

First Unitarian Church

December 10, 2017

Fifteen days 'til Christmas. Are you ready? Do you love the Christmas season? I'm a fan, but I think my husband might like it ever more than I do. He has been playing Christmas music since mid-November, and the other day when Frosty the Snowman came on, I'm pretty sure I heard him tap-dancing in the kitchen. Thumpety-thump-thump.

In public spaces, Christmas has a pretty secular feel. Snowmen, hot chocolate, jingle bells. Twinkle lights could remind us of the star of Bethlehem, but most of the time they don't.

Many people who celebrate Christmas aren't particularly church-going. Actually, the percentage of the US population that identifies as Christian has been shrinking. Between 2007-2014, the number of US adults identifying as Christian dropped by seven percentage points.ⁱ In that same time, the number of people saying they aren't part of any religion increased by six percentage points.

But Christmas doesn't seem any less popular.

In fact, no other religious holiday is so widely celebrated by people outside of the religion. Now that doesn't sit well with some, who look around at all this secular celebration and feel the real point has been lost.

They say we should put the "Christ" back in Christmas.

And you know, I'm looking around at the state of our country—the gap between rich and poor, the racism, the abuses of power, the unpredictability of health care for children, even the length of the food pantry line here at First Unitarian. It used to have about 40 people a week seven years ago, and now has well over 100.

By the end of the year, our food pantry will have handed out six thousand bags of groceries to hungry people. We just got a second refrigerator, thanks to a generous donor, so we can add fresh produce too. Really nourishing food.

I see these things when I hear that call to put the "Christ" back in Christmas, and I think, *Jesus had a lot to say about these kinds of things*. I'm not saying we should hang pictures of him in the store windows. But I do think it would be good for the country if more of us followed his advice.

So, you know what? Challenge accepted.

Now where do we start...

The other day, a member of this congregation shared the story of a bumper sticker he saw on a car this week. The sticker had a big picture of Jesus—or at least a familiar interpretation of Jesus. He didn't take any selfies. We don't have an actual picture of him. But you can imagine about what this rendition looked like.

The sticker had an image on it, recognizable as Jesus, and the sticker said, "It's not what you know, it's who you know."

Clever!

But, I ask, how does a person know him? You do have to think you know something about him, in order to think you know Jesus, right?

There are many faces of Jesus. Those of us who were raised in the Christian tradition may have encountered him first as a divine savior and healer. As a Unitarian Universalist kid, I knew him as a hero and teacher. At Christmas, we see him as an infant—miraculously tiny and helpless, beneath the starry sky. At Easter, a martyr.

In college, I encountered a different Jesus—the historical Jesus. Or at least, glimpses collected in the search for him. More than a few people have questioned whether he ever was an actual historical person.

Whole civilizations from that era—2000 years ago— have disappeared completely. So you can imagine how unlikely it would be to find evidence of one particular individual. Despite generations of searching, we have yet to find archeological proof of his life.

But as archeologists say, "Absence of evidence isn't evidence of absence." Due to the nature of the stories about him, their corroborating elements, and the real, discoverable places they reference, most scholars do believe that Jesus lived.

Certainly, his lasting impact is vast and undeniable.

So who was the Jesus at the center of all these stories?

It's a good question. In order to make sense of it, we have to start a little earlier, in the sixty years leading up to his birth. In those times, the people of Galilee, where he would live, had been dominated by the Romans. And Roman rule was characterized by military force. To borrow words recorded by the Roman historian Tacitus, "To ravage, to slaughter, to usurp under false titles, they call empire; and where they make a desert, they call it peace."ⁱⁱ

The Romans forced their religion into the public square, which included calling the emperor the "Son of God," "Redeemer," and "Lord." They used houses of God—the synagogues—to further their political power. Meanwhile, they imposed punishing taxes on the people. The gap between rich and poor was dramatic. And the people chafed under this brutality and domination.

This is the context into which Jesus was born.

As we examine the stories about him, it's worth remembering that they were not written down until long after his death. The earliest dates to at least 50 years after his death. So, they were written with the clarity of hindsight.

And, importantly, they were written under the pain of continuing Roman rule. Jesus did not win in his lifetime—or at least, it sure didn't look like it from the outside. He was executed by the state. But what he started didn't end there.

So we should remember that the stories were written down with the clarity of hindsight, and we must note that during his life, he spoke in parables. That was his primary mode of teaching.

Parables like the one about the prodigal son, a wayward son who is received with joy and generosity, not bitterness. And the one about seeds being sown—and how some will fall on rocky ground or be overtaken by weeds and will not bear fruit, while others will fall on fertile soil and thrive. Lots of parables.

Parables are a manner of speech, like poetry, painting, or song. It was a familiar mode to his listeners, who knew better than to insist that his parables be literally true. Most people understood then, as we do now, that the parables were intended to *convey* truth, rather than to be historical accounts.

When we read the birth stories about Jesus, we encounter a similar manner of speech. His disciples and their followers told stories about him, rich with meaning, and not particularly concerned with historical accuracy. The *meaning* of his life was what mattered to them. They expected that we would understand this, just as their first listeners did.

Is it any wonder then, that the stories about his birth, the stories about the birth of a person who would boldly challenge that Roman empire, and who was in the words of Marcus Borg “a spirit person” who would inspire and encourage and strengthen so many, is it any wonder that those stories echo the birth of Moses? Moses, who rescued his people from another oppressive empire, the Egyptians.

After the star, and the angels, shepherds and magi, there it is: a baby, born into an oppressive society, where a malevolent ruler orders the death of all male infants. And then he is rescued, through divine providence.

In the story of Moses, the baby is born during a time when the pharaoh has ordered the death of all Hebrew babies. His mother places him in a basket and sends him downstream, where by divine providence the Pharaoh's daughter retrieves him and raises him as her own. He would go on to liberate his people.

In the story of Jesus, his birth is heralded by the star and announced by previous prophecies, so the ruler Herod, sensing a threat, also orders the death of all babies his age. His parents, warned in a dream, flee to preserve his life. He too, goes on to show his people a path of liberation.

It might seem like a minor coincidence to listeners today, but in the first century CE, these parallels would have really jumped out to Jewish listeners.

After he was baptized in the Jordan River by his cousin John the Baptist at the age of thirty, and was so spiritually moved that he set out to teach and preach, one of his first teachings would also have jumped out as being Moses-like.

It's what we call the Sermon on the Mount or the Beatitudes today. But listeners who heard about it in ancient times would have known that when you hear a story about a prophet standing on a mountain and delivering a set of statements from God, that's a parallel to Moses giving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. He was delivering a new covenant from God, updated for his time.

I know most of you are familiar with the Beatitudes. But imagine how they would have sounded to Jewish people living under Rome's oppressive rule where the Emperor was called Son of God.

Jesus said

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

In that time, as it is too often in ours, wealth and wellbeing were taken as a sign of righteousness.

He said

Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

In a time when it seemed like the mourning would know no end.

He said

⁵ Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth

And

Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

And

Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God

He said these things in a time when military might reined.

And he said,

⁶Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

These were radical things to say, hopeful things. They pointed to a power higher than the emperor's power, and set that power over and against the emperor, when people were accustomed to conflating the two.

Eventually, the Romans—and those who had grown comfortable accepting riches and authority for cooperating with the Romans—caught up with him. The manner of Jesus' death is further evidence of his mission in life.

The scholar Reza Azlan says that when we look for clues about the historical Jesus, there are two basic facts we can be pretty sure about. One is that Jesus was a Jew who led a popular Jewish movement in Palestine. The second, is that Rome crucified him for it.

A useful thing about ancient Rome is that the Romans kept good records. And their records are clear that crucifixion was the punishment for a very specific crime: sedition, which is rebellion against the state.

In the translation of the scriptures that we have received, it says that Jesus was crucified next to two thieves. But the Greek word translated in English as "thieves" is *lesti*, which means bandits. Bandit was a common designation for a rebel, not just your regular kind of thief.

After Jesus died, Roman rule continued, and the situation got worse. In the years 66-70, thirty years after his death, there finally was a big Jewish revolt against Rome, but it ended with the complete destruction of the Jewish temple—the heart of Judaism—and the people being violently defeated.

The gospels that we have inherited were all written after this time. Their authors would have needed to distance themselves from the revolutionary movement that had led to so much destruction. Otherwise they risked incurring more wrath from the Roman authorities.

So they reflect a gradual transformation in storytelling: from stories about a political revolutionary and spiritual teacher, to an otherworldly figure with less concern for worldly matters. But make no mistake: when they call him Son of God, Redeemer, or Lord, it is to challenge and humble worldly leaders.

When Christianity became a state religion under the emperor Constantine, Jesus' challenges to worldly leaders fell by the wayside, and a religion *about* Jesus overcame the religion *of* Jesus.

I appreciate the gospels, and the rest of the bible, too. I love them because they are identifiable inheritances passed down to us from ancient people. So much of what

we have inherited from the past is amorphous or hard to get a handle on. Gender relations, for example. We are in the midst of another reckoning about those.

The roots of today's gender relations go back to thousands of years before the time of Jesus, so far back that the memory of the switch from goddess worshipping, matriarchal societies, to male-dominated ones is all but lost to our collective conscious.

But we can see and hear these gospel stories, and grapple with them. I love them because they are complicated, and lend themselves to rich interpretation. And I love to preach about them because they have played an indelible role in the shaping of our country's dominant culture.

The influence of Christianity cannot be teased apart from our national story, even if we someday finally live all the way into the dream of diversity that the God of these gospels insistently calls the Kingdom of God.

What kind of God were these gospel stories about? Or to put it another way, what did our ancestors believe was the highest good and highest truth on Earth? What did they want us to know? We, who they could not imagine but they tried anyway. For all their shortcomings and lack of understanding, what wisdom did they possess about our *purpose*?

They, and the stories they told, were inspired by visions like the one in the Sibylline Oracles, a Jewish text that also existed in the time of Jesus. It was a text that drew on the Romans' own mythology, in ways that challenged what the Romans were actually doing. That text casts a vision of a world in which the earth belongs to all, undivided by walls or fences. With no poor person or rich person. No tyrant or slave. A world characterized by radical equality.

We're still working on that.

They portrayed a God who was concerned with the weak, the oppressed, and those who mourned. And, most remarkably, our ancestors conveyed to us that there is hope. Not the easy kind of hope that comes from expecting things to work out quickly. But the kind of hope that we are called to practice, day by day, in acts of compassion, mercy, and liberation. Acts that—in spite of everything else—keep pulling the arc of the-all-of-it toward the kind of justice that creates true peace.

In this time, too often, it is true that it's who you know, not what you know, that gives you authority. So we have a widening gap between rich and poor, and it is pushed ever wider by people with powerful connections, many of whom claim to know the gospels but have clearly skipped over the parts like Matthew 5:24, which says, "Give to everyone who begs from you and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you."

Or Matthew 6:19, which says, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth..."
Or Matthew 6:24 which says that you cannot serve God and wealth at the same time.

Or Matthew 7:1, do not judge others. We've all got to work on these, right? We're not claiming perfection. But some people are being really hypocritical about it.

And we have this #MeToo moment, this parade of powerful men being called out, and it's not just about gender. It's about power. Power over, which is the way of violence, versus power with, which is the way of the gospels. Power over is the military force version of power. Power with, where neighbor lifts up neighbor, and we are all neighbors, is the kind that sows true peace.

These ancient texts are so filled with nuance and wisdom and folly and contradiction. But if there's one message we can take forward it is to keep going.

Don't accept what we know is not holy. And do all things in love. Walk in the ways of love. Not seed we plant will bear fruit. But some will.

I'm going to close by circling back to the reading by Howard Thurman that we heard earlier this morning, because I think he captures it so well.

He writes,

I make an act of faith toward... [human]kind,
Where doubts would linger and suspicions brood.

I make an act of joy toward all sad hearts,
Where laughter pales and tears abound.

I make an act of strength toward all feeble things,
Where life grows dim and death draws near.

I make an act of trust toward all of life,
Where fears preside and distrusts keep watch.

I make an act of love toward friend and foe,
Where trust is weak and hate burns bright.

I make a deed to God of all my days—

And look out on life with quiet eyes.ⁱⁱⁱ

Those quiet eyes he references are eyes that reflect deep spiritual peace within. Peace from knowing that we are not all powerful, but we are not powerless. That we belong to something larger than ourselves. That love overcomes all, even death cannot stamp it out. And that Christmas returns, year after year, to remind us of these truths.

ⁱ “America’s Changing Religious Landscape.” Pew Research Forum: Religion and Public Life. 12 May 2015. Accessed online 12/9/2017.

<<http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape>>

ⁱⁱ He’s widely quoted, but one place you can find it along with other references is here: <https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Tacitus>

ⁱⁱⁱ Thurman, Howard. Meditations from the Heart.