



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

A Precious New Beginning: A Christmas Eve Homily

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Saturday, December 24, 2022

In a Galilee far, far away in time and space, there were shepherds in the field “And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not....”

“Which”, as my colleague Lynn Ungar says, “is maybe a silly thing. For a creature made of wings and eyes to say to a couple of schmoe who were just hanging out with their sheep until the heavens cracked open. Who wouldn’t be afraid? And who stops being afraid because someone tells you? Right?”

“And yet, “Fear not” is the thing that angels say. Apparently, an angel says it to Mary. And to Joseph. “Fear not.” As if that would undo the panic of the moment, let alone all the hardship to come. The story never says if Mary or Joseph or the shepherds were comforted by these fear-denying angels. Just “fear not”.

“Likely not. But all of them moved forward, did the next thing that was to be done, which is about all you can ask. And maybe when the word came from Herod about smiting babies and they had to run— maybe when all the daily terrors of life descend— it could be good to have the angelic voices whispering “fear not” all down the long road, and reminding you about the tidings of great joy.” (Rev. Lynn Ungar, sermon preacher 12/19/18 source: Facebook, UUMA Group Page)

So much of what we face in our world – the politics, the weather, the climate, racism, gender, wars, guns and hate – is not unlike this holy night thousands of years ago. When the angel of the Lord burst upon Mary, Joseph and those lowly shepherds and announced that the Prince of Peace would be born in the most desperate of circumstances, we hear a new, fearful perhaps, and precious call into our world, fear not indeed. A shaft of light breaking bravely through the cold and dark and offering, hope. Hope in spite of the fear. Hope because of the fear. Hope beyond the fear.

MLK said it best: the opposite of fear is not complacency, but faith. The opposite of despair is hope. This sign, this incredibly unlikely sign – whether myth or not – is the proclamation that over fear and despair, there is love, hope and faith, these three.

First century Galilee, was a brutal and beautiful space. Known still as the garden of Palestine, Galilee at the time of Jesus' birth was ruled by the puppet King Herod, beholden to the nob boot of Imperial Rome. Dissenters, and there were many, especially in Galilee, were crushed mercilessly by Herod and the Roman Legions. Tax rates for the poor shepherds approached fifty percent of their livestock. No health care, no safety net, and often no mercy. For Mary to carry and give birth to a child, even the Prince of Peace, was an act of faith and incredible danger. Natal mortality was well over 50 % and to be without a home or a midwife the stakes were even higher. To be pregnant but not married, a single mother in a world in which women were treated like chattel and an unwed mother was treated like leprosy. Mary and her husband, Joseph, perhaps more likely her uncle and maybe her only friend, finds no place for them at the inn. No place that would have them. No place that would accept them because they were outcasts in a foreign land. They find at last a manger, hardly the warm and sentimental place portrayed in our culture today, more like a cave, with animals, large smelly animals, this was where her baby would be born. No mention of friends, no mention of a mid-wife; a baby born among animals perhaps even like an animal, is born, survives and becomes the prince of peace, the Messiah, the son of God. It is an incredible story. Too often the story focuses on Jesus, but let's forget about Jesus for a moment, what about Mary? Forced pregnancy is female enslavement. Life threatening to start, desperate to keep living. Why would the authors of the Gospels have Jesus' birth announced to Mary, Joseph and a bunch of lowly shepherds? Perhaps it was to say to the world, hope is possible even under the most desperate of circumstances. A most precious beginning. Can you hear me?

As the poet Jan Richardson put it: this birth, this life, this hope was a precious new beginning "Hope" she wrote "starts small, even as a seed in the womb, but it feeds on outrageous possibilities. It beckons us to step out with the belief that the action we take will not only bear fruit but that in taking it we have already made a difference in the world. (Night Visions: Searching the Shadows of Advent and Christmas)

How then did we get from this story of survival and triumph of life over death, peace over war, light over darkness to the incredible juxtaposition of our consumer culture and a world threatened by the principalities of hatred, poverty and exclusion? What of Christmas? What of its essence as the precious new beginning for us to hold up tonight, on this very, very cold night?

I believe in Christmas, or rather the essence of Christmas, lies in seeing each Christmas night as a marker for a precious new beginning; that despite it all, life is good, and we are good, and every child is born one more redeemer.

The poet Geraldine Caple writes:

Discard the myths and legends for what they are

Strip away the accretions of the centuries

Abandon the traditional pagan observances

The feasting and drinking

The spurious good will

End the materialism, the commercialism, the whole whirl of activity

And what will remain?

With unimagined clarity, we will experience an intermission, a quietness, a stillness of the spirit

A strange awareness of the infiltration of human life, an indescribable peace

Which is at the one the mystery and the reality, the hope and the essence of Christmas

What is the essence of Christmas, this precious new beginning? For me it is more than the birth of Jesus, more than the giving of gifts, more than the stillness of a mid-winter night, the essence of Christmas is in the magic of the moment. A moment of presence, so powerful it transcends reality, taking us to a new reality of possibilities, beginning of the reality of a baby born under the most dire circumstances to herald the possibility that peace may still reign and life holds more promise than we see every day. Paul Hawken, the author of Blessed Unrest "Inspiration is not garnered from litanies of what is flawed; it resides in humanity's willingness to restore, redress, reform, recover, reimagine, and reconsider. Healing the wounds of the Earth and its people does not require saintliness or a political party. It is not a liberal or conservative activity. It is a sacred act." Believing in Christmas, this most precious beginning as an eternal promise that we can change is itself a sacred act.

The essence of Christmas is the faith to look past our stories of empire that we might seek the true possibilities that the nativity can bring, that we might help each other find that third way, that there might be real peace on earth through goodwill, a novel concept and still my deepest and most fervent prayer.

This most precious beginning lies in a manger, in the cold, in a world not so unlike ours; the essence of Christmas lies in a baby born, as all babies are with the potential to change the world, with our help. The essence of Christmas my friends is in each of you, that whisper, that voice, that song, that shout, that triumph, that breath first and last, that starts when a baby takes her first breath, a breath that sounds just like the ringing of a silver bell. Believe my friends, believe, the essence of Christmas lives within us still. So may it be.