asking all of us to sacrifice. When you look around you, when you look in your heart and spirit, how are we being asked to sacrifice? And how are we welcoming and resisting what is being asked of us? In all the complexities of life and the shades of grey that we encounter as we move into this strange land of insecurity and unpredictable change, are



"What Good Ever Came Out of Nazareth?"  
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we able to keep sight of the star that hangs over Bethlehem? We can be as Mary jeopardizing our reputations, or Joseph standing by her? We can be the Wise Men traveling long distances for an unnamed unknown child? We can be the Shepherds called forth by the angels to proclaim that new life has come?

Can we keep sight of a new vision, a new way of being, a new path of justice. The Christ Child represents liberation for all people, for the marginalized, for the imprisoned, for those who despair, for those who are gripped in fear and loneliness. The birth of the Christ Child represents a physical liberation and a spiritual liberation for all beings.

And so we are called to the stable. We are called to behold the child. We are called to bring frankincense, gold and myrrh. We are called to proclaim a message of freedom from bondage.

And most importantly, we are called to accept these gifts for ourselves. The Christ Child was born for us. We are all, in some ways, held in bondage, either through others making or our own. The Christmas Story is not simply about what we are asked to give. It is about receiving what has been freely given to us. Christmas is for us. The renewal is for us. The freedom is for us. Hope, peace, love, faith – they are given to us so that we may find new life.

Now you may be wondering – who is giving these gifts to us? Where do they come from? And because we are in a Unitarian Universalist church with an expansive theology, I will tell you there is no one answer. Perhaps for you this gift comes from your God. Perhaps the gift comes from the love and acceptance you experience in the presence of loved ones. Perhaps this gift comes in quiet moments where you have withdrawn from the demands of life. Perhaps the gift comes in the busyness and you can see even in the mundane how blessed you are. Perhaps you came here this evening in hopes that such a gift would be here in the words and music and the people around you.

On behalf of that wondrous power that none can truly name, I offer you this gift. Take it as you are able and treasure it and do good with it. Amen and blessed be.