

The Journeys of Christmas

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Christmas homilies are always a bit of a challenge for Unitarian Universalist preachers. We are supposed to use the familiar gospel texts, but reinterpreted so they are rational and contemporary. We are supposed to point out the truths embedded in the myths while still casting the magic spell of Christmas imagery. We are supposed to sound Christmassy, but not too . . . Christian. So writing the Christmas homily can be a bit of a slog.

To slog, according to Merriam Webster, is “to keep doing something even though it is difficult: to work at something in a steady, determined way. To walk slowly usually with heavy steps.” And that is the truth about the Christmas story. For all the images of serenity and light, there is also a lot of slogging. The journey Joseph and Mary made to Bethlehem was a slog. Long and hard, at an inconvenient time, on crowded roads. A journey imposed on them by the powers that be; not one they chose. And don’t forget during the whole ‘no room at the inn’ part of the journey, Mary was in labor, a reality conveniently glossed over by the authors of the Gospels, which I suspect tells us something about the gender of those ancient story-tellers. Childbirth is a slog. And then those poor Magi and their journey. Another long and arduous trek undertaken after a mysterious but compelling call from the stars. And just about a week later Joseph and Mary are on the road again, fleeing with their infant son to Egypt, hoping to protect their baby from dangers they had been warned about. Thirty years later comes the journey to Jerusalem. The baby Jesus, now full grown and at the height of his very brief ministry, determined to go to that seat of power knowing full well he is going to his death. Only by this act of defiance and courage can he inspire the people to take

the courageous steps they must take in order to reclaim the integrity of their faith and their lives. But luckily for me – and for you – it is not Easter yet so we will leave that sermon for another time.

Then of course there is the journey that Jesus is still on today. The journey described not in scripture but in Lawrence Ferlinghetti's poem. "Christ climbed down from His bare Tree this year and softly stole away into some anonymous Mary's womb again where in the darkest night of everybody's anonymous soul He waits again an unimaginable and impossible Immaculate Reconciliation. The very craziest of Second Comings."

Ferlinghetti is not speaking literally here; he is not talking about the Second Coming foretold in the Book of Revelation; an event that, by the way, the earliest Christians expected to experience in their life time. He is talking about an always about to happen possibility – that the restless spirit of the divine which is constantly seeking to make itself known, always hoping to be noticed and followed, desperately needing human agency as much as humanity needs its inspiration – that this spirit will once again make itself manifest to us. And when it does, if we have paid enough attention to even notice, then our journey begins.

"Sometimes," wrote Andover Newton professor Mary Luti, "the longest and most difficult journey is not from place to place, but from assumption to experience, from contempt to embrace, from fear to hospitality, from judgment to love."

If you think about the Hebrew and Christian scriptures as a faith history of a people, written over a long period of time, then you recognize that one of the themes that recurs is this theme of journey. Over and over people of faith have had

to slog through the muck of mistrust, fear, and hatred in order to open their minds and hearts to the possibility of love. Love. Loves' pure light.

That meta-journey, of which the journeys of the Christmas story are all examples, that meta-journey began millennia before the nativity in Bethlehem. Matthew's Gospel traces the lineage of Jesus back to King David. But Luke traces it all the way back to Adam. Either way, the continuity is apparent. "By faith," says the Book of Hebrews, "Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise . . . And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children." Abraham and Sarah were old when the angel of the Lord came to them and commanded them to go to a new place. Not only were they old, they were well off and comfortable, although they lacked an heir. The news that they had been chosen to lead their people into a new land, to create a new kind of community, couldn't have been all that welcome to them. Or all that credible. Sarah actually laughed at the messenger at first, particularly at the part about how she would bear a son. Their decision to go was not based on any kind of rational cost/benefit analysis. They had everything to lose, and perhaps everything to gain. To take up their journey was an act of faith that took them out of their comfort zone and into unknown territory; it took courage for them to go. But they had faith, and they lived in hope. They thought not only about themselves but about the people around them and the future generations who might benefit from their leap of faith.

When an angel of the Lord visited Mary and told her what God's plan was for her . . . well, that couldn't have been welcome news either. Mary's response,

which is what makes her such a heroic woman, was simply to do what was asked of her. “Let it be to me according to your word,” she replies to the angel, the messenger of the Lord who has just told her, with what sounds like some irony, “Do not be afraid. (Yeah right!) And you will conceive in your womb and bear and son and you shall call his name Jesus.” It took courage for Mary to assent so graciously to that pronouncement. But she had faith, and she lived in hope. She thought not at all about herself, but about her people, and the future generations who might benefit even if she herself did not.

And so it went over the years. And so it goes. We slog through our lives, doing our best, working hard, trying to be decent people. Then a star appears in the East, or we hear the far-off sound of a trumpet and, was that the fluttering of wings? Or perhaps our call to journey comes from an image in the news of refugees fleeing the carnage in Syria, or of American Muslims being randomly attacked, or of African American men overfilling our prisons or losing their lives at the hands of vigilantes. And in answer to some mysterious call we leave behind the comfortable and the known and venture towards a new place. It takes courage, it takes faith, and it takes hope. But we go because we know the story already; we know how it ends. The Christmas story is our story, the journeys of Christmas are our journeys. After the long slog, we know, comes a brief moment of serenity, a thrill of hope. And in that moment we catch a glimpse of what could be, and we know that it is only by our efforts that it will come to pass.

On this Christmas Eve I wish you the courage to seek your new place, the strength to slog through the hard parts, and the blessings of companions who will sustain you in faith and in hope until you arrive at the manger and know, for a brief moment, serenity and peace, your silent night.