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### Sermon

There are so many ways that we search for and try to create the perfect Christmas. Christmas decorations before Halloween, mailboxes bursting with fliers and 24 hour Christmas radio entice us into the promise of a perfect Christmas. Have the right decorations, buy the right presents and listen to the right music and when you are asked the dreaded question, "Are you ready for Christmas?" you can confidently say, "Yes!" and hopefully, you might just feel that special feeling that is Christmas.

My mother has a very particular understanding of the perfect Christmas. Christmas won't happen until every one of her babies is home, and yes we remain her babies no matter how old we get. My youngest brother arrived three days ago. The other brother arrives tonight, and I'll arrive tomorrow afternoon, last, as usual. We know that this isn't possible every year, but this year, it will happen. Until I walk through the door, I know, that despite all her attempts to hide it, my mother will be restless and waiting. And when I get there she will hug me tight, and we'll go to the kitchen together and I will help her finish preparing our Christmas supper. That is her perfect Christmas.

Perhaps your families have certain understandings of what creates the perfect Christmas. Certain foods that must be served, certain rituals that must be observed, certain decorations that must be hung, certain songs that must be sung, and certain people that should be seated around the Christmas table, and when that happens everything should fall into place and Christmas will happen.

As I drove around this week, enjoying the Christmas lights, which is one of my favorite things to do at Christmas, I noticed that many people are putting signs in their front lawns that read "Jesus is the Reason for the Season." Has anyone else seen those signs? Another one is, "Happy Birthday Jesus!" These signs have been popping up for several years and, I've been told, are a particular aspect of Bible Belt culture. These signs point us to another understanding of the perfect Christmas. The perfect Christmas is not about presents and Christmas trees and shopping. Christmas is not about lavish meals, decorations, and presents under the tree. It's not about a Winter Wonderland or Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire. Christmas is simply about one thing – the Jesus they believe in. I will admit that I have ambivalent feelings about these signs. They feel judgmental and I am drawn to equate them with narrow thinking, an exclusionary understanding of God's love, and a simplistic understanding of Jesus and his message that makes faithfulness about believing the right things rather than doing the right things. But there is another side of me that can relate to the desire to strip away the superfluous and get to the heart of the matter. Who among us has not felt cynicism about what the holidays have become? Sometimes the desire for the perfect Christmas takes Christmas away. What if we could strip away the hustle and bustle, take away the consumerism and the shopping and the lights, and the high expectations of what must be, and you are left with a simple

and not so simple story about a waited for child bursting forth into the world, bearing the promise of peace on earth and good will to all.

As Unitarian Universalists, we hold that there are many truths, and they can stand side by side. It is true that sometimes hanging up Christmas lights in November and waiting for hours to go shopping on Black Friday is a shallow act of consumerism. But sometimes, it is an act of love, beauty and generosity. Sometimes our family's expectations of us at Christmas are burdensome. Other times those exact expectations give us a deep sense of purpose and of being wonderfully needed, wanted, and loved. Sometimes a literal understanding of the birth of Jesus leads those who believe in it to act hurtfully, to be inconsiderate of the viewpoints of others and to act in exclusionary ways that can damage the human spirit beyond belief. The same literal understanding can lead another to see the fullness of this world as a gracious gift of the spirit to be appreciated and treasured.

The story of Christmas is that truth, beauty and power happen within the imperfections of this world. In an ancient time, when fear ruled and tyrants seemed victorious, a young girl came to her fiancé and said, "I'm pregnant, and it's not yours." In these ancient times, her pregnancy would be his shame if he married her, and yet he chose to do just that. As she neared her due date, a decree forced them to leave the comfort of home and when they got to Bethlehem there was no room for them. She gave birth to her son in a stable, which in that time would have been seen as proof of her shame. Her son was welcome by shepherds, those who did some of the most menial work of that ancient society. Furthermore, the desire of the three magi to bring gifts to the newborn baby raised the suspicion of the King, and the young family fled to Egypt. Whether you believe this story is literally true or metaphorically true, this is a story filled with the reality of an imperfect world begging for hope and love.

Part of what I struggle with when I see yet one more sign declaring Jesus is the Reason for the Season, is that I think being faithful is so much more than just believing a story and committing your life to the baby born in it. Christmas is about devoting our lives to the truth within the story, not to its actors. To simply declare Jesus the reason for the season may be missing the point.

The Christmas story is teeming with acts of creative resistance in the face of oppression. Those who came to see the child in the manger risked their lives to do it. When Joseph and Mary welcomed the lowly shepherds into the stable they were being radically counter-cultural. In their world, when you welcomed someone lowly into your presence you lowered your own status in society. Welcoming the shepherds said to them, "You are worthy. Come and be with us." The man who stood by his young wife was also being radically counter-cultural. He risked his reputation and the reputation of his family by marrying her. And the God in this story chose to offer the world hope not through a brave warrior or hero, but rather through a vulnerable newborn child born of an oppressed people who had little control over their lives.

When I see so many today turn their Jesus into a tool of empire, into a God of power and might, I wonder, do you see the reason for the season? What if we committed ourselves to the reason for the season not by trying to change those who believe differently than us, but by committing to serve

the poorest and most vulnerable and most stigmatized in our land? Instead of judging store clerks who say "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas," stand with those who despair and love those who are deemed unworthy by the oppressions that rule in this land. Instead of judging the unwed mother, embrace her. Instead of judging the poor for their poverty, see our part in systems of economic inequality that need some to be poor so that others may live well. Instead of making prayer in schools proof of this nation's morality, make the commitment that none shall hunger, none shall thirst, and none shall shiver in the cold or swelter in the baking heat.

The Call of Christmas is that our hearts should be softened and opened, that we should look with kindness and concern at our world, and feel its suffering as our own. The Call of Christmas is not to see the sacred as grand and mighty, but as lowly and small and this means that not one of us is excluded from the promise that we too can be bearers of the gift of new life that was delivered to us in the child that was born in Bethlehem.

"Each of us could travel a long and weary journey, only to find that when night falls there is no room at the inn.

Each of us could be a shepherd, patiently caring for those who need us, who depend on us.

Each of us could be a king, in search of the holy, ready to offer our gifts.

Each of us might sometime hear angel voices, singing of a glory we have yet to know.

And surely, for each of us, there is a desert to cross, a star to follow, and a new being within to bring to life." (Ann Fields)

Amen and blessed be.