

Why Believe?

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“Christmas is taken very seriously in this household,” says the poet Carol Ann Duffy. “I believe in Father Christmas, and there's no way I'd do anything to undermine that belief.”

Last Sunday I spoke about some strategies for embracing--or at least coping--with the fact that Christmas comes each year, welcome or not. But I didn't say anything about beliefs. Where *does* belief come into the season, especially but not only for religious liberals?

Are we to believe, beyond all meteorological, physical and temporal possibility, that Santa and his reindeer circumnavigate the globe in one night, depositing toys for children at every house?

Are we to believe, beyond all biological and astronomical possibility, beyond all historical evidence, that a virgin gave birth to an infant king that night, that angels heralded the event, that wise men showed up from the east, guided by a star?

And if we don't believe, then do we perpetuate lies by participating in the telling and retelling of Christmas stories--both secular and sacred?

Do we betray our genuine theological convictions each time we shout Merry Christmas or sing *Silent Night* or hang stockings by the mantle? Worse even than Christmas and Easter Christians, are we fifty weeks a year Unitarian Universalists who abandon our reasoned faith once or twice a year like clockwork?

I've been here at Nora Church through two complete Christmas seasons now, and am into my third with you. We had a full house last year on Christmas Eve and I've insisted that we have church this year on Christmas morning, so you might guess my answers to these questions. You might even suspect that I set them up just to knock them down--if you were that cynical.

But, while my answer might be a foregone conclusion, I promise you my questions are asked in earnest. In my own theological evolution--from Unitarian Universalist through Unitarian Universalism to Unitarian Universalist--I've struggled with Christmas myself

and reached different answers at different times. This sermon is not an academic exercise but a spiritual discipline.

I could argue that belief is the wrong question to ask. As a non-creedal church a uniform, prescribed set of beliefs is not central to our faith. Our beliefs about any given theological issue range far and wide. We gather ourselves not around beliefs but around a shared theological history or around an approach to the religious life. So what we believe about Christmas might be declared irrelevant. But that skirts the true issue. The questions still remain, why do we Unitarian Universalists celebrate at this time of the year and what exactly do we celebrate? And so, rather than brushing aside the question of belief, I suggest we are not guilty of abandoning our beliefs during this festive season. In fact, our beliefs are both why we celebrate and what we celebrate.

Early on our theological forebears firmly embraced the position that Jesus was fully man. Period. And we haven't looked back. Some of us, when asked the Jesus question, answer that Unitarian Universalists consider him a great man, a teacher, a prophet among many. Others of us answer that Jesus was no more and no less the son of God than any one of us is the child of God. Whatever our individual approach to the Jesus/God question, we're pretty well united around the core assertion that Jesus was something other than God.

With that foundational understanding, our belief in and about Christmas shifts away the birth of the Messiah--even most mainstream Christians acknowledge that December 25 is very likely not the anniversary of Jesus' birthday--our belief in and about Christmas shifts away from the birth of the Messiah to a focus on the many and varied, ancient and timeless, holy and magical themes that have come to be woven into the stories of the season.

Do we believe that it was a holy night two millennia ago because a virgin gave birth to a infant would be a savior? No. We believe, in the words of Unitarian religious educator Sophia Lyon Fahs, that *each night a child is born is a holy night*. Her poem in its entirety:

For so the children come
And so they have been coming.
Always in the same way the come—
Born of the seed of man and woman.
No angels herald their beginnings
No prophets predict their future courses
No wise men see a star to show

where the babe is that will save humankind
Yet each night a child is born is a holy night.
Fathers and mothers—sitting beside their children’s cribs—
feel glory in the sight of a new life beginning.
They ask where and how will the new life end—will it never end
Each night a child is born is a holy night—a time for singing
A time for wondering, a time for worshipping.

Do we believe that angels sang? That a star guided wise men? That shepherds left their flocks to go to the manger? No. But we believe, in the words of Unitarian minister Ernest H. Sommerfield:

in songs which are born in the hearts and minds of people. We believe that some stories deserve to live forever because of what they tell us of ourselves. The angels singing an anthem of peace and goodwill deserve to be heard forever because they are the angels in human hearts. The humble shepherds, who had ears to hear and hearts to receive a message of joy, deserve to live to the end of time. The wise men, so faithfully seeking the way of a star deserve to go in search again each year as long as years shall be, for they are the story of our quest for ourselves.

Do we believe in Father Christmas, St. Nicholas, Pere Noel, Santa Claus? That he lives and breathes and drives a sleigh through the skies, delivering gifts to all the good little girls and boys? Maybe. Maybe not. But we believe, along with that long ago editor of the Sun, that *Santa exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist.* Are the stories we read, the songs we sing, the myths we re-tell, here in the darkest days of the year, stories and songs and myths quite without foundation in the scientific realm, are they lies handed down generation after generation? I suppose it could be argued that they are. But my heart says no. My heart and even the wiser part of my mind say no.

The story of hope born in human form. The story of love made manifest in brightly wrapped packages and freely distributed. The story of peace one day to cover the earth. They are not lies. They are dreams and perhaps truths deeper than fact.

Hope, if it is to be born at all, is and ever will be, born in human form. Each child born ushers into the world a spark of divinity that properly fanned may flame into the gift of knowledge, the gift of laughter, the gift of peace-making, the gift of dance, of music, of exploration, the gift of healing, of courage, of reconciliation, the gift of presence, of

patience, of speaking truth. These, the seeds of hope, are born into the world with every human birth.

Love is made manifest and freely distributed every day. In brightly wrapped packages and plates of rosettes and shoveled walks and knitted mittens and fresh cut flowers and bushels of apples. Santa Claus travels the earth not just one night a year in the cover of darkness but each day under a cloak of invisibility or in the disguise of mother, father, stranger, friend, teacher, to every child who deserves a gift and to those as well who may not seem to deserve one but who need one all the more for not deserving.

Peace on earth, good will to all seems a faint possibility this year. But then it has seemed a faint possibility year after year throughout history--during the crusades, during the world wars, during long forgotten and long remembered uncounted conflicts in uncounted countries on every continent. But the Arab spring happened this year as in years past cease fires have become truces and truces have become lasting peace. Mortal enemies have become allies. Not over night. Not without risk and courage and sacrifice. Not yet forever. But often enough that we know that the angels' song holds the possibility of being more than a dream.

Perhaps if we were very diligent, very deliberate, very mindful, we would celebrate each birth as if it were the birth of a Messiah. We would look upon each star as an invitation to a holy place. We would receive each token, each favor, each kind word and gesture and lesson as though it were gift-wrapped with love just for our delight in opening it. We would herald each peace overture as glad tidings of great joy, bound to change the world. But not one of us is that diligent, that deliberate, that mindful. And life happens. The crops go in and must be brought out. Taxes must be paid. Laundry piles up. Kids get sick. Committees beckon. Loved ones die. Jury duty calls us. Life is full, routine mixes with chaos, our diligence wanes, our mindfulness cracks. Then Christmas comes again. And because we **do** believe in hope, in love, in peace, we seize the season and pour into it all the celebration of our belief we fail to muster the rest of the year.

We sang *In the Lonely Midnight* just now because I'm the minister and it's my favorite Christmas hymn. We also sang it because it speaks to our Unitarian Universalist theology of Christmas. *If you truly seek peace, Christ for you is born.*

Strange words for Unitarian Universalists to sing, yet they are ours, written by turn of the last century Unitarian minister Theodore Chickering Williams, or almost. What he actually wrote was, "If ye truly seek him, Christ **your king** is born," which was changed to "If ye truly seek him, Christ **for you** is born," in our 1964 hymnal, and finally to "If ye truly seek **peace**, Christ for you is born," in this latest hymnal. (The subtle changes in

language, and subsequently meaning, in that one line, reflect the shifts in our theology over time.)

In his lyrics, Reverend Williams acknowledged that the time of the Nativity lies in the distant past. The manger cradle is empty, the angels silent. Yet he promises that we need only seek love, and Christ for us too will be born in our time and place. That promise is as true on June 2 and March 31 as it is on December 25. But December 25, this whole Advent/Christmas Season really, is the time we set aside as a reminder of the promise, as a refresher course in seeing miracles, and a marathon training exercise in imagining possibilities in the midst of the quite different reality of life.

We're half way through Advent, round the bend toward Christmas. In my life, and perhaps yours, these first two weeks have flown by. I've purchased my gifts and wrapped most of them. I've done some holiday baking. And I decorated my house. But yesterday I also dismantled my Advent wreath. Two Sundays had gone by and I hadn't lit the candles. Rather than playing catch up I admitted defeat and returned the unburned candles to the drawer for use another year. In all my busyness I've neglected the true work of the season--seeking peace, listening for angels' song, following stars, putting my heart's desires in the form of a letter to Santa, preparing a room. The trimmings are all there. It looks as though I believe. But in these coming fourteen days, I will strive to turn inward, to find the source of my belief and tend it gently into flame. That when the trumpets of Christmas morning break through the silent night of Christmas Eve, my soul will rejoice at the birth yet again of all I do believe. And so may it be for each of you. Amen.