

In the Flesh

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
Christmas Eve 2014

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Reading “Notes from the Delivery Room” by Linda Pastan

Strapped down,
victim in an old comic book,
I have been here before,
this place where pain winces
off the walls
like too bright light.
Bear down a doctor says,
foreman to sweating labourer,
but this work, this forcing
of one life from another
is something that I signed for
at a moment when I would have signed anything.
Babies should grow in fields;
common as beets or turnips
they should be picked and held
root end up, soil spilling
from between their toes—
and how much easier it would be later,
returning them to earth.
Bear up ... bear down ... the audience
grows restive, and I'm a new magician
who can't produce the rabbit
from my swollen hat.
She's crowning, someone says,
but there is no one royal here,
just me, quite barefoot,
greeting my barefoot child.

Reading: “The Queens Came Late”

by Norma Farber, from *When It Snowed That Night*

The Queens came late, but the Queens were there
With gifts in their hands and crowns in their hair
They'd come, these three, like the kings, from far,
Following, yes, that guiding star.

They'd left their ladles, linens, looms,
Their children playing in nursery rooms,
And told their sitters: “Take charge! For this
Is a marvelous sight we must not miss.”!

The Queens came late, but not too late
To see the animals small and great
Feathered and furred, domestic and wild
Gathered to gaze at a mother and child.

And rather than frankincense and myrrh
And gold for the babe, they brought for her
Who held him, a homespun gown of blue,
And chicken soup—with noodles, too—

And a lingering, lasting cradle-song.
The Queens came late and stayed not long,
For their thoughts already were straining far—
Past manger and mother and guiding star
And child a-glow as a morning sun—
Toward home and children and chores undone.

Homily: “In the Flesh”

It is arguably the single most intimate act that there is.

The moment when a child emerges from the womb,
when “one life is forced from another.”

The moment when children leave behind
the all-encompassing world of their mothers’ bodies
and enter the bright light of day—
or at least the relatively brilliant lights of the delivery room.

With a swift swat on the bum to encourage their first deep breath,
newborns let out a scream
to announce their arrival in this strange new world.

Rarely is the journey, for mother or child, described as easy.

It’s for good reason that we sometimes we joke in our culture
about women in labour who, in the heat of the moment,
are overcome with a deep desire to slap the father of their child.

Anyone who’s been through it, or even witnessed it,
would be hard pressed to judge any woman at such a moment.

Childbirth is, after all, an ordeal, from beginning to end.

A dear friend of mine—who I should point out is a woman—
says the female reproductive system
is the most compelling argument she knows
against the notion that our universe is the result of “Intelligent Design.”

She doesn’t buy the word “intelligent” or the word “design.”

For her, any such an intelligent designer has a lot of explaining to do. . .

But, millions of years in the making, this complicated system

for bringing life into this world is the best and only one we've got.

Which means that all children enter this world
with a great debt of gratitude to the women
who suffered and sacrificed to give them life—
the women who laboured out of a profound and primal love
so often beyond what mere words can begin to convey.

And, yet, for all the struggle, for all the joy,
for the great mystery and miracle of it all,
rarely is this life-giving moment thought particularly newsworthy,
beyond a relatively close circle of family and friends.

No angel choirs appear overhead to herald a newborn's arrival.

No shepherds arrive at hospital, with their sheep in tow,
to behold the glory of a typical human birth.

No kings (or queens) traverse from afar to pay homage,
led by some guiding star, trailing through the night sky.

Yet, as Sophia Lyon Fahs, the great Unitarian minister and educator,
reminded us decades ago, "each night a child is born is a holy night."

That simple statement is an expression of our core belief as Unitarians.

That every life is sacred.

That each human life is of worth and deserving of dignity.

That all people contains within themselves
the promise and potential to build up a better world.

To say that, "Each night a child is born is a holy night," then,
is a deep affirmation of our faith in the intrinsic value of all human life.

And it's an artful way to address the question put to us of Jesus' divinity,
by proclaiming that as remarkable a man as he was,
his life demonstrated not that he was more divine than the rest of us,
but showed how the spark of divinity found within us all
can be put to such powerful use in the service of life.

Yet, how prone we are to forget, to falter in this belief, at times.

To take the great gift of human life, including our very own,
less seriously than we should.

To fall short through our actions to reverence life,
to honour it, to uphold it, to treat it with tenderness and awe,
with compassion and care, with kindness and a deep, abiding respect.

And so the forgetful, faltering human heart desperately needs Christmas.

We need the possibility of transformation that it brings.
The offer it extends for a needed change of heart.

Our Unitarian forebear, Charles Dickens,
disillusioned by what he saw as the disconnect
between the teachings of orthodox Christianity
and the squalor in which the poor around him lived,
left us his meditation on this possibility of transformation
in his enduring parable, *A Christmas Carol*.

As Scrooge's nephew put it to his uncle:

I have always thought of Christmas time,
when it has come around. . . as a good time:
a kind, forgiving, charitable time;
the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year,
when men and women seem. . . to open their shut-up hearts freely,
and to think of people below them
as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave,
and not another race of creatures bound on another journey.

And though he's right that this season
holds the possibility of opening our shut-up hearts,
it has to be said, of course, that it doesn't always happen.

The promise of the season doesn't always take hold.
The magic moment often fails to appear.
Sometimes, the Christmas spirit is awfully hard to find.

But maybe that's because Christmas actually asks something of us.

As the poet W. H. Auden put it in his Christmas Oratorio:

“Once again, as in previous years, we have seen the actual Vision and failed To do more than entertain it as an agreeable Possibility. . .”

Sometimes what Christmas asks of us may feel like more than we can give.

But still we come. We crowd into the manger,
with all the shepherds and sheep, the magi and their camels,
the heavenly hosts with their big and buoyant wings.

We stand on tiptoe to get a glimpse, to peek at the promise,
that is reborn each year at Christmas,
lying there before all the world, just crying out
to be picked up, embraced, and realized in our world.

I think it is that cry that draws us back to Christmas, year after year.

Out of curiosity, or habit, or hope,
we come to bear witness to this story once again.

We are drawn to the enduring promise in that stable—
an abiding hope that things could actually be different,
that we could be different,
and that the possibility of that difference could, somehow, be born in us.

That’s what we find in that stable, when we really take it all in,
that we are the ones called to give birth to that hope,
to that promise of transformation.

It’s a point made some 700 years ago by the German mystic Meister Eckhart,
who said, “We are all meant to be mothers of God,
for God is always needing to be born.”

Now, that may be a tall order to hear, a bridge too far to cross for some,
especially for those of us who don’t even believe in God.

But I think the trick here is to not get hung up on language.

But to move to an understanding of God in broader terms:
as highest aspiration, as deepest grounding, as boldest love,
and as the creative force that enlivens and animates the world.

For those are all things desperately waiting to be born upon this earth.

They are the possibilities we celebrate when we affirm that, “each night a child is born is a holy night.”

For with any birth, we invest our hopes for the future in the life that each and every child will create through the years they are given.

And so it is worth recalling on this Christmas Eve that those same hopes were once—and remain—invested in us.

Hopes that we would use our lives to bring more love and compassion to this planet, that we would spend ourselves in service to the greater good.

That we would work with what we were given to better the world around us.

With Jesus, “incarnation” is the term that’s long been used to describe his birth. He was and is thought by many to be the very incarnation of God on earth.

And yet incarnation is a word of invitation, open to us all, when we embody within us those qualities we might most readily call divine.

When we ennoble our days on this earth by walking in the ways of peace, by reaching out with love and compassion to help heal the broken places in our world.

In a moment, the choir will sing one of my favourite poems, James Agee’s “Sure on this shining night.”

On the surface, it may not seem a particularly Christmas-y poem. But to me, it speaks of the hope we hold in our hearts this time of year.

Sure on this shining night
Of star made shadows round,
Kindness must watch for me
This side the ground.

The late year lies down the north.
All is healed, all is health.
High summer holds the earth.
Hearts all whole.
Sure on this shining night I weep for wonder wand'ring far
alone
Of shadows on the stars.

It is so true.

This side the ground, kindness much watch for us all,
if there is to be healing and health and wholeness on this planet.

On a night like this,
even a hint of that sacred hope as a real possibility,
is surely a cause to weep for wonder.

The words of this poem have been close to my heart for over two decades,
but I find them especially poignant this night,
mindful that this Christmas Eve marks the one hundredth anniversary
of the Christmas Truce, the unofficial ceasefire that broke out
between British and German troops in the trenches of World War I.

You likely know the story.

On Christmas Eve in 1914, soldiers from both sides
emerged from their redoubts to enter No Man's Land,
where they exchanged greetings and shared food and gifts from home.

They buried their dead and traded prisoners.
They sang carols and played football.

While this outbreak of peace occurred in only a few places on the Front
and lasted only to the end of Christmas Day,
it has remained as a story we've told across the century since it happened,
because it speaks in such a profound way to that sacred hope we carry.

After all, if the strains of "Silent Night" could be heard on the battlefield
in both English and German, is there not the possibility in our every day
to rise to the better angels of our nature

and bring healing and a lasting peace to this world?

Can we, at last, this year, learn, with kindness,
to watch for each other this side the ground?

Or will we, “Once again, as in previous years, [see] the actual Vision
and [fail] To do more than entertain it as an agreeable Possibility. . .”?

The answers to these Christmas questions are found,
as they always have been, in the hearts of humankind.

On this night so rich with promise and possibility,
may Christmas truly come to our lives and to our world.

May we throw open our foundering hearts to receive it,
to take it in, that we might embody love and peace
in the deepest parts of our own being.

And, then, in the fullness of time,
give birth ourselves to love, and healing, and peace on this earth.

May it be so, in our time. May it be so.

Amen.