

Thoreau Woods UU Church – Worship Service
The First Christmas
December 5, 2010

Prelude

Chalice Lighting

We light this candle

For the light of truth and reason

For the warmth of love and friendship

For the flame of strength and action

And for the vision of tolerance and justice.

Opening Hymn

Please join me standing as you are able in our opening hymn No. 256 “Winter Night”

Announcements

John Pepper

Visitors, Welcome! We are happy to have you here.

(Pause)

If you would like, please sign our guest book on the table in the entryway and give your address or email if you want to receive our newsletter. If you would like to become a member, please pick up one of our application forms also located on the table and put it in the offering plate or look it over and turn it in when you feel ready.

Next week our guest speaker will be Nelson Thompson and his talk is titled “The Origin of Charles Darwin’s Theory.” Prior to that or even after it I personally recommend a relatively new movie from 2009 about the life of Darwin titled “Creation.” I rented it just last month and it was excellent.

This month we are encouraging everyone to participate in the UUSC’s Guest at Your Table program. Last year we had over 25% of our congregation become members of the UUSC. This year we would like for at least 50% of our congregation to become members. We will be collecting boxes and other contributions on January 2nd and 9th.

This week will be pot luck Sunday so I hope you will stay, eat, and then help decorate the sanctuary. You will also be voting on the chair selection.

Are there any other announcements from the floor?

Opening Words

John Pepper

Welcome to a day of hope and promise,

To a place of peace and comfort,

To a journey toward truth and justice,

And to a community of love and courage that will help us along the way.

Rejoice Together, 7, Anita Farber-Robertson

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Hymn

John Pepper

Before we start the next hymn I want to remind you exactly what the word “Emmanuel” means and where it came from. It means “God is with us” and its origin comes from Isaiah 7:14. At that time in Jewish history, the people were in a desperate situation. It seemed all was lost and there was little or no hope. Isaiah was trying to reassure the king and he provided this prophesy by pointing to a young woman, “before this young woman who is with child gives birth, the two kings who do you evil will be no more. The child’s name is Emmanuel – ‘God is with Us’.”

Isaiah was simply trying to say, “this too shall pass” and it will pass in a relatively short time and above all, have faith. God is with us.”

Please join me standing as you are able singing hymn No. 225 “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.”

Joys and Concerns

John Pepper

As an expression of our connectedness and community, you are invited to come forward and share a joy, sorrow or concern as you light a candle. Or you may choose to light a candle without comment. Visitors, you are also encouraged to participate.

Please form a line to my left.

(Pause)

I will light one final candle for all those joys and concerns left unsaid.

Offertory Statement

Anne True

Offertory Music

Natasha Satterfield

Story for All Ages – *Cajun Night Before Christmas*

Reading

My first reading is from the *The First Christmas* by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan.

Of greatest importance for our purposes, modernity has pervasively affected how modern people think. It produced what has been called the “modern mind,” a mind-set that shapes all of our thinking. The Enlightenment generated an understanding of truth and reality very different from that in the premodern world. In philosophical terms, it generated a new *epistemology* which focuses on “How do we know?” and “What is true?”

To begin with, the Enlightenment led many people to think that truth and factuality are the same. Its mind-set was (and is) concerned with the distinction between truth and superstition, truth and fable, truth and traditional authority, truth and belief. The primary basis for the distinction is the modern scientific way of knowing, with its emphasis on experimentation and verification.

In the minds of many people, this has led to the notion that truth is what can be verified – and what can be verified, of course, are “facts.”

The contemporary scholar of religion Huston Smith calls this notion “fact fundamentalism,” even as he rejects it. According to this way of thinking, if something isn’t factual, it isn’t true.

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Fact fundamentalism has impacted Christians as well as those who are skeptical of religion in general and Christianity in particular. Many in both groups agree that a statement or story is true only if it is factual. Among American Christians, this is a major reason why at least half affirm a literal-factual understanding of the Genesis stories of creation and of the Bible as a whole, including the birth stories. In their minds, if these stories aren't factual, then they are not true, and the bible itself is not true. Christian biblical literalism is about biblical factuality, and it is rooted in "fact fundamentalism." As such, it is not ancient, but a product of the recent past.

If you too believe that facts are something that can be verified, how would you verify your love for your spouse or your child or your parents? Some things that are without a doubt true, simply are not verifiable.

Reading

My last reading was written by Sophia Lyon Fahs. From 1937, when she was 61, until her retirement in 1951, Fahs helped lead a Unitarian religious education revival. "The New Beacon Series," which she edited and for which she wrote or co-authored more than a dozen books, addressed children directly using vivid stories from around the world. The series' child-centered approach appealed to many young "baby boom" parents, and the curriculum's popularity in the fellowships that sprang up across the continent was one leading factor in Unitarianism's post-war resurgence.

For so the children come and so they have been coming.

Always in the same way they come – born of the seed of man and woman.

No angels herald their beginnings; no prophets predict their future course.

No magi see a star to show where to find the babe that will save humankind.

Yet each night a child is born is a holy night.

Parents, sitting beside their children's cribs, feel glory in the sight of a new life beginning.

Each night a child is born is a holy night, a time for singing, a time for wondering, a time for worshipping.

Prayer

John Pepper

Please join me now in a time of quiet meditation. Close your eyes, look out the window, center yourself in whatever way feels right for you. (Pause) Now I'll ask you to consider the following for a short time. (*Rejoice Together*, 81, Richard S. Gilbert)

Gifts that matter have no weight. They are without substance. Gifts that matter most are given to us by the Hand of Life in grace:

moonlight on fresh-fallen snow,

frost delicately etched on a window pane,

crackling fireside, bright because of who is there,

aromas of cooked food betokening a family feast,

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reunion of those long separated,
memories of Christmas past, gone but not forgotten,
anticipations of the new year yet to be,
gift-givers whom we love,
the gift of life itself.

Gifts that matter have no weight. (Pause) Amen!

Sermon – *The First Christmas*

How many of you love cake? Do you love the cake or the icing? Do you eat all the icing and then throw away the cake? When you were a kid you might have done just that, but now as an adult, probably not.

How about the beautiful wrapping on a present? Do you keep it just as it is so as not to disturb the wrapping paper or do you tear it off to get at the present inside the wrapping?

Now how about a good book? How many of you would rip off the binders and throw away the pages. We know the good part is on the inside, the binders, no matter how pretty or colorful, are there just to protect the pages or possibly to entice the reader to read the book.

The icing on a cake, the wrapping on a present, and the binders of a book all have a purpose, but it's what's inside that counts. And by the way, cake's without icing, and presents without wrapping are boring. And books without covers don't last long. The binders afford some protection to the contents between the binders.

Christmas and the First Christmas stories are a lot like these analogies. Christmas is the icing on the cake. It has a purpose but it's what's on the inside that counts.

And Christmas and Easter are the covers on a book we could call Jesus. Christmas and Easter are rather elaborate covers that entice the buyer to read what's inside, but once again the important part of the story is what's inside, not the covers themselves.

My challenge to you is in asking you to acknowledge Christmas for what it is. Enjoy it like you would the frosting on a cake or the wrapping on a present, but remember, Christmas is only a reminder of something else, something more nutritious and fulfilling, something we all may need reminding of on a regular basis contained inside the wrapping.

I like my book analogy best. I like to think of Christmas as the front cover of the book. The actual book that generated this sermon however, was *The First Christmas*, and it explains how and why the front covers of the books about Jesus came about. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke both use Christmas stories, very different Christmas stories, as the covers to their version of the book of Jesus. In fact, Matthew and Luke are the only narratives we have that tell the birth stories of Jesus.

But before we tackle what they say and why they might say it, I want to attempt to isolate these particular sacred scriptures in time by telling you a little about what transpired before they were written. And then I will remind you of some of the critical assertions and assumptions current Christianity takes for granted and that might cloud our reading of those sacred scriptures, but did not exist when either of these books were written.

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All of this will hopefully set the stage, at least to some degree, so that you can better appreciate some potential motives of the authors of Matthew and Luke and their different First Christmas narratives.

Pre-Matthew and Pre-Mark are easy. There are no birth stories prior to Matthew and Luke. The oldest writings are those of the Apostle Paul and he doesn't even mention Jesus' birth. Likewise, the Gospel of Mark was written before either Matthew or Luke and it doesn't have a birth story either.

In essence, using my book analogy, Mark has no cover on his book of Jesus, and with regards to his back cover, the resurrection, Mark has an Easter story but the original version was so brief, later editors deemed it insufficient and they added to its original conclusion to make it more substantial.

Mark was written primarily for a Jewish audience and some years before the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE. In fact, it was destroyed by a future emperor of Rome himself, Titus.

But the main fact you need to remember about the times prior to Jesus' life and the much later writing of both Matthew and Luke, is that the Jewish people for the past 500 years had been oppressed and under the power and control of one empire after another. Their oppressors included the Babylonian, Medean, Persian, Macedonian, and lastly, the Roman Empires.

In fact, even when they governed themselves back in the times of King David and his successors, only David was seen somewhat as a just King. Most of his successors were no better than the later occupying empires. The Jewish people were sick and tired of the oppression from without and from within and they were ready for a new way of life, a new paradigm if you will, they were ready for real peace and real justice.

With regard to five hundred plus years of brutal oppression, we simply can't imagine what that must have been like for their collective consciousness.

Shifting focus now and looking back from our current perspective, what clouds our vision, what gets in the way? To be blunt, a lot of bad, and in my mind, utterly useless theology gets in the way.

There was no New Testament collection of sacred scriptures. And the books of the future bible had not yet been domesticated for political purposes as they were in the 4th century Rome when Christianity became the State Religion. Domestication and reinterpretation were necessary to tone down the all too plentiful criticism of empires and kings. This domestication shifted the emphasis from the here and now to some future world after this one and that's what is still emphasized in much of current Christianity.

In addition, there was no concept of original sin. Augustine, who is mainly responsible for that horrible theological idea, hadn't been born yet and so they weren't subjected to the idea of inherited sin. There was no Trinity, therefore, there was only God, at least there was only God for the Jewish people. In fact, for all practical purposes the Jewish people were the first Unitarians.

And since I have already mentioned Augustine, there was no "Just War Theory" initiated by Augustine and further refined by Thomas Aquinas, both pillars of Catholicism.

If you can possibly entertain an idea of a "Just War" you simply have to tame or domesticate the radical teachings of Jesus. For example, where exactly did Jesus under any conditions justify war?

And of course there was no Catholic/Protestant divide or justification by faith as Luther proclaimed in the 16th Century.

And lastly, but certainly not least, there was no salvation theology. The need for Universalism was totally non-existent.

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So, now I've given you a brief picture of the conditions which led to the times when Matthew and Luke were written, and I've also attempted to clear the way of some of the intervening theological obstructions which potentially cloud and distort our contemporary readings of both Matthew and Luke.

What are we left with? What was going on at the time they were written which might help explain the authors' motives for crafting Matthew and Luke as they did?

Before I attempt to do that, I want to remind you of my earlier reading on "fact fundamentalism" The authors of Matthew and Luke were not, and I repeat, were not writing a history or Biography of Jesus, at least not one that would be written today.

They weren't interested in outright facts or historical accuracy. They were primarily interested in promoting a new and radically different way of thinking and believing with Jesus and his life and his teachings as the focus of their narratives. And they were writing for specific audiences taking into account the specific needs, expectations, and world views of those audiences.

And they were writing after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, a terrible event in the life of the Jewish people.

The author of Matthew wrote for a predominantly Jewish audience and the author of Luke wrote for a predominantly Gentile audience. For instance, Jewish kingship was important to Jews and less so to Gentiles. Thus the author of Matthew emphasized Jesus as the new King of the Jews and his genealogy traces Jesus back to King David.

On the other hand, Luke emphasized Jesus' lineage all the way back to Adam which encompassed all people. For Luke, Jesus is a new Adam, a new "Son of God," the start of a new creation, the beginning of a transfigured earth.¹

The emphasis on the genealogy of Jesus in both of the Gospels is in stark contrast to the genealogy of the most important person in the world at that time – Caesar.

When Jesus was born, Caesar Augustus was emperor of Rome and he claimed to be the Son of God. His genealogy was traced back to Aeneas who was the divine son of Venus, the daughter of Jupiter, and her human consort Anchises.²

The world knew of Caesar's claim to divine parentage and in order to compete, the authors of the Gospels had to provide Jesus with his own divine lineage, from God on the one side, to Adam and David on the other side. This gave Jesus a similar but even better pedigree than Caesar.

Now this is where I need for you to remember our earlier reading on "fact fundamentalism." These were not facts as we know them. They were methods to establish royal pedigrees and set these Sons of God apart from other mere mortals. Borg and Crossan synthesize the situation far better than I where they say:

"If you wanted to oppose and replace one Son of God born with a millennium-plus descent from the divinely born Aeneas,

you would have to introduce an alternative Son of God with a better than millennium-plus descent from, say, the divinely born Isaac, as in Matthew, or, better, the divinely created Adam, as in Luke. But what is

¹ *The First Christmas*, 94

² *Ibid.*, 96

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always clear is that ancient genealogy was not about history and poetry, but about prophecy and destiny, not about accuracy, but about advertising.”³

Yes, it was all about advertising. My Lord’s pedigree is better than your Lord’s pedigree. My Son of God is superior to your Son of God.

In all likelihood, their first century version of advertising is why the miraculous birth stories were written into both Matthew and Luke. They were trying to sell their new way of thinking to their audiences. And all advertising isn’t necessarily bad. What they were trying to sell was worth buying.

As Paul Harvey used to say, the birth stories were clever and intriguing openings for the ‘rest of the story’ and it was the ‘rest of the story’ that had worth and value. Borg and Crossan succinctly summarize what the authors of Matthew and Luke were selling into one simple concept.

“Both come to us with divine credentials for the good of humanity. They are two alternative transcendental visions. *Empire* promises peace through violent force. (The alternative Jesus provides) promises peace through nonviolent justice.

Each requires programs and processes, strategies and tactics, wisdom and patience. If you consider that peace through victory has been a highly successful vision across recorded history, why would you abandon it now? But whether you think it has been successful or not, you should at least know there has always been present an alternative option – peace through justice.

The clash of visionary programs for our earth is the context and matrix for those Christmas stories, and they proclaim God’s peace through justice over against Rome’s peace through victory.”⁴

So, do you want peace through victory achieved by war or do you want peace through justice? The birth stories in fact set the stage for Jesus’ alternative way of living and view of life written about extensively in both Matthew and Luke. The birth narratives provided incendiary language that almost forced people to choose between the two sides. At least the language probably did in the first century. The language used has lost its affect on us.

At that time, both Jews and Gentiles alike knew what Caesar was called. “First-century emperor Caesar Augustus was titled Lord, Son of God, Bringer of Peace, and Savior of the World.”⁵

Matthew calls “Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham” (1:1) and says he was born from the Holy Spirit (1:18) and that he will save his people from their sins. (1:21) For his Jewish audience these claims made Jesus superior to the Emperor.

Similarly, within Luke an angel tells Mary she will bear a son and he will be called the Son of the Most High and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David and his kingdom will have no end. (1:31-33)

Luke goes on to be even more explicit and calls Jesus a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. (2:11) The authors of Matthew and Luke clearly used imperial language to describe the newborn Jesus. And in doing this, writing as they did, it was heresy.

Borg and Crossan provide a potentially useful, if not somewhat startling analogy, saying, “On the one hand, “lord” was an ordinary title used by slaves to masters or students to teachers.

³ Ibid., 98

⁴ Ibid., 75

⁵ Ibid., 57

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But used simply as “the Lord” it meant the emperor, especially from Caesar Augustus onward, just as, for example, “der Fuhrer” simply means “the leader” in German, but eventually designated Adolf Hitler as the supreme and only leader. In that context to have called (Jesus) “der Fuhrer” would have meant death in Dachau.”⁶

The birth narratives in both Matthew and Luke provided fighting words and if you were the oppressed, the poor, the marginalized and if you were tired of the status quo with the current regime, this language would have gotten your attention.

What followed in both Matthew and Luke surely satisfied as well. For instance, Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount affirmed the old Jewish laws and proclaimed new laws of justice and peace and even love for one’s enemies.

Meanwhile Luke emphasized the obligations to and justice for the marginalized in society such as the poor and women. In Luke the angels gave the good news of the savior’s birth to the shepherds and at that time, there were few poorer than the shepherds, who had been given one of the worst jobs imaginable.

We may not see being a shepherd that way today, but at the time, “As a class, shepherds (were) even lower in the social order than peasants and (qualified) well as the “lowly” and the “hungry.”⁷

And finally, “Luke’s gospel makes mention of women and balances female with male more than any of the other gospels.

Here are some examples found only in Luke: the mother’s only son at Nain, who is raised from death (7:11-16); the woman whose sins were forgiven (7:36-50); Martha and Mary, who host Jesus (10:38-42); the woman who addresses Jesus from the crowd (11:27-28); the crippled woman in the synagogue (13:10-16); the man with the lost sheep and the woman with the lost coin (15:4-7, 8-10); and the insistent widow (18:1-8).

Finally, only Luke has so many named women who accompany Jesus: ‘The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources. (8:1-3)’⁸

Nowhere else were women deemed of such worth as by Jesus and as written about within Luke, who wrote primarily for a Gentile audience. And, on as an aside, in the stories written by Paul, he was hosted primarily by women throughout his journeys and those travels were primarily to Gentile lands. Women, above everyone else, appreciated the message of Jesus – acceptance and justice.

Surely the birth narratives set the stage and intrigued their audiences who were themselves the poor and oppressed, the marginalized and the women.

And what followed, peace through justice was without a doubt satisfying and a glorious respite from an eternity of peace through subjugation and war.

Which would you follow? Which do you follow?

In conclusion, events unfolded over the next few hundred years and established customs honored to this day. And as Borg and Crossan indicate, “to say the obvious, light in the darkness is central to the Christian

⁶ Ibid., 154

⁷ Ibid., 48

⁸ Ibid., 47-8

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celebration of Christmas. Jesus is born in the deepest darkness – in the middle of the night at the winter solstice.

This is not historical time, not a historical fact about the date of Jesus' birth, but metaphorical time, sacred time, symbolic time. The symbolism is perfect.

Nobody knows the day, the month, or the season of the year of Jesus' birth. The date of December 25 was not decided upon until the middle of the 300s. Before then, Christians celebrated his birth at different times – including March, April, May, and November. But around the year 350 Pope Julius in Rome declared December 25 as the date, thereby integrating it with a Roman winter solstice festival celebrating the "Birthday of the Unconquered Sun." The Roman birthday of the sun became the Christian birthday of the Son."⁹

For countless people around the world, Jesus became and is the light of the world, bringing enlightenment to a darkened world, and his birth symbolically celebrated at the darkest time of the year should remind us all of two of our most cherished beliefs and messages he proclaimed throughout his ministry – Peace and Justice.

The questions remain the same today as they did in the time of Jesus. Who will you follow and pledge your allegiance to: the emperors of this world who promote peace through violence, or the teachings of Jesus and other like-minded prophets down through the centuries who have all proclaimed peace through justice?

Namaste!

Sermon Response

Closing Hymn

Please join me standing as you are able singing our final Hymn, No. 226 "People Look East" and remain standing for our Benediction.

Benediction

John Pepper

May every one of us know a midnight clear, a midnight and a dawn and daytime when we know our desert and know the shape of our journey.

May we hear the love songs sung by all good angels and learn to sing them wherever our lives take us.

May peace be the spirit of our hearts and the work of our hands.

And may joy and hope ever accompany our footsteps.

Rejoice Together, 134, Libbie D. Stoddard

Amen, Namaste, and Go in Peace!

Extinguish the Chalice

Postlude

⁹ Ibid., 172