

I grew up in a Unitarian Universalist congregation in southern Rhode Island where the majority of the congregants were former Catholics. That meant that they were all expected to go to Christmas Eve mass with their families, so we had the strange and delightful tradition of having Christmas Eve eve service. The service itself was a bizarre mishmash of trying to talk about Christmas and be joyful while also being wary of Jesus and the whole Christianity thing, and my sister and I would spend the whole service trying not to giggle inappropriately.

One year, the whole Christmas story was told from the point of view of one of the farm animals, watching the birth of Jesus and the arrival of the shepherds and wise men from the comfort of their hay in the corner. I was maybe fourteen or fifteen and I remember wondering if we were veering too close to sacrilege and thinking “only the UUs would tell the Christmas story from the point of view of a farm animal and not think it’s weird.” Maybe I should’ve known I’d become a minister.

I don’t think we need to occupy the perspective of the cows and the donkeys to make room in the Christmas story for a diversity of experiences. I do think it’s important to let the story be complicated and magical and painful, like any birth story.

Because the holidays are often portrayed in a very one-note tune: everyone’s happy and loves everyone and everything is perfect and you’ll probably fall in love when you go home and save the family inn/Christmas tree farm. That story isn’t very helpful. It creates all this dissonance between expectations and real life and can make this time of year even more excruciating for people who are struggling for any number of reasons.

And the Christmas eve story, the biblical one that we read, it’s actually really messy. Which isn’t just a fun costuming choice by the storytellers, it’s the point of the story.

The word Emanuel means “God with us” so when we sing “O Come, O Come Emanuel” we’re asking the god of the heavens to meet us in the flesh and reality of being human. From a Christian theological perspective, Jesus, that babe born in the manger, wrapped in rags, he is god coming into the world to experience human

suffering in order to be with us in our human suffering. Liberation theologians call this accompaniment, this *being with* in the fullness of human pain. Nothing about that is glossy or sugar coated or filtered. The being present in the mess is the point. The intimacy of knowing and loving someone in their hardest moments is the point.

And when you look at this story, there is a whole lot of humanity.

Look at Mary - a young, unwed woman giving birth in a barn without any assistance. Maybe you remember that last year I preached about the concept of virginity and how the actual original meaning of the word was knowing your intrinsic worth. So Mary is a young woman, poor and discounted by society, struggling through labor who is still, incredibly, deeply grounded in her worth and her power.

There's Joseph, who was totally overwhelmed and wanted to bail until an angel came and scolded him, which was both effective and, I imagine, even more bewildering. And he's trying to find shelter for Mary who's about to go into labor and he has no idea what to do to ease her pain and his baby is about to be born and he really just hopes Mary and the baby don't die.

There's the innkeeper who seems kind of burnt out and overloaded, unable to muster any compassion or assistance, which suggests that he's lost touch with the world and forgotten his own humanity, or is so lost in his own pain that he can't see what's in front of him. A hardened heart is not an enviable thing.

What about the shepherds who are the first to read the signs and believe that the world is changing, making the journey even before the wisemen, hoping that maybe, just maybe, a new world is being born. All while trying to get a bunch of sheep to keep up and not get eaten by wild animals.

Or the wisemen, who get called in to the king's office for questioning and then secretly gather up their most precious gifts to bring to a babe who is supposed to be the messiah. When, keep in mind, the scriptures said that those who saw the face of

god would die instantly. So, this isn't a particularly chill situation. Will the baby be cute, or will it turn you to stone? Hard to know. Definitely bring the myrrh

And, all of this is happening under a tyrannical empire of the aforementioned, which is why they're all on the road in the first place. King Herod is forcing a census because he's heard the rumors, too, that a babe will be born who will capture the hearts of the masses and teach an ethic of love that will be the single greatest threat to the empire.

No one in this story is drinking eggnog in their white cable knit sweater. Everyone's outside and probably smells weird and is kind of freaked out and dehydrated and needs a snack, but is also overcome by hope and love and faith that a better world is possible. That feels more relatable to me, especially after all the chaos of the last few years.

And, amidst it all, the baby is born, amidst all that struggle and danger and oppression, the baby is safe and whole and sweet. And this is only the beginning of his story. That baby becomes a man who does threaten the empire, who still threatens empires, who teaches that the greatest commandment is to love god and love your neighbor as yourself, especially the outcasts. And in truth, if we're paying attention to the story, love of god and love of neighbor might really be the same thing.

We don't have to make light of the story to make sense of it. We don't even have to take it as truth to find truth in it. To be human is to know suffering and love and joy and messy hope. We are creatures wired for connection and if anything, this story makes room for us, however we come to this moment.

So maybe choose a buddy, a perspective that helps you know you're not alone. Maybe Mary can be your companion through the season, inviting into your own power amidst the birth pains of change. Or maybe it's Joseph or the innkeeper who are all kinds of bewildered, or the shepherds or the wisemen in their hopefulness. There's space in this story for whatever you're holding right now. A story about the sacred embodied in the human experience means that we are never never alone, that we are all inextricably connected and the task of living is to love fully.

I'll end with a reading from the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker who was first ordained as a United Methodist minister and later as a Unitarian Universalist Minister.

Your gifts—whatever you discover them to be—  
can be used to bless or curse the world.

The mind's power,  
the strength of the hands,  
the reaches of the heart,  
the gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting

Any of these can serve to feed the hungry,  
bind up wounds,  
welcome the stranger,  
praise what is sacred,  
do the work of justice  
or offer love.

Any of these can draw down the prison door,  
hoard bread,  
abandon the poor,  
obscure what is holy,  
comply with injustice  
or withhold love.

You must answer this question:  
What will you do with your gifts?  
Choose to bless the world.

The choice to bless the world is more than an act of will,  
a moving forward into the world  
with the intention to do good.

It is an act of recognition,  
a confession of surprise,  
a grateful acknowledgment  
that in the midst of a broken world  
unspeakable beauty, grace and mystery abide.

There is an embrace of kindness  
that encompasses all life, even yours.

And while there is injustice, anesthetization, or evil  
there moves a holy disturbance,  
a benevolent rage,  
a revolutionary love,  
protesting, urging, insisting  
that which is sacred will not be defiled.

Those who bless the world live their life  
as a gesture of thanks  
for this beauty  
and this rage.

The choice to bless the world can take you into solitude  
to search for the sources  
of power and grace;  
native wisdom, healing, and liberation.

More, the choice will draw you into community,  
the endeavor shared,  
the heritage passed on,  
the companionship of struggle,  
the importance of keeping faith,  
the life of ritual and praise,  
the comfort of human friendship,  
the company of earth  
the chorus of life welcoming you.

None of us alone can save the world.  
Together—that is another possibility, waiting.

Amen and blessed be.