

“Pilgrims Together” A Christmas Eve Homily

Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
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It is the season of light, with candles kindled across the holidays/holydays of Hanukkah, the Winter Solstice, Christmas, and on into Kwanzaa. But tonight is Christmas Eve, when we light our chalice and open our hearts to the legendary star shining in the sky over a lowly stable where the baby Jesus was born. The Christmas story invites us to suspend our disbelief about stars and angels and wise men and shepherds and all. Yet we need not suspend our disbelief, we need not plummet into the depths of doubt, that the birth of a baby, any baby, anywhere, at any time, is a miracle.

In seasoned wisdom and the joys and sorrows of motherhood, Rev. Sophia Lyon Fahs reminded us that “each night a child is born is a holy night.” She wrote, perhaps through personal reflection:

“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 this new life end?
Or will it ever end?”

How we yearn for a newborn babe to grow in love and wisdom and compassion and joy. Yet we have no inkling of how this little life will end, unless you are among those who have lost a newborn, bearing heartache imaginable only to you.

How that early 20th century writer, Khalil Gibran, unwittingly grounded Fahs’ words in his own poetic wisdom:

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of
Life’s longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you
yet they belong not to you.

... You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

Babies are gifts with no guarantees. Women and men become parents with no promises as to how it will all unfold. The little we know or read about the life of the baby Jesus and how his life unfolded is limited by hearsay. But what hearsay—four and more accounts of how he grew in wisdom and stature and preached and lived a life of love. Did it end well? It depends on your frame of reference.

On Christmas Eve, might we hold in our hearts the *gift* of this baby known as Jesus. What would he become? A prophet? Surely, he was among the many prophetic women and men challenging us to “confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love” or so one of the sources of our living tradition espouses. A rabbi? Surely, for he taught, tapping the means by which we all learn readily—stories. They’re often called parables. His close friends became known as disciples. Disciple means simply one who learns. The son of God? Many believe Jesus was/is Jesus the Christ, the One specially anointed by God. Yet if “every night a child is born is a holy night”, are not all of us children of God, children of Love? What we do with it is a path unknown at our birth.

A veritable star shines over each child born. And so we sing: “For each child that’s born a morning star rises and sings to the universe who we are.” The star of Bethlehem? Why not? The star of Meriden or Middletown or Boston or Bombay or Hanoi or Seoul or Paris? Why not? Light illumines us all.

On this silent night, holy night, I invite us to go back in time to a city of light—that is, Paris. Go back four centuries and five years, and consider this night across the centuries—Christmas Eve, 1513. Consider what I have mused thus far—the birth of a child, the journey of that child onto paths that father and mother could never predict and were wise not to try.

How to enter the sanctity of this night as hopeful wanderers—perhaps like the legendary shepherds, as people blessed to rest our gaze if even for a moment on a child heralded by an angelic host, visited by sages, surrounded by a mother with so much to ponder in her heart, watched by a father, who like any father was likely dumbfounded by it all. Ponder a child whose birth story and life story—told in countless versions across the centuries—found its way into a night 1500 years later, in a room in Paris inhabited by an architect of bridges. Bridges, how apt as a metaphor for the time that was and the time that is. Bridges we know join some specific “here” to some specific “there”. So too a bridge is a construct connecting us all, a material metaphor for the spiritual connection of all life.

Fra Giovanni Giocondo, born in 1445, was a gift and gifted. I wonder about his childhood, as I wonder about Jesus’ childhood, but Giocondo’s is easier to trace. He moved through life as a Dominican, then a Franciscan, monk, as an archeologist, as an antiquary, as a scholar and teacher of the Classics—altogether as a full blossom of the Renaissance. His intellect and imagination are responsible also for bridges spanning the River Seine, that river that winds its way through Paris. Specifically, Giocondo was the architect of the bridges at Pont Notre-Dame and the Petit Pont. He was an architect of words also, and an architect of friendship.

On Christmas, we speak commonly of family; we raise the significance of family to unattainable sanctity. But what about friendship? How, if you were you observing Christmas Eve alone, might you reach out to a friend, a friend whom you held in deep affection and high esteem? An email? Maybe. A phone call? Perhaps. A text? Please, no. Of course, none of these were options four centuries ago. Fra Giovanni Giocondo took pen to parchment and wrote a letter that has survived the centuries, a letter to his friend, Countess Allagia Aldobrandeschi.

I am your friend and my love for you goes deep.
There is nothing I can give you which you have not got,
but there is much, very much, that, while I cannot give it, you can take.

No heaven can come to us unless our hearts find rest in today.
Take heaven!

No peace lies in the future which is not hidden in this present ... instant.
Take peace!

The gloom of the world is but a shadow.
Behind it, yet within our reach is joy.
Take joy!

There is radiance and glory in the darkness could we but see –
and to see we have only to look.
I beseech you to look!

Life is so generous a giver, but we, judging its gifts by the covering,
cast them away as ugly, or heavy or hard.

Remove the covering and you will find beneath it a living splendor, woven of love, by
wisdom, with power.

Welcome it, grasp it, touch the angel's hand that brings it to you.

Everything we call a trial, a sorrow, or a duty, believe me,
that angel's hand is there, the gift is there,
and the wonder of an overshadowing presence.

Our joys, too, be not content with them as joys.
They, too, conceal diviner gifts.

Life is so full of meaning and purpose, so full of beauty –
beneath its covering - that you will find earth but cloaks your heaven.

Courage, then, to claim it, that is all.

But courage you have,
and the knowledge that we are all pilgrims together,
wending through unknown country, home.

And so, at this time, I greet you.
Not quite as the world sends greetings,
but with profound esteem
and with the prayer that for you now and forever,
the day breaks, and the shadows flee away.

“The day breaks, and the shadows flee away.” On this Christmas Eve, let’s consider the babe of Bethlehem. Let’s behold each child who’s born, for whom a morning star rises. Let’s pause in wonder that each night a child is born is a holy night, and each child born is a child of God, of Love, of Hope.

On this Christmas Eve, let’s realize that not everyone is with family; but hopefully, oh so hopefully, we all have a friend, at least one. And we can connect in the spirit of friendship. We can bridge our lives with another.

And on this this silent night, holy night, no matter what we believe or don’t believe, however we celebrate or otherwise, whatever joy we know or sadness we harbor, we are in the good company of pilgrims—in Giocondo’s words, “pilgrims together, wending through unknown country, home.”

May it be so.
Amen.