

“One Tiny Child”

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Have you ever seen a newborn baby? Have you ever seen a bird newly hatched? Have you ever seen a puppy just born? It's rather amazing that children and grownups alike are so eager to peer into their crib, their nest, their scrunched up blanket, because each of *them* is scrunched up. Their eyes are blinking if they've even opened yet. They usually make lots of racket—the baby cries, the bird chirps, the puppy whines and whimpers. “O come let us adore him/them...?” Amazing that such creatures hold power to bring us to our knees in wonder.

“Your children are not your children; they are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself,” spoke the Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran. With these words I begin the dedication of children in this sanctuary. A newborn reaches and stretches as if pulled by a force that we might call the life force. They gulp air, they open their mouths expectantly, and they slowly but surely open their eyes to light and life. From the moment of birth they become the “offspring” of “life's longing for itself.” Life pulls us, and rarely do we resist.

Infants are fragile, yes, but I wonder if we humans are not stronger in these first few moments than we are in the entirety of our lives. We've already made the most arduous of pilgrimages after nine whole months of cozy comfy nurturance in a warm bath. Then suddenly the “bathtub” is too small. Time to get out. We squirm and struggle—never mind what this does to our maternal bathtub. We keep squirming and struggling until we push and somebody else—though they're not yet an “else”—is pushing too. And then, all life breaks loose. We've done it. We've made the pilgrimage through the straits that lead into the world as we know it and life as we know it. And the attention, oh the attention we command!

Here she is; here he is, just one tiny child. So you can imagine, you can just imagine, that with the legendary tales surrounding the birth of the baby Jesus—accounts of shepherds in the field and wise men bearing gifts from the East and angels appearing in the heavens singing a song of peace—that something extraordinary was afoot. Here was the hoped for Messiah, the long anticipated redeemer of the Jewish people who would save them, not from their wrongdoings, but from their oppressors. Recall that this baby was born in an occupied land. His birthplace was where it was because his parents had to travel so far from their home to pay taxes. We don't commonly link Christmas with tax time, but the realities of that first Christmas were very much about paying tribute to the occupying powers of the day. The consequences for not doing so were unthinkable.

“The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight,” sounds that song of the little town of Bethlehem. Hopes, yes; and also fears. For the story of Jesus' birth was soon to turn into a flight from Bethlehem into Egypt to avoid the foretold wrath of a tyrant named Herod, who was bent on finding the baby said to be the “King of the Jews” and to kill this threat to his throne. “How dare a tiny child threaten my power,” Herod might have said to himself. Christmas was not all love and light. It was also fear and flight.

Nonetheless, the truth that lies at the heart of legend invites us to ponder the power of a child who would threaten the powers that be, a child who would grow up to preach the revolutionary message of love—doing to others as we would have others doing to us. What an audacious message! What a gospel of bravado! Is it not simply another way of proclaiming: “Peace on earth, good will to all?” And yet another way of suggesting that all life is connected? The message wasn’t and isn’t “Peace on earth, good will to some!”

Whether we as Unitarian Universalists hold to the message of hope that lay at the heart of the birth of this baby or whether we ascribe to the belief that we’re all children of God or whether we claim that the human spirit is the sole and sufficient force for love in the world, it doesn’t matter when we also bend over a crib and ponder the promise of a new life. “Love beyond belief,” my friend Thandeka calls it. Might we also hold to adoration beyond reason?

“Original Mystery,” my friend Phoebe Hoss named it, as she bent not so many years ago over the little miracle, who was her granddaughter. Consider the newborns you have beheld, and consider the baby Jesus, as I offer you Phoebe’s words, gently adapted:

You, you dear few
 solid pounds of bone,
 muscle, luscious
 rose-petal – [burnished brown, ebony gorgeous] flesh; you
 with your thrusting,
 quivering, questing arms
 and legs...

Somewhere
 in you some pristine
 core, some invisible
 sponge, is soaking
 up smiles, frowns, bits
 and pieces of ourselves—
 fragments we’ve carefully
 ordered over the years, the
 bright we know, the shadows
 we don’t—and ordering them
 anew, ordering them as
 what your eyes
 will see, your ears hear,
 your tongue speak;
 ordering them, finally,
 as uniquely you.

One tiny child is how each of us began.

“One tiny Child can change the world;
 one shining light can show the way.”

That child still reaches out inside us, yearning to be who we most fully are. Each of us grows into the heart of ourselves, though not by ourselves. We are swaddled, nurtured, and sustained in community. On this night of birth and light, song and silence, may we reach again for who we are at heart and who we can be, moving ever more closely toward community beloved.

May the Spirit of Christmas come alive for each of you.

So may it be and Amen.

Sources:

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Phoebe Hoss, "Original Mystery."

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