

## Story 1

The Good that Christmas Is

Rev. Richard Venus

“She really is a very small girl, a darling little thing, with the cloud of golden hair and big wide eyes that almost cry out to have her named Mary in the Sunday School play. And so it was delightful a week or so ago, when it was this child who chose to come forward and volunteer, who wrapped herself in robes of blue and held the doll that was her baby with reverence and love. Tears came into more than one eye, I tell you, as this girl and an equally small, equally loveable boy played out the primary roles in the ancient nativity legend that centuries have shaped about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem those many years ago.

“And yet, when the religious education director was sitting at a Christmas concert at her own daughter’s school, she was not overly surprised to receive a solemn tap on her shoulder, and, turning around, to find herself eye-to-eye with a very small girl. Her eyes were wide. Her voice was solemn. ‘Can you tell me the name of that play? The one I was in last week?’

“‘It was the story of the birth of Jesus,’ Laurel said, her heart full. ‘It was the story about the nativity and you played Jesus’ mother.’ ‘Thank you,’ said the child, seriously. ‘I just wanted to know.’”

The teller of that tale, my colleague Maureen Killoran, adds, “Ah, dear one, the truth be told, we all want to know.” And so it is with many Unitarian Universalists; we ask with that little girl, “Can you tell me the name of that play?” We want to know what is behind the tinsel and carols, the hustle and the lights. We know the facts, but it’s the story that tells the truth.

We know that the reasons for Christmas come from early history, around the time when people faced longer and longer days of darkness. They had become acute observers of the world around them. They observed that summer gave way to harvest and as the leaves fell from the trees they knew that winter would eventually yield to spring, or at least it had always done so. But in the absence of exact knowledge as to why the seasons changed there must have been doubt that the sun would again bring its warmth and light. Perhaps, they must have wondered, would the days keep on getting colder and colder, shorter and shorter?

We, as rational Unitarian Universalists, can offer our scientific reasons and historical research to explain how Christmas as we know it came to be. We can explain how a star in the East standing over the place where Jesus was born was perhaps a comet, often tracked by wise men that routinely followed the stars in their courses. Or maybe it was a particular grouping of Saturn, Jupiter and Mars, which occurred about the time many estimate Jesus was born. This collection of planets could have appeared as a bright, shining star.

Anthropologists can trace gift giving to early tribal custom. Tribesmen in Tanzania, for example, give away giraffe meat and in return are praised for their bravery and generosity.<sup>1</sup> Offerings of pieces of animal flesh were given to enhance the hunter's prestige and future rewards of different kinds were given in return by the receiver, which suggests that perhaps gifting is in our genes.

We pride ourselves on our rational approach to religion and to such holidays as Christmas. We UU's can tell you about the Christmas story. We can tell you that we're skeptical about virgin births, and a child born in a stable, and a donkey ride over many miles by a pregnant teenager. We can tell you that it is a mythological tale made up to tell the truth. "What is the name of that play?" we ask. "We just want to know."

As the Rev. Killoran puts it, "I can tell you the name of this play, my friends. The name is sometimes Jesus, Buddha, and Ishtar; and the name for me most often are simple words. The name of the play is Justice. The name of the play is Hope. The name of the play is Love. "Come, listen," she continues. "Come and sing. Come and let the deep truths of Christmas work their magic in your soul. For the name of the play is the name of our deepest longings made flesh, and the truth is that in these longings we are not, and we will never be, alone."<sup>2</sup> We are the ones who make the meaning of the story real; the foolishness in believing we might be more kind, caring and generous to others, and that we can be more loving of ourselves as

well. This is the wonder of this season: we can make real the love of self, of neighbor and even our enemy. That is what a story about the birth of a babe in a very cold, dark barn is telling us no matter how much Santa gets in the way.

## **Story 2**

I Have Trouble With Christmas by Judy Ayers

I have trouble with Christmas. There. I've spoken what's true for me, knowing that it's not at all culturally fashionable to have trouble with Christmas. It's a little like saying you don't like puppies or chocolate, both of which, incidentally, I do like. But there it is. In the first place, I don't have very good memories of childhood Christmases. Often, it was a more-than-usually tempestuous time in an already-stormy life. And with childhood innocence and naivete, I always thought this Christmas would be better. Until it wasn't.

Fast-forward to adulthood. The Jesus story simply isn't mystery in the same way it is for Christians. Just as Muhammad's story isn't my story in the same way it is for Muslims. And I can't get into the cultural excesses of the season. It feels like the whole culture is having a party and I wasn't invited. The profit-driven commercialization of it all saddens me. That stores have Christmas decorations and merchandise out before Halloween strikes me as ludicrous.

In the face of all that, I'd figured out what worked for me—minimalism, focusing on Solstice, the interplay of darkness and light, growth resting, a few carefully-selected Christmas concerts, and the quiet of land blanketed by fresh snowfall. Spending Christmas with my daughter and her family. Then, I met and married Tom. My husband comes from a big family and a long tradition of over-the-top Christmas decorating and activity. As we blended our traditions, we have maintained that to a significant extent. To my minimalist eyes and personality, a lot of it looks like clutter. A wreath, some candles, and a holiday tablecloth would do nicely, thank you.

Despite all this, especially as I've gotten older, I've at least made an uneasy peace with it all. And a large part of that is my deepening appreciation of the ways in which the mysteriousness of life pokes through our days in the most ordinary of ways. The biblical account of Jesus' birth reminds me that he was born as a helpless, squalling baby, the most ordinary and miraculous of events. Yet the shepherds and magi came, and wondered, awestruck. No understanding of human reproductive biology lessens how breathtaking the creation of a whole new human being is.

I do enjoy Christmas carols, although I struggle with the theology of many of them, and with their ceaselessly being played in stores. But I've discovered instrumental renderings of those melodies on traditional instruments such as

dulcimers, folk guitars, lutes and mandolins. I am fond of Christmas carols played on bagpipes, too, which mysteriously touch something in my Scottish genes.

Solstice has always been more significant for me than Christmas. I'm much happier when there is more light. I celebrate the lengthening of days, the return of the light that has diminished over the previous months. I welcome its promise of warmth. As I light candles, I recall the mystery of how the light always returns. No matter what my intellectual understanding of the physics of solstice is, I'm struck again by the way it opens out into something greater in its transcendence of the ordinary. Whatever your traditions, whatever your hopes and dreams and needs for this complicated season may be, know that we're all held in an endless web of life and in the blessing of community.

### **Story 3**

Joy Shall Be Yours in the Morning: A Humanist Christmas Homily

Rev. Josh Pawelek

Night is falling, snow is coming on a frosty, December evening. Mole and Rat are sprucing up Mole's home in Chapter 5 of Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows*. They've just arrived there, somewhat unexpectedly, after a long journey. They are tired and hungry. Mole is anxious and a little embarrassed by his meager possessions and barren cupboards; but he's relieved to be home after so much time

away, surrounded by familiar things. Rat is trying to give Mole a proper homecoming, figuring out how to add an air of festivity to their night, when suddenly a group of field-mice come to the door singing carols with shrill little voices. “Joy shall be yours in the morning,” their song proclaims. A feast ensues. And in the end it is a wonderful homecoming for Mole. Later, as he drifts off to sleep, he is content, at peace, and mindful of how blessed he is to have this home “to come back to; this place which was all his own, these things which were so glad to see him again and could always be counted upon for the same simple welcome.” Joy shall be yours in the morning.

It’s a version of the timeless theme we return to in this season, year after year: cold and darkness give way to warmth and light; anxiety and distress give way to contentment and peace; brokenness to wholeness; lost to found; despair to hope; sorrow and suffering give way, in the end, to joy. The messenger of peace, hope and love isn’t born on a sunny, summer day. That birth speaks to us, inspires us, moves us because it takes place—at least in our imagination—in the bleak midwinter.

I confess I sometimes feel uncomfortable mapping this narrative onto our lives. I sometimes feel disingenuous as a pastor offering a bright vision of the future, when it’s difficult to say with confidence what the future will bring. There are times when, in the presence of someone who is grieving, someone who is in great pain,

someone who is angry at an injustice that has been done to them, I wonder: who am I to say, it will get better, when I'm not always convinced it will? Who am I to say, time heals all wounds, when I've witnessed wounds that seem to never heal? Who am I to offer hope when I'm aware of so many people in situations that breed hopelessness: the slave, the prisoner, the war refugee, the victim of violence, the homeless family, the hungry family, the person living with loss, the person living with illness.

I want us to say to each other and to the world, Be hopeful! I want us to say to each other and to the world, Fear not! I want us to say to each other and to the world, Peace on earth, good will to all! I want us to say to each other and to the world, Joy shall be yours in the morning! But I don't want us to make false promises. I don't want these words to ring hollow. I don't want these words simply to be the rote things we say at Christmas time and then return to some other words, some other life once the light has returned. I want them to be real. I want them to mean something. I want them to have the power to change us in whatever way we need change in our lives.