

Unitarian Society of Hartford

Reflection: The Truce

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Christmas Eve, 2006

Pre-service reflection:

There are only 2 ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle.

The other is as though everything is a miracle. A. Einstein.

Story for All Ages: The Day You Were Born

Spencer, Jack, and Carter's dad, Doug, made us this crèche, which tells about the day Jesus was born. Let's see if we know who each of these characters is.....

We know quite a bit about what happened the day Jesus was born, don't we?

I wonder what happened the day you were born.

You were too tiny to remember but maybe somebody told you.

Do you know anything that happened the day you were born?

I wonder if you were born on a Tuesday?

I wonder what your dad was wearing that day.

I wonder if anybody rocked you that first day.

I wonder if you wore one of those little caps they put on babies?

Things happen the day we are born,
but they are not the most important things about us.

Things happened the day Jesus was born,
But they are not the most important things about him either.

The baby Jesus grew up.

He went to synagogue school and learned how to be a good Jew—
He learned how to love the Lord his God with all his heart and mind and
spirit,
and how to love his neighbor as much as he loved himself.

You could tell he learned those things by the way he acted.
He helped people who needed help,
and he told great stories that gave people ideas
for how they could help themselves.

His stories were so good that people still tell them today!

The important things about Jesus are that he loved and acted like he loved,
even when it was very inconvenient, even when it cost him his life.

I don't think Jesus had any idea that you and I would be here,
2000 years later, talking about him.

But we are. And there may be people talking about you
many years from now.

Wouldn't it be great if what they say about you is not that you were born
on a Tuesday, or in a stable,
but that you were a person who loved, and who acted like you loved,
even when it was inconvenient.

A Reading by great UU prophet James Luther Adams,
from his book, ***Changing Frontiers of Liberal Religion***

“The stories of Jesus in his inwardness, in his love of persons,
in the audacity of his liberation from the bondage of mere tradition,
in his confidence in the Kingdom that grows by itself
in reaction to human response,
in his faithfulness to his unique mission,
in his trust in the mysterious mercy of God—
in his eliciting of a new community in the world but not of it--
a community above nation and race and class,
A community embracing the humble and the wise—a beloved community.

What are such Bible stories to religious liberals?

these stories made and make, more readily known and available to us the powers that can release us from self-worship and give us constant renewal of life and love.

So persuasively have his stories made these powers available that we can understand why most of the followers of Jesus through the ages have given him a special place in the order of being.

What are such Bible stories to religious liberals?

At bottom this is not a question one considers from curiosity or just for old times sake, but for help in making meaning of our individual lives, for help in finding common ground among our neighbors, for help in creating shared purpose for humankind.”

Reflection: the Truce

Dancing Day seemed far away, on Christmas Eve 92 years ago. No angels touching earth with miracles of peace. The world was at war. Just months into it, soldiers on the Western front in Europe were weary, frustrated and dispirited, bogged down in barbed-wire entanglements and glue-like muck in waterlogged trenches.

Hundreds of thousands lay slaughtered by machine gun fire and artillery bombardments as modern weaponry outstripped military strategy. Others died from trench life diseases brought by rats, lice, frogs, and hoards of unburied dead strewn about.

Enemy trenches were often no more than 50 yards away and a merely curious or bored peep from one's trench on a quiet morning could bring instant death from a patient enemy watchman.

But despite all that, soldiers on all sides received gift boxes prepared by their respective governments that first Christmas in the trenches.

British, Belgian, and French troops got small specialty items fitting their national tastes—liquor, tobacco, food, chocolate, buttons and badges. The Germans even managed to send small Christmas trees and candles to troops at the front—one for every 5 meters of trench,

according to some records.

A Christmas cease-fire had been proposed by Pope Benedict XV, and rejected by all sides as "impossible." But,,,,, at several spots along 500 miles of Western front that night, guns fell silent.... as angels bent near the earth and touched their harps of gold. What happened?

Listen as John Jesensky sings us the story of that night, as told by Francis Tolliver (This song is in the audio files).

The Truce, II

Imagine it. For a few moments "the walls they'd kept between us crumbled, and were gone forever." Once we are touched by an angel, once that miracle of self forgetting is accomplished we are never the same as we were before. We cannot unknow when we have been fully shown— Or fully told in a story, that on either end of the conflict, we are more alike than different, more one than many.

In the early months of another war-- your ancestors and mine had just engaged what would be our most bloody war, with you who are not Southern on the other end of the rifle from me.

Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural address in 1861, was a splendidly compassionate call to reason, patience, deliberation, A call to breathe 'and one.'

That speech ends like this:

My countrymen, one and all, think calmly on this whole subject. In *your* hands, is the momentous issue of civil war. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors.

We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection.

The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave
to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land,
will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched,
as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

When memory of our sameness is stirred by the better angels
of our natures, there will be peace.
Those angels who bend and touch the earth and our lives with peace,
are inside of us. The miracle is inside each of us
and can be conveyed through a memory, a story.
That is the message of Christmas.

That one person who breathes peace matters.
That each one of us is and can be the prince of peace
on as large a stage as we choose.

Fred Louis is one person who breathes peace among us,
who from the crucible of Viet Nam became a veteran for peace,
who models the compassion and deep listening
of Ave-lokita-shivara among us. Thank you Fred.

The Christmas Truce of 1914 was a moving manifestation of
the power of one, breathing peace.

One Francis Tolliver type began the truce.
One Francis Tolliver in a trench with a gun could have ended it.
And today that truce remains a symbol of hope for those
who believe that a recognition of our common humanity
can stop any conflict.

A new French film, **Joyeux Noel**, captures and conveys,
in fairy tale fashion, that truce. It's at Blockbuster.
Men sang carols together, showed photographs, shared rations,
exchanged gifts and addresses, played soccer with improvised balls, buried
each other's dead,
and parted with "much handshaking and mutual goodwill," as one letter put
it.

Yes those who witnessed it wrote letters.
Like the shepherds, these men told stories about

all they had seen and heard,
of angels bearing a message that peace does come on earth
when it comes into the hearts of first one person,
then another, and another.

The good news of the miraculous truce spread quickly,---
and retribution was swift.

Yes, just as Herod slaughtered the innocents in the Jesus story,
Obscene forces arose in 1914 in response to the humanizing truce.
Commanders punished those troops,
shamed their countrymen in uniquely German French or Scottish ways.
The war went on for four years, claimed nearly 10 million lives,
and the Christmas truce was never repeated.

But such things do not un-happen. Such stories cannot be untold.
When angels touch us, and miraculous things happen, we are changed.
Even if the miracles are just stories--
like Jesus healing lepers one of whom said thank you,
or feeding 5000 with 5 loaves, and the generosity of the crowd,
or turning a tax collector into a philanthropist over dinner one night,
or saving a woman from being stoned by reminding the angry crowd
of their own imperfection.

I am not surprised that people told stories about the power of
the presence of Jesus, stories that hint at miracles.

You have stories like that, a moment when something happened, which
should not or could not have happened,
times when there could not be a statistical distribution chart
broad enough to include that moment as even the furthest outlier
of probability.

Tell those you love some of those stories in the next few days--
dare to feel again the touch of an angel,
to imagine that there may yet be some untamed uncharted mystery afoot,
that there may be angels watching over us yet,
that miracles may yet abound, sparked by sharing such memories.

If throughout these grace-given days of ours,
surrounded as we are by green life and brown death,

by hot pink joy and cold gray sorrow,

If we stay inside ourselves and do not venture out, then the miracles of the universe remain a part of life we shall not know, and our locked hearts shall never feel the rush of worship brought on angel wings.

And now, we your staff want to end this legend making service, By venturing out to say thank you. for giving us this wonderful place to work. (all staff stood) We are honored to be able to serve you, And want to share with you these words of faith from a great Unitarian minister and activist of the 20th century, A Powell Davies:

Christmas Always Begins at Midnight

Mattie:

Brotherhood - we may betray it, but we cannot forsake it.
Love - we may disown it, but we cannot renounce it.
And the dream? Even in the hour of treason, it reclaims us.

Vaughn:

For we know that sometime there shall be a world in which man's inhumanity to man is ended.

Nina:

A world of gladness from which all cruelty, is gone,
in which the joy of each is the joy of everyone,
the sorrow of each the sorrow of all.

Brian:

There shall be such a world because there is a song
that sings it at midnight,

Rosie:

because in the darkest hour, there comes a light
to those who sit in the darkness,

Peter:

because stories bring hope to those who, in the wilderness,
walk beneath the shadow of death.

Denise:

Because this is so, let us open our hearts to Christmas.
Open them to all the hope that stands against a world that wastes
with evil things;

Bridget:

Let us open our hearts wide enough for gentleness in a world
that is bitter and harsh;
wide enough for loveliness in a world that is desolate;

BJ:

Let us venture out, and open our hearts
wide enough for faith, and its joy
and the song of its joy that God is with us.

Via con dios, my friends.