

“The Star at Christmas: It Asks of Us a Certain Height”
Christmas Eve, 2007, 7:00 & 9:00 P. M.
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Bruce A. Bode

Lighting the Chalice (in unison)

We light our chalice this Christmas Eve,
For the renewal of faith,
The wonder of hope,
The beauty of love,
And the gift of joy.

Call to Worship

Holy and beautiful is our gathering on this blessed Christmas Eve.
Here we have come to give our thanks,
To face our ideals,
And to remember those we love and who have loved us from the beginning of time.

Here we gather to deepen our faith,
To renew our hope,
And to express our joy for the gift of Christmas.

Through this hour breathes the worship of all the ages,
The cathedral music of all history,
And blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

Lighting of the Christmas Candle

This evening all over the world, children and adults alike, stop what they are doing and remember Christmas. They think of the star as bright as the sun, and of the Child born on a bed of straw. (allusion from Mary Oliver). They light a candle to Christmas.

So, too, we, in our own way and in our own holy place, would light a Candle to Christmas. We would reflect on the preciousness and value of human life and of all life.

Please attend as we light the Candle of Christmas.

Reading of the Christmas Story

My reading of the Christmas story this evening is from two different Gospels, the first, the most familiar of all, is the story of the birth of the Holy Child from the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke.

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar

Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria. And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David. To be taxed with Mary, his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward all."

And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us."

And they came with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

But Mary kept these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, even as it was told unto them.

(Luke 2: 1-20)

Reading from the Gospel of Matthew

And my second reading, also a familiar part of the Christmas story, is from the Gospel of Matthew. It tells of the visit of the Magi in the days following the birth of the Holy Child:

After Jesus had been born at Bethlehem in Judea during the reign of King Herod, some wise men came to Jerusalem from the east. "Where is the infant king of the Jews?" they asked. "We saw his star as it rose and have come to do him homage."

When King Herod heard this he was perturbed, and so was the whole of Jerusalem. He [Herod] called together all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, and enquired of them where the Christ was to be born. “At Bethlehem in Judea,” they told him, “for this is what the prophet wrote:

‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
you are by no means least among the leaders of Judah,
for out of you will come a leader
who will shepherd my people Israel.’

Then Herod summoned the wise men to see him privately. He asked them the exact date on which the star had appeared, and sent them on to Bethlehem. “Go and find out all about the child,” he said, “and when you have found him, let me know, so that I too may go and do him homage.”

Having listened to what the king had to say, they set out. And there in front of them was the star they had seen rising; it went forward and halted over the place where the child was. The sight of the star filled them with delight, and going into the house they saw the child with his mother Mary, and falling to their knees they did him homage. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. But they were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, and so returned to their own country by a different way.

(The Gospel of Matthew 2:1-12, The Jerusalem Bible)

Christmas Poem

For my contemporary reading this Christmas Eve, I have selected a short poem by Jacob Trapp, which speaks about silencing, if only for a night, the pragmatic, critical, cynical parts of our mind.

I who have knelt before no gods this year
Have sudden need to kneel me in the snow.
When round me like the rush of wings I hear
The midnight chimes and carolings, I know
I am not meant to live on cynic’s dole,
To speak the mocking word, and wear disdain
As one who wears behind a mask a soul
As parched for beauty as a draught for rain.
I, who have lived insensible of loss,
Now kneel in wonderment of light that fills
A waiting world – from Bethlehem the cross
And gentleness that walked forgotten hills...
How long ago: Ah me! How dull we are,
How slow of heart, how blinded by a star!

Christmas Prayer

We gather this evening in this house of reflection and worship to ponder the miracle of life and the mystery of our own hearts. And we gather, not ourselves alone, but we gather with multitudes throughout the world who seek, each in their own way, a greater reality, a larger hope, a deeper love, and a more enduring peace.

And we gather, one and all, around a birth, around the story of a birth, around the recognition of a holy presence in this our difficult and broken world.

And here this evening where the Star has finally stopped, may we open our hearts to the miracle of life and being, and may we listen as carefully as we can for the voices of angels, and may we pray as fervently as we know how that love and joy and peace may come to dwell more fully upon this earth, beginning with ourselves.

Let us now, in the silence of meditation, seek that still point of being within us, which is the still point at the center of all being, the still point represented by the birth of a child, that Holy Child of Bethlehem.

“THE STAR AT CHRISTMAS”

The poem

What a beautiful touch it is to have a star in the Christmas story – a star that a wise person can follow that will lead one to the place of a holy (and wholly) new birth.

To notice a star. To be caught by the light of a star. To be lifted up by a star. To be led by a star. To follow to a star. To choose something like a star.

Poet Robert Frost understood the value of a star:

O Star (the fairest one in sight),
We grant your loftiness the right
To some obscurity of cloud –
It will not do to say of night,
Since dark is what brings out your light.
Some mystery becomes the proud.
But to be wholly taciturn
In your reserve is not allowed.
Say something to us we can learn
By heart and when alone repeat.
Say something! And it says “I burn.”
But say with what degree of heat.
Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade.
Use language we can comprehend.
Tell us what elements you blend.

It gives us strangely little aid,
But does tell something in the end.
And steadfast as Keats' Eremite,
Not even stooping from its sphere,
It asks a little of us here.
It asks of us a certain height,
So when at times the mob is swayed
To carry praise or blame too far,
We may choose something like a star
To stay our minds on and be staid.

Frost's commentary on the poem

I have an audio-tape recording of Robert Frost reading this poem, "Choose Something Like a Star." It's a recording that includes some of his witty commentary sprinkled in along the way.

At the time when this recording was made and when the reading took place – it was in 1959 before an audience of more than 1600 people at a church at which I was later to work – Frost was in his eighties and had become very popular. And this poem also had become popular, so much so that it had been put to music by composer Randall Thompson. Our QUUF choir has sung Thompson's musical rendering of this poem on a number of times – a lovely piece. But in his commentary on the poem, Frost said, "Somebody turned it into music and dwelt too long on that star – made it too magnificent, more magnificent than I ever try to be."

What Frost said he was thinking of at the time when he wrote this poem was that the star was something to "just to put your mind on." He said, "It could be a poet of the past, or a text of some kind that you can depend on, something to keep you from going with the mob when they go too much this way or that."

As an example of going with the mob, Frost spoke of a time from his youth when the nation first went one way and then another way with respect to Admiral George Dewey.

At first, Admiral Dewey was a great war hero because during the Spanish-American War in 1898, he commanded a vessel that sank or captured the entire Spanish Pacific fleet in Manila Bay without the loss of a single American life due to combat. And, as a result, by act of Congress in 1899, Dewey was made Admiral of the Navy, the only person in the history of the United States to have attained that rank.

And so because of his popularity, Dewey was encouraged to run for president, which he did on the Democratic ticket. But in the run-up to the election, he made some ill-advised statements, such as that he had never himself voted before, and so everyone turned against him. And, as Frost commented in his reading, Dewey's praise was probably too much in the beginning and his blame was also too much.

Thus, says Frost, we need something like a star that we can look up to that will keep us from being swayed too much by popular opinion. We need a star ... the light of a star piercing the darkness of night ... something lofty, something a little mysterious, but not too mysterious.

I think of this, said Frost, sometimes with respect to my young poet friends: They are more mysterious than they need to be, “probably from pride of spirit.” Some mystery is okay, “But to be wholly taciturn/ In your reserve [– to be completely and deliberately aloof and obscure –] is not allowed.”

So, star, don't be too mysterious and obscure in your message. Say something to us that is understandable and simple. Say something to us we can learn by heart, so that when we are alone we can remember and repeat it to ourselves. Say something to us that we can take in and make our very own. Say something to us that we can live by.

And the star answers, “I burn.”

Well, okay, that's good, that's a start. However, a little more detail would be helpful. We're a little bit confused down here.

But say with what degree of heat.
Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade.
Use language we can comprehend.
Tell us what elements you blend.”

And what you have to tell us, O Star, may not be all that much. It may actually “give us strangely little aid,” and yet in the end it could be something; it could be exactly what we need ... for sometimes what we need is just to be recalled to ourselves, just to regain our focus, just to be steadied.

The reference in the poem to “steadfast as Keats' Eremite” has to do with a poem by John Keats, an early 19th century English Romantic poet, who in the opening lines of a poem titled, “Bright Star,” wrote:

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art—
Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,...

“Eremite” is from the Greek, “*erēmos*” and signifies “desert” or “uninhabited place.” And so an eremite is a desert-dweller, a hermit, that lives in seclusion and isolation ... like a star, which is solitary and distant and isolated, as well as being steady and holding to its own course.

And what the poet Keats wants, as he declares in the rest of that poem,* is the warmth of human love combined with the steadfastness of the star. He doesn't want the star's isolation or solitariness, but he does want its steadfastness.

And, so too, Frost suggests that what we humans may need is the steadfastness of the star as well as its lofty height – something fixed above us that we can look up to, focus on, and be steadied by.

The star above us pulls us upward toward itself, and:

Not even stooping from its sphere,
It asks a little of us here.
It asks of us a certain height.

So that when at times we wobble and go off our course, and are swayed by outside influences and public opinion, and are caught up in the whirl and swirl of the news of the day, and are pulled first one way and then the other ... when we lose our center, lose track of our better selves, then, says, the poet:

We may choose something like a star
To stay our minds on and be staid.

... “s-t-a-i-d,” as Frost spelled in his spoken commentary ... staid, that is, solid, steady, upright, and centered.

My commentary

And, I, too, find that when I stand out under the night sky and look up at a particularly bright star, it does pull me up and steadies me.

There's something about a star that is individual and solitary, and it calls to the individual character in us. It calls us to our inward and deepest self. It calls us back to ourselves.

And so again I say, as I did at the beginning, what a great touch it is that there is this star in the Christmas story, this Star of Bethlehem, that may lead each of us to our individual and deepest self ... lead each of us to our own center ... which is symbolized in our story in the birth of a child ... but not just any child, the Christ-child ...

... that is to say, no longer the story of a particular child in history, not the story of Jesus of Nazareth, or of Mary and Joseph and the wise men from the East, but now the story of every child ever born, and the story of our own potential, our own highest and deepest self.

That's the story, and that's what the star is leading us to.

Sometimes we lose our way. We get pulled this way and that way by all the events of our day. And we find ourselves thirsty and parched, as if in a wasteland, as if in a desert place. We lose track of ourselves. We lose contact with our inner depths.

In the Christmas story, Herod represents the one who has lost his center. As Michael Podesta writes:

If, as Herod,
we fill our lives with things,
and again with things,
if we consider ourselves so unimportant
that we must fill every moment of our lives with action,
when will we have time
to make the long, slow journey across the desert
as did the Magi?
or sit and watch the stars
as did the shepherds?
or brood over the coming of the child
as did Mary?

For each one of us
there is a desert to travel,
a star to discover,
and a being within ourselves to bring to life.

(“Desert,” Michael Podesta)

And so sometimes to get out of our spiritual desert, we have to go into the desert, into a solitary place, a quiet place, where we can look up into the night sky, and focusing on a solitary star, let it lead us back to ourselves, back to who we are and who we could be.

That’s what the wise men do in our story. They head out into the desert in search of a deeper truth and a larger humanity. They follow the star that leads to a Holy Child, that is, to their own rebirth. And then steadied by their discovery, they leave the voice of Herod behind and so make their way back to their homes in their own way.

A relationship of Star and Candle

And, finally, there’s a connection between stars and candles. The light of a candle is like the light of a star. And in lighting a candle, which is a fragment of a star, you are led to your own inward center. The light of a candle in the darkness of night steadies you and, like Robert Frost’s star and like the Star of Bethlehem:

It asks a little of you here.
It asks of you a certain height.

And now let us conclude our Christmas service with the lighting of our individual Christmas candles.

* Lyrics of entire Keats poem:

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art--
Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,
The moving waters at their priestlike task
Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors--
No--yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,
Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever--or else swoon to death.

(John Keats, "Bright Star")

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the reflection given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on Christmas Eve, 2007. The spoken message may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)