

“O Little Town Of Nazareth”

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Williamsburg, VA
December 24, 2006**

In the early 1940's, the Universalist Church of America applied for membership in the National Council of Churches. Their petition was rejected, due to opposition led by the Presbyterians, on the ground that they were “not sufficiently christocentric . . . and, . . . too much like the Unitarians.” This dismissal prefigured the eventual UU merger that came along in 1961. But granting that Jesus is not at the center of our theology, is he in the picture at all; and if so, where? Plainly, our religious movement has a complex relationship with Jesus – a complexity to be entered again, with the hope of seeing something new, as we celebrate the anniversary of his birth.

The gospel according to Luke begins with a story set in Nazareth in or about the year 4 BC. Luke refers to a census decreed by the Roman Emperor. But there is no record of such a census then – even though there are records of such events in earlier and later years. Luke asserts that Joseph was required to travel to Bethlehem, about 100 miles across the desert from Nazareth, to register in this unhistorical census. The reason, he says, is that Joseph was descended from the House of David, in Bethlehem, and the census required travel to one's place of ancestral lineage. But there is no evidence that such events ever called for this kind of travel. Luke describes this trip as involving Mary as well as Joseph. But given the status of women in that society, there would have been no reason for Mary to go – or for Joseph to subject his pregnant wife to a journey of such distance and danger.

The Gospel according to Matthew, on the other hand, begins with a story set in Bethlehem. It is based on events that are quite different from those recounted by Luke, but just as unhistorical. Neither Mark, the first of the four gospel writers, nor John, the last, makes any reference to the circumstances of Jesus' birth. This reinforces the conclusion that Jesus probably arrived in the world without fanfare. Luke and Matthew created such fanfare through different stories that accomplished a significant common result: the situation of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, rather than Nazareth.

[PAUSE] But . . . why delve into these historical details? To answer that question, we need to understand why the gospel writers went to such lengths to colorize the details of Jesus' birth.

They were Christians, but they wrote for an audience that included many Jews, whom they hoped to interest in becoming part of the nascent Christian movement. They strove to offer them a radical message that nonetheless could be connected to the Judaic tradition. To do this, they told the story of the birth of Jesus in a way designed to validate prophecies in the Hebrew Bible concerning the arrival of a messiah. Most importantly, situating the birth story in Bethlehem fit the prophecy in the book of Micah that the messiah would be a descendant of the House of David, King of the Jews and architect of their golden age.

A birth in Nazareth would have conflicted with the Bethlehem story. But even apart from this difficulty, Matthew knew that many in his audience simply would not accept the notion of a messiah born in Nazareth, an insignificant village of unlettered country people near the Sea of Galilee, far from Jerusalem. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” asked an astounded Nathaniel when Philip urged him to join those following Jesus. In the Gospel according to John, the scholarly Jewish leaders of the day condescended to followers of Jesus, saying “search, and you will see, that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.”

As a Unitarian Universalist, Nazareth has a meaning for me very different from its meaning for the audiences of Matthew and Luke. I see the lower than ordinary beginnings of Jesus as a source of his inspirational quality, rather than a detraction from it. Here was a person who consorted with those shunned by his own people as oppressors, like the tax collectors. When the leading Hebrew scholars reproached him, he replied, “it is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick.”

Jesus felt the same way about those treated as untouchable or insignificant, like the Samaritan Woman at the well in the book of John, with whom he conversed and communed, to the shock and bewilderment of his own disciples; or the lame and sick, whose physical afflictions were commonly interpreted as spiritual deficiencies; or the widow who paupered herself by depositing her only coins in the offering. Here was someone who put no store in credentials, rejecting even the title of rabbi. Here was someone with a deep sense of the inherent worth and dignity of every human being. No exceptions. No asterisks.

Over and over again, Jesus flouted social convention, following the truth wherever it led him, whether talking to a rich man or lawyer asking how to gain entry into heaven, or responding to Pilate in a way that sealed his own fate as a dangerous, unpredictable radical who would not play by the back-scratching rules of the Roman Empire and its client states. A nobody who became somebody, of whom the Romans decided they had to make a grisly example. A devotee of the free and responsible search for truth and meaning who makes our own embrace of this value look tame.

Jesus of Nazareth gave himself to the paupered, the imprisoned, those written off as demon-possessed. He drew to himself all the net-tending nobodies he could find fishing their lives away in the Sea of Galilee. He didn't need to be schooled in the ways of justice, equity and compassion in human relations. Such ways resided in him at a level deeper than learning. All the way down at the bottom of the mineshaft of the human persona.

All of these qualities are excellent ethical values – but in the last analysis, just symptoms, as it were, of what possessed Jesus: a profound experience of connection. Connection with his own deep self, with his heart's desire, with the deep desires and wounds of others, with what last Sunday's poet, David Whyte, called “that other more secret, moveable and frighteningly honest world where everything began,” -- some other and greater night than the starry desert evening of his own birth. We are not given to know how he made these connections, but they yielded a life that was both transformed and transforming – of both himself and those around him. He connected his life to something too wild and wondrous to be controlled, reduced, or even

defined; and then let that something run through him, like voltage. Jesus came and stood in the doorway between two worlds. And people were afraid. This was disturbing then and continues to be disturbing even today.

As Gary Wills has said, “the Gospels are scary, dark, and demanding.” They depict “a wild and ragged figure who flits from tree to tree in the back of our minds. It is not surprising that people want to tame them, dilute them, make them into generic encouragements to be loving and peaceful and fair. If that is all they are,” said Wills, “then we may as well make Socrates our redeemer.” And I say, we may as well follow the lead of the “word stylist” in yesterday’s New York Times, who nonchalantly suggests that we “enjoy Christmas while recognizing its muted Christian element, in much the same way one might enjoy the glories of a Botticelli or Fra Angelico, in spite of the unrelenting Christian presence in their art.” Of Jesus we certainly would have to say he was . . . unrelenting. Inconveniently, rudely, disturbingly, intrusively unrelenting.

We are a long way now from the sweetness of “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” But isn’t it plain that Nazareth is our kind of story, that Jesus is our kind of hero? It is a Universalist story of how being from the wrong side of the tracks doesn’t – make – any – difference in that great equalizer called the realm of spirit. It is a story of soaring hope, because its message is that every unremarkable human has the power of transformation. Every time a child arrives among us to be blessed, we celebrate not only that child, but also the arrival, yet again, of that hope, of the knowledge that every child is both blessed and blessing, and is carrying once more into the world the hidden gift of transformative possibility.

The uncolorized Nazareth story is a story of hope and inspiration – one we can live out of. Not necessarily the only one, but certainly a true one. When we hear the telling of one true myth, we should retell and retell it to ourselves, to our children, to anyone who will listen – like a fire being kept alive through the winter. Once a year, we should set aside a holy day -- just for this.

And speaking of myths, where does all of this leave that other little town, and the traditional Christmas story to which we will return at 4pm today? It too deserves an important place in our tradition, because viewed from our modern perspective, it is a vivid reminder of the importance of myth. Like all of us, the Israelites yearned for a story out of which they could live meaningful lives. Naturally, they turned to their golden age, the time of King David – slayer of Goliath, a living metaphor for their own hope, as a small nation, of repelling their large and fearsome oppressors.

The Bethlehem story exposes the weak magic of myths based on royalty -- on secular power. The tragedy of the Israelites was not that their mythic hopes were too grand, but rather that they were too small. They prayed for a king. Jesus was the answer that came – an answer that offered so much more than mere royalty. We should ask ourselves, for what do we yearn today? In what do we repose our hope for satisfaction of that yearning? Have we dared to unfold our hope to its full extent?

Luke and Matthew did inflect their storytelling somewhat toward the Israelite royalty myth, by substituting Bethlehem for Nazareth. But they also gave us a compelling story of an ordinary person who became an extraordinary leader. A singular voice that speaks to us still. A true prophet.

True? Doesn't the rhetorically expedient jettisoning of Nazareth for Bethlehem impeach the credibility of the rest of Matthew and Luke, and maybe even Mark and John with them? Or can we pick and choose? I say that as Unitarian Universalists, we can. We have this freedom because we take seriously two important ideas. The first is that our human faculty of reason enables us to distinguish true history from false history. The second is that another human faculty – call it spiritual receptivity – enables us to distinguish true myth from false myth, by sensing the resonance of revelation which true myths awaken in the human soul.

My faculty of reason tells me that in all likelihood, Jesus was born in Nazareth, not Bethlehem. It also tells me that the accounts of the ministry of Jesus in the Gospels are probably, in the large, historically sound. I don't know that Jesus spoke every word attributed to him, but I don't need to. I don't accept as literally true the various gospel stories of miracles that defy the laws of physics, but I don't need to do that either. Nowhere does the Bible represent itself as pure historical truth. The parts of it that my faculty of reason tells me are largely historically true are more than sufficient for my purposes.

And what are those purposes? To find guidance and inspiration for living the best life I can live. These purposes motivate me to use that other human faculty, my spiritual receptivity, to judge whether the Gospels are a true myth or a false one. To some, the notion of a "true myth" is paradoxical. To me, though, a story compelling enough to deserve being called a myth isn't false at all, but rather, is so true that it happens over and over again, down through history. Both history and myth can be true. The important distinction is in what they are true TO – the particulars of what happened, in the case of history, and the essentials of human nature and experience, in the case of myth.

The Gospels deserve the compliment of being called both true history and true myth. They are stories that begin with the literal; that then combine it with the plausible and familiar; and finally arrive at endings that are utterly surprising, yet somehow still as plausible as the beginnings from which they sprang. And they set up that resonance within me – resonance with historical truth, recorded through the art of paying attention to evidence; and resonance with mythic truth, revealed rather than recorded, through the art of imagination and literary creativity. Truth that has always been there, waiting for our awareness to be awakened. I am grateful for the gospel truths. Precise allocations of authorship between Jesus as liver of the life described, and the writers as tellers of the story, are of no great moment to me.

If an improbable character like Jesus of Nazareth could live an extraordinary, inspirational life, there is hope that my life, despite all the blind alleys I've walked down, might make some valuable contribution. If there is a place of honor for the illegitimate child of a day laborer and a pregnant teenager from nowhere, then surely, even in this broken world, there is a place of worth and dignity, of meaning and purpose, for me and for everyone – with all our flaws and limitations. History convinces me that Jesus very likely did live that extraordinary

inspirational life. Myth convinces me that even if he didn't, he could have; and so can we. Not just theoretically, but really.

Our religion reveres skepticism and dissent alongside faith and accord. We can be true to that tradition by turning away from the damage done by those who have misused his name, his life, and his teachings -- without turning away from Jesus. If we do that, the loss will be ours. We can stand in front of the text of his story, we can look at the historical reality behind it, and we can read all we see with our own authentic minds and hearts. We can listen for that inner resonance that enables us to know a mythic truth when we hear one. On the occasion of this much-misused holiday, may we use our given faculties to be bearers of hope, of generosity, of good news.

AMEN.