

Christmas Eve Candle Light Service - 2013

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Gospel Readings Luke 2:1-20 & Matthew 2:1-12

Christmas Prayer by Rev. Lucy Bunch

Homily by Rev. Roger Jones

You know the story. If you've attended a few Christmas Eve services, sung the carols and heard the scriptures, you know the story. If you've been to a Nativity pageant, or starred in one... If you remember Linus's soliloquy on the *Charlie Brown Christmas* television special, you know it.

It is the story on which Christmas is based. Many people find it familiar and comforting. It's like a pair of well-worn shoes you rarely slip into nowadays, but you still keep them around because you love them. The Nativity story shows its wear like the binder of an old classic book on your shelves. Some of you however, might find the story to be so well-worn that you find it boring, instead of reassuring. You might even think: good thing I hear it no more than once a year.

Well, at the very least, that story is a reminder that some things do not change. We still can rely on a few things in life, and the Nativity story is one of them. It is old and familiar.

How odd it is then, that what is *happening* to the people *in* the story is totally new and unfamiliar. It is downright strange, and rather scary for them. Our world seems quite predictable, as we watch their world, changing in very weird ways.

Let's consider the Gospel of Luke. In the first chapter of Luke, the angel Gabriel appears to the Virgin Mary with a big surprise: *You are pregnant. Furthermore, the bio dad of your baby is not a bio dad at all, but a spirit, the Holy Spirit. Yes, Mary: You are going to give birth to a divinely given baby. Don't worry, I will break the news to Joseph. Trust me, he will calm down, and he'll be a good father.*

Nine months later, we find ourselves in the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke. An imperial decree puts the young couple through an

ordeal of walking to Joseph's ancestral hometown, to Bethlehem. And unfortunately this is when the baby is due. Mary gives birth in a stable—another surprise—and not at home. Not in a guesthouse or the inn, but in the stable behind it. Not a reassuring or familiar place for a new mother.

Meanwhile, in the wild rocky fields outside the town, an Angel of the Lord appears to shepherds in the night sky. Surprise!

As these lonely, rough country boys keep their sheep from getting lost and guard them from hungry wolves, an angel is the last thing they watch for.

No wonder the angel has to ease their minds:

Be not afraid. I'm here with good news, really. There is a baby in a stable, just born last night. He will grow up to save the world. He is the Messiah. He can rescue all people everywhere/ from poverty, from war, from despair.

This news is *enough* of a surprise, but the angel also sends them on a mission. *Go see that baby right away, over in town, in Bethlehem, the City of David.*

The scared shepherds' heartbeat starts to slow down, but then another surprise—a whole *host* of angels appears, flashing wings, shining, and singing:

Glory to God! Peace on earth. Peace is coming! Generosity and kindness will be the way of the world!

Wow. According to the Bible, the shepherds are amazed at this news. *Amazed*. Shifting for a moment from the Bible to the dictionary, we find synonyms for this word *amazed*—the shepherds are ... astonished, speechless, thunderstruck, flabbergasted.

No wonder they fall on their knees, as we heard

in the song, “O Holy Night.” They are *so* amazed they are feeling faint.

After they regain their strength, the shepherds let go of their familiar tasks and head into town. Surely on their journey, they talk about this experience. They question the news, which they are now going to check out for themselves.

Hey, do you think... did the angel speak the truth? Could it be true? That this baby will save our people from the cruel fist of the Roman Empire? Is this really the Messiah, the anointed one, the promised rescuer?

Can it be--? This child will save us from war, from despair, from hunger, from empty spirits?

Following instructions, these ordinary men enter Bethlehem. They find their way to the stable carved in the hill behind the inn. Again, they fall on their knees, this time in front of the baby in the manger. They are charmed by its tiny fingers and little face, by its mother’s calm, and by its adoptive new father’s obvious dedication and love. Since they now can see proof of the angel’s prediction of a baby in a stable, they also believe the angel’s news about the mission of peace which this child brings into the world.

The shepherds are anonymous characters. Shepherds are so poor and humble they are not given names in this story. Yet they get an angelic assignment and they have a front row seat for the birth of a messiah, a king, a rescuer. And if that was not enough of a surprise, consider this: the messiah is born in a stable, to poor parents, far from home. He is no better off than the shepherds. Yet he is the promised prince of peace!

The shepherds go out into the towns and fields, proclaiming what they have heard and seen. This becomes their mission, their fresh new purpose. They proclaim the possibility of hope, and kindness and peace on earth, for everyone everywhere.

How life has changed for them. Their life story is not the same old story they were used to. They have stumbled into good news, and now they are sharing it:

Love is born anew. Peace is possible. We can dare to live in this world/ with generosity and kindness.

This is the story. We know it, you and I.

Or we like to think we do. We like to think we know ourselves, know our own story, as well. In fact, we don’t know the whole story. To me, this is a key lesson of Christmas: Stay open. Don’t assume you know the whole story—the story of your own life, or that of any other person. Stay open.

Practice an attitude of openness toward the unfolding of life--your life and mine, the unfolding life of the human family. Stay open for hope. Even in situations where we feel stuck, or where we fear for our loved ones. There may be nothing we can do. But we can stay open. We can prepare for the possibility of something new.

We might not always know everything we need. Just around the corner, or just out in the field beyond the city, we might encounter a new gift, a new insight, a fresh new sense of purpose.

Let us practice openness. Individually, on our own journeys. Together, supporting one another, speaking from the heart, hearing one another into new purpose.

Like the unsuspecting shepherds, try to be open to new voices, new journeys, new joy, and new gifts in your life. Be open for the good news that your life is a gift and a blessing.

The shepherds didn’t think they needed a new purpose, so the angelic message was a big scary shock. Yet after their astonishment and amazement, they heard the calling of love. They went looking for good news of peace, went looking to be surprised yet again. They went looking to know more than they thought they knew about life.

Their big surprise is a lesson we can learn every Christmas, and every day of the year. Stay open for the unexpected, for a new direction, a fresh sense of purpose. No matter who and what you think you are, think again.

In the midst of so much that is so familiar and settled, stay open. At the most ordinary times, during the dull or depressing stretches of life, a new story can emerge, or we can write one. No matter what you think about life, stay open to the possibility of renewal, of joy, of love.

This Christmas, let us keep our minds and spirits open to the surprises of life. And may we strive to be open, all through the year. Let us be open to life. So may it be. Blessed be. Amen.