

Christmas Eve Service
Rev. Linda Thomson
First Unitarian Congregation, Toronto
Sunday, December 24, 2025

A young woman who is, as they used to say, "in trouble".

Shepherds and Angels.

Mysterious Wise Men on a Journey.

A Tyrant and Taxes.

A baby placed, of all places, in a manger.

The Christmas story is a compelling one. Whether you believe the story or see it as a quaint remnant or have yet another relationship with it, the fact remains that the story is compelling and that for many hundreds of years many people have chosen to tell it, sing about it, reflect upon it and in some cases, debate about it.

There are other similar stories that have been told through the ages. Other people have stories of winter births and virgin mothers. The Hindus have Krishna, the Zoroastrians have Zarathustra, and the Romans had Mithras. The image of an extraordinary child, born under extraordinary circumstances is a powerful one, and one that we seem to respond to. Perhaps something in us wants to believe.

So tonight, in this place, we will turn our thoughts to the story in the Christian Scriptures. Regardless of your theology or your viewpoint it has something to tell us. It is as if we've received messages, sent across the years.

At the centre of it, is a baby. Now babies are wonderful things. They are amazing, we marvel at them, and at the potential they represent. But the story we tell about Baby Jesus is more than a story about the potential in each new life. Jesus, the story goes, is divine. And it seems to me that's a very powerful image. Because, as wonderful as babies are, they are also quite bothersome. They can't do anything for themselves. They are messy and they are smelly and there are days when it's hard work to muster the strength needed to care for them. And this one, the story goes, was divine. Perhaps they are all. Perhaps we all are. One of the messages that I take from the Nativity story is that we can find the divine in the most unlikely places. It's easy when things are going well and when life is beautiful to imagine that we are surrounded by evidence of wonder. But in the nativity story, things were not going well for Mary and Joseph. They were simple people and they were in a terrible predicament. Imagine how dark and desperate things seemed to them. They had no place to go, Mary was in labour and they were far away from the people who might normally have helped

them. Hardly the circumstances we would expect for the birth of a divine. But again, the story persists! We don't, it asserts, need to look in grand mansions or at those in high places to see that which is most worthy. Even during the hardest times, in the most difficult of circumstances, we can, if we listen just so, hear angel songs. On a cold winter night the star we see, might, if we let it, lead us to an encounter with a miracle.

Perhaps what is most significant about the baby in the story isn't the angels and wise men, and the unusual circumstances of the birth. But that the baby in the story was called, in his adulthood, to stand for compassion and justice. He elevated the marginalized—women, the poor, and outsiders—Jesus directly undermined the rigid social and power structures of his time.

What are the implications of this message? They are, I believe, far ranging. If we can imagine the divine in the face of a simple baby, perhaps we can see it too, in the face of the old woman we pass on the street or in someone who we find particularly annoying. Perhaps we can see the divine in the face of everyone and perhaps we can acknowledge it in ourselves. And what difference would that make? We might not worry so much about finding saviours and we might be reminded that it is our job to reach out to one another. Perhaps the story is a reminder that we can, at least some of the time, save one another. Sometimes we are called to be there and to help someone who has lost their way, or who is scared, or who is sick. At other times we need to acknowledge that we are in trouble, and that the people around us can offer what we need. There is much to challenge us in the Jesus story.

Unitarian Minister, Tom Schade reflected on our Unitarian Universalist practices at this time of year:

We will reflect on the meaning of a winter festival that reminds us that what we hope for will come from the most unexpected places, on sudden and seemingly miraculous reversals (like light in the darkest hour, kings worshipping in stables, and virgin births), and be incarnated in acts of generosity, kindness, hospitality and rootedness. We tell, he says, of a salvation that spreads from hand to hand like the candlelight in a darkened sanctuary on Christmas Eve."

And so may we, reminded again, of the story of a poor couple and their baby, know that salvation comes in the kindnesses we offer one another, in the work we do to make the world more joyful, and more just. May we find the courage to follow a star in search of an unlikely wonder. May we have faith to hear angel song on the wind of a winter's night and may we dare to dream of peace on earth.