

*How Can We Celebrate Christmas?*

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How can we celebrate Christmas? I ask that question, not meaning “in what ways can we celebrate Christmas,” but instead meaning, “how can we possibly celebrate Christmas” – given the violence and brutality that seems so present in our world. How can we celebrate Christmas in the face of the terrible events that surround us – globally, nationally, locally, personally? Wednesday’s shootings left the light sermon I had planned about Christmas impatience looking ridiculous and inappropriate given the realities of terrorism, of inaction on gun control, of inadequate vision or will for effective mental health programs. It seems just too ironic to celebrate peace and good will to all. It seems thoughtless to light the Advent candles of Hope, as we did last Sunday, and Love, as we do today. There seems to be just too much lack of Hope and Love in this world.

But the more I thought about it, the more clearly I saw that the story we celebrate in the holiday is not one of simple peace. The Nativity Story is the story of an oppressed people longing for a messiah to deliver them from strife. The Jews lived in a world of continual warfare. They had been conquered and, as was often the custom, then scattered - away from their homeland. They were anxiously waiting for a messiah to liberate them as had been predicted throughout the Hebrew Testament. They had waited a long, long time.

As an example of what the Jews endured during their waiting, think of Hanukkah – celebrated tonight. It marks the rededication of the Jewish temple after it had been desecrated by conquerors who repurposed the sacred temple as a worship space for Zeus. That would be somewhat as if, today, St. Peter’s in Rome were stripped of its Christian figures and made a shrine to a pagan god. Mary and Joseph travelling, in

their journey to Bethlehem – and how many of you mothers would have relished jumping on a donkey when nine months pregnant to take such a trip - were responding to the command of their conquerors, represented by King Herod the Great. This was not an easy time or an easy command to obey.

The very times in which Mary and Joseph travelled were times of casual cruelty. Some of you may know the novelist Geraldine Brooks. I have just finished her novel about King David entitled The Secret Chord, and, oh, how routine violence appears in the time. What people do to each other. What men do to other men in battle. What men do to women in hasty bedchambers – it is horrible and brutal and routine.

Herod, the king, is known for his brutality. The Gospel of Matthew is the only one to report the Massacre of the Innocents: angered that the Wise Men have not returned to tell him where they found the baby Jesus, King of the Jews, Herod – according to Matthew - ordered the murder of any male infant two years old or younger in the area of Bethlehem. Recently scholars have questioned whether this happened at all. They have pointed out that if it did, well, because Bethlehem was a small town, only twenty infants were slaughtered. Twenty infants. Only twenty. Josephus, an honored Jewish historian, has written of Herod that, “He sank the nation to poverty and to last degree of injustice.” He also killed two of his own sons as well as other members of his family. So whether the Massacre of the Innocents took place or not, we know Herod was a cruel man.

I bring this up to point out that our celebration of hope in the midst of terror and fear actually connects us to the Nativity Story.

It also connects us to humanity.

In not just biblical time, but in all time humans have struggled with the obscenity of brutal violence. Consider the hymn we just sang. Longfellow wrote those lyrics after witnessing impossible violence. Not long before he wrote those words, his wife had

died. She was helping one of her daughters to seal a letter with candle wax, and the flame leapt to her clothing. Her entire dress was instantly alight. In the next room, Longfellow grabbed a rug to wrap around her to extinguish the flames. But he was too late. She died of her burns. And Longfellow, whom we all picture with a flowing beard, grew that beard to cover the burn scars on his own face.

Just before he wrote those lyrics, his son – whom he had forbidden to join the Union Army – ran off to enlist and then suffered a grievous wound. No wonder Longfellow could write that life “mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men.” And yet still, after all he had been through, Longfellow could end his poem with, “but pealed the bells more strong and deep. God is not dead nor does he sleep. The wrong shall fail. The right prevail for peace on earth good will to men.”

The Civil War isn't the only time we have witnessed horror. There are too many wars in the memory of our own oral history that emphasize that reality: the chemical warfare of World War I; the atomic bomb of World War II; the beheadings of hostages performed by members of ISIS. Humans have long been capable of acts of great horror.

Celebrating Christmas reminds us of many things, and perhaps the most important thing is expressed in today's Centering Thought: “The light shines in the darkness. And the darkness has not overcome it.” Somehow, people have – as Zinn states in today's reading – been able to “behave magnificently.”

Consider the Four Chaplains. I preached on them here a number of years ago. Traveling in World War II on a troop transport ship that was attacked by a German submarine, the four chaplains – a rabbi, a priest, and two Protestant ministers – sought to guide the frantic troops into lifeboats. The attack had occurred in the middle of the night and the soldiers were unsure what to do or where to go. The four chaplains aided in establishing order, guiding men to lifeboats. One survivor tells of

trying to run back below decks to retrieve his gloves. The rabbi stopped him. Returning below decks would have meant certain death. The soldier insisted he needed his gloves to survive in the lifeboat. The rabbi gave him gloves. "I have two pairs", he said. Of course he didn't have two pairs, but he wanted this man to find safety.

These four chaplains continued to guide distressed soldiers to lifeboats and then, seeing that there was no room for them in the boats, linked arms and began to pray together. A rabbi, a priest, two Protestant clergy. In the 1940's. They prayed aloud. They sang hymns. And they drowned. They behaved magnificently.

More recently we have seen members of a Bible study group at a Charleston church killed by an individual motivated by hate. And members of this community were able to say, "I forgive him." They behaved magnificently.

But it isn't just in the big moments. It is also in the quiet moments that people are capable of behaving magnificently. All of you – and I only know some of your stories – help each other every single day; moving forward in the face of loss, of illness, of change.

You might find the words of Robert Fulghum from this morning's responsive reading a bit simplistic. But I don't think you can argue with his statement that "love is stronger than death." How many of you have lost someone, but not lost the love you bear them?

And the fact that love is stronger than death is one of the reasons that we CAN celebrate Christmas. Love IS stronger than death. We usually think of that as the truth of the Easter story. But it is also true of the Christmas story. We may think the Christmas story's message is that Hope is stronger than death – but what is Hope but the product of a great and gentle love?

Howard Zinn says that our history is one of cruelty – but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, and kindness. What we choose to emphasize is what will determine our lives.

So how can we celebrate Christmas?

We MUST celebrate Christmas – for our own sakes. To be true to the part of our humanity that is indeed capable of compassion, sacrifice, courage, and kindness. We must celebrate Christmas to face down, perhaps not in a single glorious moment or in a particular season, but in EVERY moment – the brutality that is also in our nature.

And we certainly must celebrate Christmas for the children upstairs. Not so they get presents and sugar highs; not so they think the world is all rosy. But to affirm for them a sense of overwhelming love and the certainty that the light does indeed shine in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.

Think of how that certainty might sustain them one day.

Think of how it might help them act, not with anger but with love.

The power of the story of Jesus's birth comes from universal understanding of the love and hope and joy attendant on the birth of any child. Every single child upstairs is a miracle to those who know and love them. Each of you is a miracle to those who know and love you. Even for those with no religious faith, the Christmas story affirms this sacred truth. That's why people – even Unitarian Universalists – can sing lyrics about Jesus Christ and Mary and God. That's why people need to.

Make no mistake. We need to celebrate Christmas.

We need to celebrate with the spirit of Hope even when we might be feeling despair. And if our hearts are open, if our eyes are open – we will find Hope somewhere. It is good that we can celebrate together. It is good that we can travel through the age-old rituals. It is good that we can sing and say the age-old story. It is good that we can honor that which has endured because it connects to the core of our lives; it faces our weaknesses and strengths; and it lifts us up.

Let us join in singing that most joyful of Christmas songs, “Angels We Have Heard on High.