

“A Wondrous Gift”

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What is the most wondrous gift you have ever received? On this silent night, holy night, close your eyes. Let your mind float. Let the memories of your heart open slowly, gently. Let the sounds of Christmases past return as they will—and the sights and smells and joys and sadness of what lay under your tree of life.

Perhaps it was a toy train that you never ever expected would appear. Perhaps it was a Raggedy Ann or Andy, for those of you who remember those floppy huggable dolls with the inscription over their heart-space that read: “I love you.” Perhaps it was a set of Legos for which your eyes had grown wide as you stood in front of that toy store, hands clasped with a long ago someone who noticed. Perhaps it was a phone call from a friend with whom you had lost touch. Perhaps it was a reunion with a Mom or a Dad from whom you had been estranged. Perhaps it was the safe return of a brother or sister, back from a perilous deployment. Perhaps it was the warm hand of a stranger sitting next to you in church, a stranger who sensed your sadness and reached out. Perhaps it was the birth of a child, maybe a child you never thought you would see because you were labeled high risk for pregnancy in the first place. Perhaps it was an infant emerging from a gigantic aircraft that had at long last landed with a raft of babies far from their place of birth, and the softness of that child as the stewardess handed her to you saying, “Take her home. She’s yours.” Perhaps it was an epiphany in a roadside diner, where a scrawny waitress and a scruffy guy at a counter had comforted a wailing child; and a partner, a spouse, a friend had whispered to you, “He’d come here.”

Open your eyes. It is Christmas Eve. We bask in the glow of candles. We raise our voice to the strains of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” We hear again an ancient story of the birth of a babe whose life would unfold in ways quite other than any parent would possibly want for their child. The blaring mall sounds of “Santa Baby” move into the calmer cadences of “O Little Town of Bethlehem.”

The baby Jesus as we know him, or are meeting him for the first time, need not be a reminder of a singular story spread by ardent followers that led in part to harsh certainties over who he was and why he was. The baby Jesus just may be a reminder, as the story told by Kayla is a reminder, that love arrives in places unexpected. It’s not a simple story. A young couple travels far from home to fulfill their tax obligation to an occupying power. A legend, heralded by an angelic host and a mysterious star calling shepherds and sages to the back lot of an inn in a little town of Bethlehem, blossoms in the birthing space of a barn. Love is born in a land not far from that part of the world where in our own day brutality stirs, families flee for their lives, and a jarring number in this part of the world are seduced by proclamations designed to silence the better angels of our nature. The hopes and fears of all our years tug at each other.

Shall we hold hope or nurture fear? Shall we feed those impulses to disparage those with whom we find ourselves in company at a roadside diner?

Lest we lean into the temptation to lift all who are poor and downtrodden into a beatific scene with a silver lining, might we note that the legendary birth in common surroundings was a sign that the child whose birth we mark includes the possibility of identifying *not* with the rich and powerful, not with the high decibel voices disparaging what it might mean to “be born in a barn,” but with all among us who know poverty, illness, violence, depression, anxiety, and despair.

How are we called to be? What are we called to do? What if the angels of Christmas appear in ragamuffin garb? What if the angels of Christmas cry because they’re hungry or frightened? What if the angels of Christmas possess the soul-sense to find comfort in the arms of strangers with no need to score points on a social ladder, with no need to bolster their sense of self through seasonal charity, with no need to raise their political or social rank by opening a mere crack of their hearts? What if the smallest angels of Christmas find comfort in the arms of elder angels with no self-consciousness of “doing good?”

A baby’s crying his head off. What to do? You pick him up. You bounce her around ever so gently. You sing a song, however out of key—surely not a stanza from Handel. You render respite to tired parents. And you go further. You go further, because you can; we can.

Whatever our own circumstance, we can discover on this Christmas Eve the grace of solidarity with any who know oppression. We can uncover a ready capacity to hold hope as we hold a baby. We can mobilize sacred impatience with a human reluctance to open the doors of inns, to tear down walls, to stand up to oppression wherever it occurs, oppression that is rife in our time, with the transforming power of love. Love calls us to proclaim: “I am the Mommy great with child, a stranger in a strange land.” “I am the Daddy knocking on a door, hopeful.” “I am a baby ready to be born.” “I am a shepherd, ready to be distracted.” “I am an angel longing to sing the good news of love born again and again.” “I am Rita with outstretched arms.” “I am a slightly unkempt guy with a baseball cap and a coffee pot asking if you’d like a refill.”

“I am the other daughter in the Milford family; my sister died in a car accident this summer; and I’m wondering if I matter also.” Remember, you drove by my house. “I am Layla Barakat, who lost my job last week; what can I hope for given the way so many now feel about Muslims in this country?” You drove by my house too, at least my house for a while. “I am the son of the Baileys; every night I hear Mom and Dad shouting at each other downstairs. Joy to the World? I don’t think so!” I wonder if you heard the shouting as you drove by my house. “I am Fidel Hernandez; I miss my son so much I can’t stand it. We could no longer afford his medication!” You drove by my house, wondering maybe that there were no lights in the window this year.

And I am a Mom, a partner, a Dad, a friend, with my own hardened notions of how Christmas should really be celebrated until...until...

It is Christmas Eve.

The star returns. Angels sing. Shepherds set forth. A child is born.

It is Christmas Eve.

A time of birth, a time of promise, a time of timelessness.

It is Christmas Eve

We gather in the glow of candles, the sound of carols, the truth of legend and story.

It is Christmas Eve.

A time for hurting hearts to know what is possible,
a time to leave estrangement at the altar of truth telling and peace making.

It is Christmas Eve.

Whether angels sing in the sky or in our hearts,
Whether a newborn babe was the savior of the world or love incarnate.
Whether you are hurting or hoping, beside yourself or at peace with yourself.

A wondrous gift is given!

So may it be and Amen.

Sources:

Jan Carlsson-Bull, "It is Christmas Eve."

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," Words: Latin 9th c., trans. Composite based on John Mason Neale, 1818-1866, in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston, 1993, 225.

"O Little Town of Bethlehem," Words: Phillips Brooks (835-1893), in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston, 1993, 246.

Harriett Richie, "He'd Come Here," *The Christian Century*, December 13, 1995.