

FILLING IN THE MANGER

A sermon preached to The Channing Memorial Church in Newport, R.I. on December 19, 2010 by the Reverend John H. Nichols

It was the weekend before Christmas. I was driving with my then four-year-old son, David, on a lonely stretch of interstate on our way from Chicago to Boston. It was dark and late and snow had been falling for about an hour. I was very tired. David had been asking every ten minutes when we were going to stop, and I knew I couldn't stay awake to drive much longer. So, I was immensely relieved when I saw the familiar words, "Holiday Inn."

But the Inn had no available rooms. I couldn't believe this was happening. At my request they called ahead on the interstate and told me it was unlikely I would find a room anywhere for at least one hundred miles. I doubted I could drive safely for thirty more miles, and sleeping in the car on that cold winter's night was just not an option.

I then directed my son to stretch out on a couch in their lobby, and I asked the clerk if I could make a bed for him there so that he could be safe, warm and dry for a few hours. The clerk went to talk to the manager, and when she reappeared, lo they had found us a room. It wasn't fancy. It wasn't a stable, but it was clean and warm.

I have often remembered what it felt like that night when we were a long way from home without a safe, secure place to lay our heads. I remember it every time I see the news footage of people who have been stranded at the airport by a holiday snowstorm. I remember it when I think of those who are homeless. Thinking back on this experience of being far away from anyone who cared to take us in, led me to recognize that the traditional Christmas story is, primarily, about all of us as travelers and our search for home and safety.

I remembered this particularly one year when I felt boxed in to the sort of a theological corner that UUs create for themselves at this time of the year. Many members of my congregations enjoyed Christmas, but they felt guilty about celebrating it, because they thought they weren't entitled to enjoy a Christian tradition. What could I say to them to make clear what has been clear to me all my life as a Unitarian Universalist that Christmas is about all of us? It is about our conviction that miracles of all kinds arise out of ordinary events which get us through all of the journeys we must make.

The stories in Matthew and Luke are not history of course. They are metaphorical. They represent, as Phillips Brooks once put it so well, "The hopes and fears of all our years." The stories are about us. They are about the lonely

voyage that each life is, and we recognize this so well that we have put ourselves into these stories and we call it Christmas.

Let us take a long look at the story that is reflected in the Gospel texts and then see how we have fit ourselves into the larger story that we tell about Christmas. Let us first approach the stable in Bethlehem, the one that has been depicted in paintings, poems and songs and, therefore has been etched into the back of our minds.

Snowdrifts and pine trees surround our stable. Our own Hymn 241 depicts Joseph and Mary trudging through the bleak, frozen midwinter landscape to find warmth and comfort in a snow-covered barn where they are sheltered from the wind by the trees of Northern New England. I don't think it is just New Englanders who, from the richness of their imaginations, picture that Galilean stable as located actually somewhere near Woodstock, Vermont.

We know that Jesus was born in sunny Bethlehem, but most people prefer to site this story in the midst of the bleakness, the coldness, and the winter that actually surrounds their own lives. They supplement the bare framework of the story with an image of warmth coming to a shivering people, the warmth of a stable filled with love.

This is because they recognize we all are a shivering people. The bleakness outside the stable represents our inner weather, not Bethlehem's weather. We are hoping to come in out of the cold. Did you ever wonder why stables that are placed on church lawns at Christmas time are almost life sized? Many people want to imagine themselves inside the stable to live again the promise of a new life, and the promise we make together to nurture that life.

Did you ever wonder, as well, what the big deal is about a "white Christmas?" Aside from the Bing Crosby song that is. Could it be that the pristine whiteness of a new fallen snow seems to promise a new start for all of us – just as the birth of a child seems to suggest that new births could happen in the rest of our lives? A new start is partly what Christmas means for many people.

According to the story, Jesus was placed in a manger. A manger was literally a feeding trough for animals. The story does not say that he was born in a manger, only that he was placed there. The story does not say that he was born in a barn or in a stable. The manger could well have been located in a cave.

In our minds eyes, however, we do not want to see the cold damp walls of a cave. We want to see a stable that was built by human hands and hewn with an adze or a saw from rough wood, and we want to see it reflected in the light of torches. We want to give this child some greater shelter and warmth than the actual Jesus may have enjoyed.

We want to surround the manger with friendly animals. There are probably a hundred carols and short stories, which have been written about the animals in the stable. However, the text does not say anything about there being animals there. Perhaps this is because the people for whom the story was first written were not as sentimental as we are about animals. As far as they were concerned the animals in a stable were just waiting to become food for the table. Our wanting to fill the stable with animals reflects our wish to see our own domestic animals as also creatures of God.

The story tells us there was no place for Joseph and Mary in the inn. Thus, in every pageant there is a child playing the innkeeper and saying “No room.” Then the innkeeper relents and brusquely offers Mary and Joseph a corner of his stable, because he believes the stable is a proper place for such lower class trash, as they seem to be.

The innkeeper is a great sermonic device, but there is no actual innkeeper in the text. We created the innkeeper, also, because we too often are the innkeepers of our own lives. We push new people and new experiences away. We fold our arms over our chests and say, “No room!” We need this story to remind ourselves who the innkeeper really is.

As we remember it, and as we want to depict it on church greens and town commons, three kings from the east arrive in time to find the shepherds kneeling before the manger, awestruck at the birth of this child. Actually this is a merger of two stories. Matthew tells us about the three kings who made the long journey, following a star to Bethlehem where they found that it shone over the house where Mary and Joseph lived. So the kings dropped in to Joseph’s house to see the baby, have some eggnog and leave some baby shower presents. But there was no inn, no crowds, no shepherds and no manger in Matthew’s story.

Luke tells us the story about the manger and the shepherds, but there are no magi in Luke’s story. It seems clear that Matthew did not want shepherds in his story, and Luke did not want kings, but we have brought the stories together. We want both Joseph and Mary’s journey and the Magi’s journey in the same story.

Why do we want both of these journeys in the story we tell in our heads? For one thing, making a journey through the cold and darkness to a place of warmth and love is something many people traditionally do at this time of the year. At this congregation’s Christmas Eve services – we will play host to a large number of travelers who will reach the end of their journey here at our inn.

More importantly though, we understand that life is a journey. Sometimes it is a dark and uncertain journey. We travel in search of a goal that is alternatively mysterious, elusive and frightening. Along our journey there have been places filled with busy people going about their official business with no

particular concern for us. There have been inns where we would have liked to stop and rest, but there was no room there for us. Our future travels contain the same possibilities and the same risks.

We travel with hope, and we bring gifts. We hope to be at ease with the shepherds and kings we may meet in life, and we hope that wherever our future resting places may be found, we will be not afraid when we get there. In other words, we craft elements of the Christmas story to speak to our own situations – our own longings for assurances that our journeys will be fruitful and that our lives will be illuminated by a faith we have found along the way. And the very existence of this story in all of its warmth suggests that our faith is justified.

Let's just hear that story one more time remembering that it is our story also. It begins with the song of Mary in which she expresses her pleasure that God should give the gift of life to a peasant woman. It is a rare moment, because in Mary's world most people believe that God does not traffic with the poor or with women. Already God is doing something to break up the old rules of might and power making right.

Then bureaucracy intervenes. The entire Roman world shall go to the places of their birth to be registered. This was the government's way of saying, "We want to keep tabs on you just in case we have not made your lives miserable enough." Mary and Joseph travel at the height of her pregnancy, and upon reaching their destination, they find there are more important people taking up the room in which they might have birthed their child.

So they find a crude alternative hiding place, and this is fitting because, after all, as far as the town of Bethlehem is concerned, he will be just another poor Galilean brat. This is a cynical world – not unlike our own – in which no one expects anything really hopeful to happen.

In the fields outside of town there are shepherds, who have no status at all because they take care of other creatures. It is to these people that an angel appears and speaks the words that characterize the soul of the Judaic and Christian traditions, "Be not afraid." Apparently the angel believes that these peasants, who actually care for other creatures, are the only ones who can really receive and understand this message, "Be not afraid. You are not left alone."

Matthew tells us that Herod trembles when he hears that something about this newly born child is more important than he is. Therefore the three kings are told in a dream that if they find the child they must keep it to themselves. Matthew, who sees this story through the eyes of kings, knows that a power, which does not belong to the king, must be talked about very discretely or the king will be angry.

On the other hand, Luke – who sees this story through the eyes of shepherds – people who have no orientation to or interest in power – instructs his

shepherds to go out and tell the whole world. Luke believes that ultimately the Holy is stronger and more powerful than the apprehensions of dictators.

We don't know precisely where Luke and Matthew got their stories. They really aren't replicated anywhere else in the Hebrew tradition. But it is not difficult to see the inspirational source for what they wrote. That source is the central moral and spiritual message of the Jewish and Christian worlds. It is also what Unitarian Universalists inherit from that tradition.

Here is that message. Life is a precious gift. Along with the gift comes a mysterious strength. It is the strength of the Holy that dwells among us, and – if we are open to it – that strength enables us to use the gift of life well. Thanksgiving, care, compassion and justice are its goals. Cynicism, manipulation, greed and corruption will never be the last words. In fact, the next source of hopefulness or inspiration may very well be near to us. It may even come to us in the form of a person or an influence that will surprise us and challenge us before it comforts us.

Can we make that journey to Bethlehem again this year trusting in life's capacity to provide us with all that we really need? Can we find the openness expressed in the magi's presentation to a child? Can we find the faith expressed in the words from Luke's story, "Be not afraid"?

In the days to come may you find the inn you seek, the company you cherish, the angels you need to hear and the message that love is waiting for you somewhere. Do not be afraid.