

First Unitarian Church

December 6, 2015

In 2010, my first year as a minister here, I brought a live donkey into the sanctuary for the Christmas eve service. Right up next to the platform. This was in the old sanctuary where the platform didn't go all the way across the room. Remember when we used to try to squeeze the choir, piano, lay leaders, and ministers all onto a platform about 1/3 this big?

The donkey was a nutty idea. A number of things could have gone wrong. Especially numbers one and two, if you catch my drift. Our pageant that year was a reenactment of Las Posadas, in which Mary and Joseph go door to door looking for hospitality. And with every knock, I was watching that donkey out of the corner of my eye.

Of course even if there had been a, uh, incident, it probably would not have been as bad as the one that went viral that year on YouTube. It was a video of a camel in someone else's Christmas service... a camel that fell over sideways onto the people in the pews as it was walking down the aisle.

Why did I do it?

Well, when I balked at the idea, another staff member looked me in the eye and said "Chicken." You understand.

And... better that Christine know right away what she had gotten herself into by hiring me.

And... the kids were super excited.

But also... it was perfect. A donkey! For Christmas eve! The humble donkey is not only the animal that carried Mary through the desert as she went into labor. It's also a classic and picturesque part of the nativity scene.

The Nativity Scene is one of the most iconic images of Christmas. Francis of Assisi, the 13th century Roman Catholic friar, is credited with beginning this tradition.

It is said that he was visiting the town of Greccio, where he discovered that the chapel was too small to hold midnight mass. He decided to hold the service outside instead. Great. Everyone will fit. But... it had some drawbacks. He was worried that without the decorum and sanctity of a formal chapel, the service would not have the proper air of reverence. As he pondered what to do, he decided to take a nap.

A great strategy, as we do a lot of processing in our sleep. We could all get more work done by napping.

Sure enough, while he slept, an idea came to him. He would create a scene to represent the scene of Jesus' birth. Remembering the description in the gospel of

Luke, in which Jesus is laid in a manger, he brought the scene to life as he imagined it: in a stable, with hay, an ox, and a donkey.

Telling the story decades later, the Franciscan monk Giovanni di Fidenza, wrote also that as Francis preached his sermon, a soldier who was listening attentively was surprised to see the holy child miraculously appear asleep in the manger, right before his eyes, and Francis embrace the child as though to wake him.ⁱ

Di Fidenza adds that afterwards, other miracles confirmed the truth of the soldier's vision: "...the hay of that manger, being preserved by the people, miraculously cured all diseases of cattle, and many other pestilences."

So that's how the iconic nativity scene came to be. And one of the delightful things about it is how it has been reinterpreted across cultures in countless artistic variations. From the light up lawn ornament version, to tiny figurines carved out of wood, and with the holy family and their visitors portrayed in every ethnicity and style of clothing.

But have you ever wondered how it relates to the scene that is described in the gospels?

Of the four gospels that have been included in the Christian bible, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, only two contain birth narratives: Matthew and Luke. Our readings this morning were excerpts from those. And as you might have noticed, the birth narrative in Matthew actually doesn't say much about the birth. It pretty much just says, "When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, magis came." They follow a star to find him, and when they do, it is in a house, not a stable.

The gospel of Luke paints a much more vivid picture. In Luke's telling, Mary and Joseph start out not in Bethlehem, but in Nazareth. They travel, we are told, because the Emperor Caesar Augustus has ordered a census of all the land, and everyone has to travel to their hometown for it.

While they are there, Mary gives birth. She wraps the baby and places him in a manger, because there is no guest room, the writer says.

Then, an angel appears to shepherds in the fields, who are filled with "fear," and before you picture an angel with sharp teeth or a wrathful God who terrifies shepherds, let us remember Christine's sermon last Sunday, when she explained that the biblical word for fear is the same as the word for "awe." It was a decision of later translators to go with *fear* in English.

And so, overcome and moved by their feelings of awe, they go to meet the baby.

The two stories—Matthew and Luke— have some similarities. In both stories, Jesus is born to a young woman named Mary. (The word used for "virgin" here actually could be translated simply as "young woman.") In both stories, Mary is engaged to

Joseph, and she gives birth in Bethlehem. And, we didn't read this part, but in both stories, the family ends up going to Nazareth afterward, where Jesus will be raised.

But what is more striking than the similarities, are the differences!

None of the specific stories in Luke occur in Matthew, or vice versa. One story has the shepherds, the other has the "magi." One has a star, the other has angels. One story describes the family's journey to Bethlehem, the other only says Jesus was born there.

Luke explains that Mary and Joseph were from Nazareth, but Matthew makes no mention of that at all. In fact, in the gospel of Matthew, when it says the magi visited Jesus in the house, it is written in such a way that we could easily assume he was born in his family's own house, and that they lived in Bethlehem.

Some of the differences are hard to reconcile, though, if you try, you can. For example, although one story mentions a manger and says there was no guest room, suggesting Jesus was born in a barn, you may be interested to know that in the ancient near east, houses and barns were in fact often one structure.

Houses had two levels—with living quarters for people on the second floor, and animals kept below. House, barn... they could refer to the same place more or less.

Other things aren't so easy to square.

The stories are suspect from a historical perspective... for example, the gospel of Luke mentions that Quirinius was the Syrian governor, while the Gospel of Matthew has a story woven in with the birth narrative—it wasn't in the reading this morning—but most of you are familiar with it: it's about King Herod trying to trick the magi so he can find and get rid of this baby who is prophesied to become a great leader. The problem is that Quirinius did not govern Syria until a full decade after Herod the Great's reign. So if Jesus was born in the time of Herod, as the gospel of Matthew says, then Quirinius was not the governor of Syria as the gospel of Luke says.

There is also no record *in any other source* of a census occurring at that time—or at any other time under Quirinius. And not only that, but if you think about it for two seconds, you realize that a census requiring everyone to return to their hometown would have been impossible, not to mention a bureaucratic nightmare.

Luke says Joseph returned to Bethlehem because David was his ancestor, and David was from there. But David lived a thousand years before Joseph. That's even worse than simply returning to your hometown for a census—can you imagine if you had to return to the place that your paternal great, great, great (27 times) grandfather lived for a census? I think mine lived in one of the kingdoms that preceded Ireland.

If something that huge were really attempted, you'd think another author or historian would have found it significant enough to jot it down.

Of course, we know better than to read the scriptures as strict historical accounts. Our tradition, Unitarian Universalism, takes the scriptures seriously, but not literally. That's because whenever we do a close reading of scriptures, as we just have, they speak for themselves, telling us that they are not meant to be taken literally.

So what does it mean to take them seriously?

From a spiritual perspective, it means to approach them with the assumption that wisdom may speak to us through the voices of our ancestors. When I say "our ancestors," I mean our religious ancestors, but also our cultural ancestors. You could have been raised in Buddhist Mongolia, but if you live in the US, then you are also now an inheritor of a culture that has been shaped by the stories and traditions of the ancient Israelites and the disciples of Jesus.

To take the scriptures seriously to acknowledge that—even if you prefer to look to other sources for spiritual wisdom—our culture is saturated with references to these.

In divinity school, there was a required course called "Theories and Methods in the Study of Religion" that involved some modern academic readings that were so hard to understand it was like they were written in a foreign language.

While I quietly wondered if the school was going to discover they had let me in due to a clerical error, other more confident students were irritated by what they saw as readings that were so abstract they seemed pointless.

One day one of them challenged the professor, Ron Thiemann. He was an intimidating figure. The former dean of Harvard Divinity School, known for having a temper. "Why does this matter?" the student said.

And Dr. Thiemann bellowed back something to the effect that **IDIOTS HAVE BEEN THE DOMINANT RELIGIOUS VOICES IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE** and we needed to **BE ABLE TO FORM BETTER ARGUMENTS** than them!

Ho-kay! This was just a few years after 9/11, and there was no shortage of bad theology on the airwaves. Remember Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson blaming 9/11 on "pagans, abortionists, feminists, gays and lesbians?" Oh yeah. They said that.ⁱⁱ

People use poor readings of the scriptures to promote their own agendas.

A couple of weeks ago, I was at the Center for American progress in Washington DC, where I am part of a Faith and Reproductive Justice Leadership Institute that is going into its third year now. We were talking about the way the bible is used to shame sexuality and block reproductive health care, and to shame women.

In our opening check in, my friend Cherisse who is also part of the group said if she had a superpower she'd want to be an invisible, bionic bible that appears whenever someone used Jesus to justify shame and oppression and she'd go *Clap!!* "That's not true!"

Cherisse is the founder and CEO of Sisterreach, a non-profit that works for reproductive justice in Memphis Tennessee. Her organization especially empowers women of color, whose experiences are often ignored by the usual “pro choice” or “pro life” discourse.

The thing is that the scriptures are so unclear sometimes, and so full of references and comments that don't make sense to modern ears, that they really can be interpreted in many different ways. But I'll tell you what: later in the gospels Jesus teaches the golden rule. He says that love is the greatest commandment. Everything else—every other law—hangs on that, he says. And he tells us how to tell the difference between a true prophet and a false one. He says, “You will know them by their fruits.”

So when we read the gospels or hear the gospel stories, and when we hear people speaking in the public square with the voice of authority in religion, the best way to interpret them is probably the way Jesus himself said to.

[Pause]

The irony is not lost on us... is it... that Jesus was born very close to modern day Syria. Maybe 80 miles from the border. That Syria is overrun with deadly violence. That people of all ages, from babies to the elderly, are fleeing in desperation and are being turned away at every border. Like Jesus and Mary in Las Posadas.

At the heart of the nativity story is an ancient teaching about hospitality. About not judging a stranger before you have offered them safety, not judging them before you have taken care of them. That's an important teaching throughout the scriptures, in the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible, as when Abraham sees three strangers in the distance, in the hottest part of the afternoon, and he runs to them to greet them, and offers them a bite to eat, by which he means a feast. They turn out to be angels, but he didn't know that. And in the New Testament, or Christian scriptures, we have not only the birth narrative in Luke, where the holy child is laid in a manger because there is no room for him, we also have the story of the good Samaritan.

Compare these to the voices we've heard in the media this week, suggesting that no Syrian refugee can be trusted, or that only Christian refugees should be allowed into the US, if any. How would we even know who is a Christian? And of course that idea is based on the “logic” that, as one politician put it, that there is no meaningful threat of terrorism from Christians. Meanwhile, in the US, family planning clinics are terrorized. We know that “Christian” is not a homogenous category. There are plenty of terrible people who call themselves Christian, and self-identified Christians have and still do carry out plenty of terrorism. But neither terrorizing, nor turning people away reflect the heart of the scriptures.

The classical Greek tradition also taught an ethic of radical hospitality. Xenia and theoxenia are the duty to provide hospitality for a stranger. The “theo” in theoxenia suggests that the stranger may be god in disguise.

In an article in the Harvard Divinity Bulletin, Anna Mudd points out that “the most radical element [of the tradition] is also the most essential. “The code of xenia rests on the fact that the host must be willing to take a guest into his household and take care of him before he has any idea who he is.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Then she says something I found really lovely. She writes:

“While the closest of kin, babies are also in a sense the most essential kind of stranger—arriving at our door unknown to anyone in this world, and knowing nothing of this world themselves. Perhaps this code of xenia, so deeply woven into communities within and across terrestrial borders, not only connects the fabric of our own social worlds but allows us to practice for this most elemental moment of welcome.”

Babies are the most essential kind of stranger.

Of course, once they are born, most people when we see a baby feel an instant sense of welcoming toward them. Even total strangers smile when they see a baby. We instantly sense our common humanity with them. But at some point, they become strangers again. We, who all started out as the most essential kind of stranger, forget that. And we forget to see each other as kin.

Some of us, as we grew up, became strangers once again to our parents, because we were gay, bisexual, or transgender, or liberal, or we married someone from another race or religion... or we were just disappointing to our parents in some way. Imagine if they had remembered how much stranger we were to them before we were born or adopted, and opened the doors of their hearts to us with the same curiosity and commitment to love.

Well, we can endeavor, at the very least, to do this as a church. To open our doors, and the doors to our hearts.

On that point, I want to tell you about something really special we are about to do as a congregation, and then we’re going to sing our closing hymn.

We, inheritors that we are of a beautiful, ancient story in which the savior of the world is born to a humble family in imperfect circumstances,

And inheritors that we are of the ancient spiritual practice of hospitality...

We are about to open our doors to people who, like Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, need a temporary place to stay.

Beginning in February, this Albuquerque campus of our congregation will be part of a network of churches that take turns hosting homeless families four times per year, through the organization called “Family Promise.”

Every few months, for one week, we will turn our social hall into a welcoming home for up to four families. Volunteers will make dinner and eat with our guests. We’ll

have bedrooms separated by room dividers. Then, the families will spend their days at the Family Promise day center, where there are not only showers, but a program to aggressively work toward getting these folks back into permanent housing within three months.

We are really excited to be part of Family Promise because we know it fills an otherwise unmet need in our community. A family that goes to a regular homeless shelter does not get to stay together. Men, women, and children are separated. It's incredibly hard, under those circumstances, to maintain a sense of being a family or to parent your kids. It compounds the stress and negative impact of an already unbearable situation. Families in the Family Promise program, on the other hand, are kept together and supported together, so that they can recover together and quickly go on with their lives.

We'll need lots of volunteers who'd like to make a dinner, help with set up or take down, or one of the many other tasks that will be needed. There will be jobs for volunteers who want to help out just once, as well as regulars. There are also possibilities for donating needed items, like new sheets and blankets, to help us get our space ready.

In the social hall you'll find a table with our volunteer leaders who can tell you more about the program, and they'd be glad to take your name if you'd like to get involved or contribute a needed item.

ⁱ <http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/st-francis-and-the-christmas-creche.html>

ⁱⁱ <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/story?id=121322&page=1>

ⁱⁱⁱ Mudd, Anna. "The Little Stranger." *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*. Vol 43: No 3-4. Summer/Autumn 2015: 31-3. Print.