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## NO ROOM

A sermon given by the Rev. Rosemary Lloyd  
at First Church in Boston  
Sunday, December 23, 2007

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The day after tomorrow is Christmas.

Today's service has been like a stocking stuffed with good things: stories and songs to touch and cheer your hearts. And the stories and songs will continue. Later, just after this service, we will reconvene in the auditorium for a not-quite traditional Christmas pageant. You all are welcome to participate. There is no rehearsal needed. It's designed to be spontaneous. And will be a lot of fun. You won't want to miss the part where a camel has a perspective on the Christmas story....So come take a role or be the audience! Come share the joy!

For the day after tomorrow is Christmas, a time for re-telling a story that has been told for 2000 years. And as we will see in our pageant, it is told and retold from fresh vantage points to help bring it to life for us and our imaginations....Which isn't the easiest thing for some Unitarian Universalists.

Every Christmas I struggle with the tension between my happy, contented memories of Christmas' past: of lighted trees and the manger scene recreated in miniature in our living room; of singing hymns about angels bending near the earth and new born joy to the world.

The tension part comes riding in on a wave of intellectual investigation, wrestling with the historic accuracy of the Biblical texts that brought us this story through the ages...The tense place is on the shore between what is real and what is true. Where we have to get down and under the collision of facts and dig for the treasure of the uplifting truth of mystery and myth that is buried there.

When one spends time studying the Bible from historical perspectives, it is not long before one realizes that the facts are a little hard to come by. In fact, the stories told in the books of Matthew and Luke—our two chief sources for the story of the life of Jesus and his teachings, have differing points of view.<sup>1</sup>

The story we know so well about a babe born in a stable, where shepherds keeping watch over their flocks at night receive glad tidings from angels, and three wise men follow a star to the stable—is a conflation of differing accounts.

It is only in Luke that we learn of shepherds being visited by angels. And only in Matthew are there three wise men. In Luke, there is a lot of focus on Mary, while she plays a lesser role to her betrothed Joseph, who takes the lead in Matthew.

In Matthew, Joseph and Mary don't have to travel to Bethlehem to register in a

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<sup>1</sup> Special thanks to my colleague and mentor, the Rev. Roger Paine at First Parish in Lincoln, MA, for his sermon *The Rashomon Effect* that reminds us of these textual comparisons. For a good, general overview, read Marcus Borg's *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*.

census ordered the Roman Emperor, because they already live there. It's in Luke that the couple live in Nazareth and have to travel to Bethlehem, which is why they go looking for a place to stay and end up in a stable where Mary gives birth among the animals and lays her babe in a manger... In Matthew, they already live in Bethlehem and there is no mention of a stable....

And it is in Matthew that Joseph is warned to leave Bethlehem because King Herod has gotten wind that a new messiah has been born in the region. Not wanting any competition for the title of "Son of God"—for that is one of Herod's titles as the King—he orders all boys under 2 years old to be slaughtered. So Joseph takes Mary and the baby and they flee to Egypt. After they've been in exile for a while, they return to Judea, but not to Bethlehem where it is still too dangerous, but to Nazareth. That is where the family has been living all along in Luke, and in that account there is no mention of Herod or Egypt.

Does knowing all this help us gain some peace with our Christmas story?

Perhaps in this way: there is a story that we tell and retell through the ages because, in spite of the facts being confusing or conflated, there is still something that rings true. A message that is essential for us to hear from different perspectives for what it tells us — even from a camel's point of view.

For years, I admit I had little room in my imagination for the beauty and truth that is embedded in the Christmas story—the story of Mary and Joseph and a baby who was called wonderful, marvelous, the Prince of Peace! It didn't—it couldn't make sense. The evidence is conflicted. It was a mystery to me that so much could be built upon so little...

I thought I could just ignore this childhood holiday, but it was impossible. It wasn't only because the culture screams of a certain kind of Christmas—with the radio stations that become all Christmas all the time the day after Thanksgiving. But it was something deeper that kept calling me to pay attention.

Unitarian Universalist minister John Buerhens has been known to chide our failure of imagination to understand the truth—not the facts, but the truth--present in the Christmas story. He likes to quote this parody of a well-known carol which begins:

"God rest ye, Unitarians, let nothing you dismay;

Remember there's no evidence there was a Christmas Day.

When Christ was born is just not known, no matter what they say,

O, Tidings of reason and fact, reason and fact.

Glad tidings of reason and fact!"

The great theologian Howard Thurman has one explanation as to why this story—so often sentimentalized at this time of year--is so important to our souls, to our imaginations. Thurman wrote: "... It is of profoundest significance... that the Gospel story, particularly in the Book of Luke, reveals that the announcement of the birth of Jesus comes first to the simple shepherds who were about their appointed tasks. After theology has done its work... the birth of Jesus remains the symbol of the dignity and the inherent worthfulness of the common man.

Stripped bare of art forms and liturgy, the literal substance of the story remains, Jesus Christ was born in a stable, he was born of humble parentage in surrounds that are the common lot of those who earned their living by the sweat of their brows. Nothing can rob the common man of this heritage—when he beholds Jesus, he sees in him the possibilities of life even for the humblest...

If the theme of the angel's song is to find fulfillment in the world, it will be through the common man's becoming aware of his true worthfulness and asserting his generic prerogatives as a child of God. The diplomats, the politicians, the statesmen, the lords of business and religion will never bring peace in the world. Violence is the behavior pattern of Power in the modern world, and violence has its own etiquette and ritual and its own morality.<sup>2</sup>

The day after tomorrow is Christmas. Like winter itself, the day arrives whether we are prepared or not. There is an inexorable quality to the passing of time. No barrier can hold back its swift flight...

While this may seem a melancholic note to strike this morning, I hope you will forgive the poignant chord. For, just as there are those who have been blessed beyond measure this year with good fortune, new life, new love, health and happiness (and I count myself among this group), we cannot help but realize that Christmas is not exclusively a merry, happy and bright celebration for all. Within this community alone, there are many who have suffered a long year of illness, of relationship turmoil, unexpected turns of fortune, the death of a loved one, diminished capacity. Beyond our walls there are people who are cold and hungry, children who are invisibly homeless and threatened with violence, and our country is at war...

And still, it is Christmas. And there is a gift in the story for you, if you can find a vantage point that will nourish your heart and feed your soul—as though it were true, even if there isn't a fact that can be corroborated.

Because I am awaiting the birth of a new grandchild any moment, it has been easy for me to get in touch with the idea of a very pregnant young woman, traveling a long distance, making a difficult journey at the end of her term, and arriving in a crowded town where all the hotels are booked. And there are apparently no relatives they can stay with, even though we are given to understand that Joseph was from the area. There is no room for these strangers in a strange land...

All over the world, there are women who are on the road. Displaced by marauding guerillas, exploding ordinance, poverty, political oppression, floods and famine. They are strangers in a strange land. And there is no safe, clean warm place for them to rest and wait for their long-expected child...

Here in the United States, there are pregnant women who are in hiding, living in difficult and dangerous conditions, unable to get proper medical attention because they are strangers in a strange land--undocumented immigrants who, because of drastic new laws, live in fear of imprisonment and deportation—being separated from their children and parents and spouses—

Among our church family, there are those with roots that can be traced back to the first immigrants. There are others whose families have arrived more recently, like mine. And some listening to my voice are themselves new arrivals...All at some time have been strangers in a strange land...People still come in search of the same things our forbearers sought: to live and work and worship and raise their families in freedom and peace.

As people of faith, we affirm the inherent worth and dignity—the worthfulness—of all beings. Not some people. Not just people with green cards. But all people. For all

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<sup>2</sup> Howard Thurman (1900-1981), *The Mood of Christmas*, (Harper and Row, 1973) p 11.

are worthy to be treated with fairness and to pursue happiness. And all are equal in the eyes of the law.

There are compassionate solutions to the complex and challenging problem of undocumented immigrants in our country. Working them out may be difficult, it could even be messy or painful. But our faithful response to those who, perhaps out of fear of welcoming a terrorist along with a good man, are slamming the door and saying there is no room—our responses must include a way to welcome the next generation of new Americans.

The day after tomorrow is Christmas. Nearly five years on, our country is still at war. This is a tough thing to say at a time when we'd like to be feeling the joy. But young men and women are still being asked to kill and die in our names. And so we must make room in our hearts to remember them this Christmas. For how else can we pray for their safe return to these shores, and to their families? How else can we welcome a new hope for peace?

There are children who are hungry and homeless in our land. Another tough reality to be confronted with at the edge of Christmas. Still, let us make room in our hearts to remember them, too. For how else will we be motivated to work for sustainable, systemic change to improve their plight? We have the resources. We need the heart. A heart with a lot of room to face the facts and *still* feel the hope!

This Christmas, make room in your heart for the truth that is more real than the facts: There is good news in this Christmas story! Open your imaginations to the part that is truest for you.

I will be focusing on the angels of the Christmas story this year. The ones who said: Do not be afraid. For unto you a child is born...

I know, I know. The angels didn't bother to mention that it might be difficult—even painful--and it will be messy. And the outcome could be unexpected.

But just as Christmas will be here the day after tomorrow, ready or not, a child will be born, and we will call that child wonderful, marvelous! May that Peace and Hope and Love be reborn in your heart the day after tomorrow, and may it shine through your life in the New Year. Merry Christmas. AMEN.