

“The Symbol of the Silver Package”
Christmas Eve, 2009, 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.

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;
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 they remember Christmas. They think of the star as bright as the sun and of the Child born on a bed of straw; and they light a candle to Christmas.

And so, too, we, in this our last Christmas Eve service in this beautiful sanctuary, would light a Candle to Christmas. We would reflect on the preciousness and value of human life. We would be recalled to our own deepest selves.

Please attend, now, as we light the Candle of Christmas.

Reading of the Christmas Story

There is one Christmas story more well-known than any other. It is story we find in the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke.

Already when this story was put to scroll, the Gospel writer was looking to the past, for

his story begins, “And it came to pass in those days...” That was probably about 1900 years ago now.

And so imagine yourself, going back to that time, and trying to hear this story as if for the first time.

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)

“Amazing Peace: A Christmas Poem”
By Maya Angelou (read by Dennis Reynolds)

Thunder rumbles in the mountain passes

And lightning rattles the eaves of our houses.
Flood waters await us in our avenues.

Snow falls upon snow, falls upon snow to avalanche
Over unprotected villages.
The sky slips low and grey and threatening.

We question ourselves.
What have we done to so affront nature?
We worry God.
Are you there? Are you there really?
Does the covenant you made with us still hold?

Into this climate of fear and apprehension, Christmas enters,
Streaming lights of joy, ringing bells of hope
And singing carols of forgiveness high up in the bright air.
The world is encouraged to come away from rancor,
Come the way of friendship.

It is the Glad Season.
Thunder ebbs to silence and lightning sleeps quietly in the corner.
Flood waters recede into memory.
Snow becomes a yielding cushion to aid us
As we make our way to higher ground.

Hope is born again in the faces of children
It rides on the shoulders of our aged as they walk into their sunsets.
Hope spreads around the earth. Brightening all things,
Even hate which crouches breeding in dark corridors.

In our joy, we think we hear a whisper.
At first it is too soft. Then only half heard.
We listen carefully as it gathers strength.
We hear a sweetness.
The word is Peace.
It is loud now. It is louder.
Louder than the explosion of bombs.

We tremble at the sound. We are thrilled by its presence.
It is what we have hungered for.
Not just the absence of war. But, true Peace.
A harmony of spirit, a comfort of courtesies.
Security for our beloveds and their beloveds.

We clap hands and welcome the Peace of Christmas.
We beckon this good season to wait a while with us.

We, Baptist and Buddhist, Methodist and Muslim, say come.
Peace.

Come and fill us and our world with your majesty.
We, the Jew and the Jainist, the Catholic and the Confucian,
implore you to stay awhile with us
so we may learn by your shimmering light
how to look beyond complexion and see community.

It is Christmas time, a halting of hate time.
On this platform of peace, we can create a language
to translate ourselves to ourselves and to each other.
At this Holy Instant, we celebrate the Birth of Jesus Christ

Into the great religions of the world.
We jubilate the precious advent of trust.
We shout with glorious tongues the coming of hope.
All the earth's tribes loosen their voices to celebrate the promise of
Peace.

We, Angels and Mortals, Believers and Nonbelievers,
Look heavenward and speak the word aloud.
Peace.

We look at our world and speak the word aloud.
Peace.

We look at each other, then into ourselves,
And we say without shyness or apology or hesitation:

Peace, My Brother.
Peace, My Sister.
Peace, My Soul

**“Silver Packages”
by Cynthia Rylant**

Introduction

Our reading on this Christmas Eve is a story written by Cynthia Rylant, an acclaimed author of more than a hundred books for children and young people. The author was born in 1954 in Virginia, but, at the age of four, with the divorce of her parents, moved to the Appalachian Mountains in West Virginia to live with her grandparents.

There she lived simply – no electricity or running water. Still, it was a time of living in the country and near to nature, which she enjoyed. Thus, a number of her books are set

in the Appalachian Mountains. The author lives now in Lake Oswego, Oregon, a bit south of Portland.

The title of our story this evening is Silver Packages: An Appalachian Christmas Story, and is inspired, says the author, “by a real train, the ‘Santa Train,’ which rolls through the Appalachian Mountains each Christmas season. From this train, tons of toys and treats are tossed by volunteers to the children of the coal towns who wait patiently by the tracks. This has been happening every Christmas since 1943.”

“Silver Packages: An Appalachian Christmas Story”

A train comes through Appalachia every year at Christmas time. And though it doesn't have antlers, nor does the man standing on its rear platform have a long white beard, it may as well be Santa Claus and his sleigh, for all the excitement it stirs up.

People call it the Christmas Train. And it has been coming to them for years. Each new child born in the mountains learns to walk, talk, and wait for the Christmas train.

It is everyone's delight.

The oldest people remember its beginning. They tell of a rich man who had come traveling through the hills by car many years back. No one knows why he came up into the hills, but why isn't important. What matters is what happened.

The man had a car accident. His car just took itself right over the side of a ridge, and the man slumped in that car, hurting and scared. Someone came along. Some say it was old Mr. Crookshank, but others say it was Betty Pritt. But who came along isn't important either.

Whoever it was pulled that rich man out of his car and took him into a house in the hills where he was nursed and cared for until he could make it out on his own. When he left, the rich man tried to give money to the people who had helped him. But they would not accept it.

So that rich man left the mountains feeling he owed a great debt. And for the remaining years of his life, he has been repaying this debt from the caboose of a Christmas Train he brings into the hills each December.

On the twenty-third – everybody knows it – the train will slowly wind up and around the mountains, and on the platform of its caboose will stand the rich man in a blue wool coat. He will toss a sparkling silver package into the hands of each child who waits beside the tracks, and for some, it will be the only present they receive.

So the train is awfully important.

One year a boy named Frankie stands beside those tracks and waits for the Christmas Train. It is very cold and a lot of snow has come down the night before. Frankie's shoes are thin and his feet hurt badly from the cold. But he is determined to wait, even if his feet and all the rest of him become ice.

Now this particular boy wants a particular present. Not just any present tossed from the back of that train. A *particular* present: a doctor kit. He's been waiting for it, beside the tracks.

The train comes through finally. Noisy and steaming and scary, it is so big, but everyone loves to see it and they cheer and clap and some of the mothers even weep to see it coming.

Frankie stands there at the tracks, praying for a doctor kit, till he sees the caboose slowly coming up. And when it is just past his nose, he shouts and waves and runs after the train, his icy feet aching.

From the rear platform, the rich man in the wool coat sees him.

"Merry Christmas!" he calls.

And he tosses into Frankie's hands a sparkling silver package.

Frankie stops running. He is out of breath, so he can't yell a thank-you. He can only hold tight to his gift and wave to the man and the train disappearing into the mountains.

Frankie carries his package home, and puts his own name on it, and sets it under the family Christmas tree. On Christmas morning, he opens it.

It isn't a doctor kit. It's a cowboy holster and three pairs of thick red socks.

Frankie looks at his mother and father and brothers and sisters and tries not to cry.

He wears the socks all winter and plays with the cowboy set all year. But he dreams of a doctor kit.

The next Christmas Frankie waits again in the cold for the Christmas Train. The socks still fit him, so his feet are warm. But his fingers are cold and hurting.

He waits at the tracks and prays for a doctor kit. The train comes; the rich man tosses the silver package.

And on Christmas morning Frankie opens it.

No.

It is a little police car with lights that really work plus two pairs of brown mittens.

Frankie doesn't cry.

He wears the mittens all winter and plays with the car all year. But he dreams of a doctor kit.

Frankie waits three more years for a doctor kit. It never comes. He gets trucks and balls and games. He gets mittens and socks and hats and scarves.

But the doctor kit never comes.

When Frankie grows up, he moves away, out of the hills. He lives in different places and meets different kinds of people and he himself changes a little into a different kind of person.

But deep in him, never changing, are his memories. And what he remembers the most about being a boy in the hills is that just when it seemed his feet would freeze like the snow, a man on a train had brought socks. Just when it seemed his fingers were hardening to ice, the man had brought him mittens. Just when the cold wind was cutting sharp as a blade into his throat, the man had brought a scarf. And when Frankie's ears were numb with red cold, the man had brought a hat.

And Frankie remembers something about owing a debt.

So, a grown man who has been gone a long time moves back into those same mountains to live. His brothers and sisters are still there, waiting for him.

He returns to the hills where he has grown up, and that winter, near Christmas, he stands at the tracks, watching the children wait for the train.

And it comes, as always.

The grown man watches the steam engine move toward him, watches the caboose roll by him, and he nearly runs after that train, so strong are his memories. This grown man nearly runs after a silver package.

But instead he watches a little girl chase that caboose, watches a man in a wool coat toss her a silver sparkling package, watches the gift land near the little girl's feet, watches her running so fast that she trips on her silver package, watches her fall hard to the ground.

The grown man does run now, but not for a train. Not for a rich man in a wool coat. For a little girl.

He picks her up. He wipes her tears with the scarf from around his neck. He smiles at her.

"It's okay, little one," he says easily. The train is disappearing into the trees. He had meant to wave at the rich man. But there wasn't time.

He picks up the silver package and puts it into the little girl's arms.

"You'll be all right," he tells her. "I'll make sure."

He pulls open his kit to look for a Band-Aid.

"Name's Frank." He smiles. "I'm a doctor."

(Text ~ 1987 by Cynthia Rylant. Illustrations ~ 1997 by Chris K. Soentpiet. *Silver Packages* was first published in 1987 in the collection *Children of Christmas: Stories for the Season* by Cynthia Rylant, illustrated by S.D. Schindler.)

Christmas Meditation: "The Symbol of the Silver Package"

Christmas as the emotional center of the year

Last Sunday, on the fourth Sunday of the Christmas season, I mentioned that, for me, as I suspect for many of you, Christmas is the real center of the year. Not to take anything away from the meaning and value of the other festival days in our calendar year, but Christmas is the center, the emotional center, the emotional hinge-point or pivot-point of the year. The energy of the year builds toward Christmas and then subsides after Christmas.

As a minister who prepares services throughout the year that are often related to the festival days that punctuate our yearly cycle, I certainly feel this. Christmas is a time like no other in the liturgical year; it's the center-point, the hinge-point, the pivot-point.

And religion, which has to do with tending to and celebrating the core meanings, values, and convictions of our lives, is called to its highest and deepest responsibility in this season ... because the qualities of Christmas are at the center of the core meanings, values, and convictions by which we live our lives.

And how do you get at the deep qualities of Christmas that center our lives? How do you celebrate the height, depth, and breadth of Christmas? How do you speak of it? How do you keep it fresh? How do you bring together, as English poet John Keats puts it, "the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of the imagination"?

The message of Sarah Hull

I thought that Sarah Hull, who joined me this past Sunday on the Fourth Sunday of Christmas, got at the deep meaning of Christmas in a most beautiful way. Sarah said:

"Christmas celebrations, as we know them, usually have one or more of several components: celebration of the fact of the birth of Jesus, a family gathering,

celebration in union with a larger community, the giving of gifts to loved ones, and to charities.”

But she said, “Even as these things are happening, there can be also a sense of something missing.”

And here she came forward with a marvelous statement of Kate Bosher, who she quoted as saying:

“Isn’t it funny that at Christmas something in you gets so lonely for – I don’t know what exactly, but it’s something that you don’t mind so much not having at other times.”

The missing piece identified

Sarah identified this “missing something” as the opportunity to express the true nature of our love. At Christmas, we both realize how far we often are from expressing the fullness of our love; and, at Christmas, we get another opportunity to try to get at that love – a love that, as with Ebenezer Scrooge, may be buried under many layers of difficult life-experience.

As was stated four weeks ago in the first of our responsive readings during this Christmas season:

“Sometimes, even at Christmas, the world seems dark and dreary. We are burdened with the memory of too many failures, too many defeats, too much sorrow.

“Sometimes loneliness, fear, selfishness, discouragement, and resentment turn the bells of Christmas into bitter mockery.

“At such times we must remind ourselves that the lights and bells and songs of Christmas are meant to celebrate not only the good we know, but the wonder and glory we have lost and would find again.” (Dr. Duncan E. Littlefair)

Christmas is the religious and emotional center of the year, because it has to do with calling us again to our true nature and to our deepest self.

The gifts of Christmas

And that, I believe, is what this story that I read to you earlier is about. This story titled, “Silver Packages,” is about discovering our true self, our deepest self.

In mythological terms, this story, as with so many stories, is about the hero’s journey. It’s about the journey that each of us must take in our individual lives to discover who we are, what we love, and how we can show that love.

The Christmas season, like the Christmas train, that yearly makes its way into our part of the world comes bearing gifts – simple gifts, profound gifts.

To children, the gifts of Christmas have to do with awakening them to the wonder and glory of life – and with awakening them to who they are in life and to what they love.

And to adults, the gifts of Christmas may be reminders of “the wonder and glory we have lost but would find again.” Or, as with children, Christmas may be for adults as well an opening to the miracle of life and the fullness of love for the first time.

Whatever the case, the gifts of Christmas, related as they are to the “holiness of the heart’s affections and the truth of the imagination,” are gifts that are to be waited for with great anticipation and eagerness, even as Frankie waited for the gifts from the Christmas train in the Appalachian Mountains. These are gifts that will mean the world to us, gifts that will light up our world with joy.

Santa Claus as the gift-bringer

And, particularly for children, Santa Claus is the image of the one who brings those gifts. Santa Claus is that ultimate figure of generosity. Santa is the one who, more than any other, knows the heart of a child.

And how does he do it? With all the children in the world to keep track of and to prepare gifts for, how does he know exactly what I want and need? How does Santa Claus know the heart of each child?

In our story this evening, which is perhaps written for somewhat older children and even adults, the Santa Claus-like figure on the Christmas train doesn’t get it quite right. Year after year, our hero does not get exactly what he is hoping for and waiting for – he doesn’t get the “doctor kit.”

Instead, the gifts he receives – though he uses them at the time and later as an adult comes to appreciate their great value – serve to make clearer to him what is really in his heart and what he has *not yet* found.

And this missing piece, then, is something that he has to dig for and discover on his own. And that’s the hero’s adventure: to find what belongs to you and to no one else in quite the same way.

And in our story, this occurs; our hero finds his way. He finds his way through unnamed trials. He finds his own gift; he discerns who he is and what he is made for. He discovers his destiny.

And he discovers that part of that destiny is to return to the community in order to share with them his particular gifts. Thus, the hero’s journey is a circle; it loops back upon itself. First, the discovery of your own gifts; and, then, the giving back. And both parts of the journey are fraught with danger and equally difficult.

The Christ-child and the silver package

The silver package in our story is the precious metal of our own lives; it represents our own inner silver. It's a package that belongs to us and to us alone.

As I work with the imagery of Christmas, the silver package of our story is another symbol, if you have ears to hear, for the Christ-child. The image of Christ-child in this season of the year is a symbol for us adults of the vitality, freshness, potentiality, and divinity of life – and not just the life about us, not just the life of our children or grandchildren, but also the beauty and glory of our own interior life.

The Holy Child of this Christmas season, born into a humble setting, long-awaited by parents, praised by angels, honored by shepherds, gifted by wise men, and surrounded by animals; that Holy Child is our own divine life in symbolic form. And so:

“Bring a torch, Jeannette, Isabella, bring a torch and quickly run.
Christ is born, good folk of the village,
Christ is born and Mary's calling, Ah! Ah!
Beautiful is the mother, Ah! Ah!
Beautiful is her child.”

That Holy Child, I suggest, points not only to the birth of physical and actual life, as glorious as that is; it also points to the spiritual and imaginative life within each of us.

And it points to that which is missing in our life – the basis of our loneliness.

And it points to that which we may have covered up and layered over – the wonder and glory of life we have lost and would find again.

And it points to that which is yet to be discovered, to the love that is possible for each of us.

And it points, finally, to the deep mystery of life and being that we can never fully grasp, but which in this Christmas season we are given an opportunity to try to express as best we can.

The gift of the silver package that comes with the Christmas train at this time of the year is the gift of our own deepest love, which we share with all life, and particularly with that life that is closest to us in this beautiful/terrible, ultimately mysterious reality of which we are a part.

Let's conclude our Christmas Eve service by quietly lighting individual candles that represent the light, life, and love within us, and then follow this by singing the three verses of “Silent Night, Holy Night.”

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on Christmas Eve, 2009. The spoken message may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)