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Unitarian Universalists and Christmas

The nativity story appears in only two places in the Bible. This story of the special circumstances of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth is found only in the Gospels attributed to Matthew and Luke. There is no mention of Jesus' birth in the gospels of Mark or John, in the letters of Paul, in the rest of the New Testament, or in any historical accounts. Out of these two gospel stories has been constructed a narrative that we all know – or think we know. Yet if we look into these narratives, we find some interesting differences – differences that suggest some underlying meanings that might speak to us as Unitarian Universalists.

We tend to think of the Christmas story as one unified tale of the birth Jesus, which includes a manger in Bethlehem, a magical star, visits from Wise Men and shepherds, an angry King Herod, and a flight into Egypt. Simple, right? Not so simple, as it turns out – Matthew and Luke actually report the story quite differently.

In Matthew, Mary is engaged to Joseph, but not married, when she discovers that she is pregnant. Joseph is about to “dismiss her quietly,” when an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him that the child conceived in Mary is from the holy spirit. The child she is to bear will be a fulfillment of ancient Hebrew scripture. In Luke, Mary is also engaged to Joseph, but the angel appears to Mary and tells her that she will be impregnated by the holy spirit and will give birth to a child named Jesus, who will do great things. .

In Luke's nativity story, Joseph and Mary live in Nazareth, and they are required to go to Bethlehem to be registered for a census. There is no room to be found in town, so Jesus must be born in a stable, wrapped in scraps of cloth, and surrounded by farm animals. In Matthew's story, Joseph and Mary already live in Bethlehem, and Jesus is born at home. There is no trip to Bethlehem and no manger; Jesus is born in a “house.”

In Matthew, there is a star leading to Bethlehem and Jesus' birthplace, and wise men from the east follow the star to find the infant. Meanwhile, King Herod, remembering ancient prophecies that a new ruler – a Messiah -- would be born in Bethlehem, urges the wise men to report back to him, so that he can have the child killed. But the wise men, suspecting what Herod is up to, decide not to report back to Herod. Instead, they travel back to their own land by a different route.

In Luke's telling of the story, there is no star, there are no wise men, and there is no story of King Herod and his fears. According to Luke, the family is visited – in the stable -- by shepherds who have been told of the birth by an angel, while they were out in the fields. The angel tells them that this baby is a savior, the Messiah of prophecy. The shepherds find the baby in the manger as the angel told them, and then they go out to tell people about the birth. After all this, according to Luke, Mary remains silent and ponders in her heart what has happened.

In Matthew, Herod orders the slaughter of all male infants under two years old, and the family flees to Egypt on a donkey. In Luke, there is no slaughter and no flight to Egypt. Instead, Jesus is taken to the temple in Jerusalem to be circumcised. In Jerusalem, Mary and Joseph meet two prophets, Simeon and Anna – who both see in the infant Jesus the fulfillment of ancient prophecy about the coming of a Messiah to

lead the Jews. Afterwards, as told in Luke, the family returns to Nazareth – they do not go to Egypt as told in Matthew.

So we have two stories of the birth of Jesus that differ in many of their essentials. And as we can see, modern tradition has simply conflated the two stories into one. There is the trip to Bethlehem, the manger, the star, the wise men, the shepherds, the angel, the flight into Egypt, and so on. Why the differences, and do they matter? Well, for one thing, we now know with some certainty that these stories were written down between the years 80 and 90 of the common era, i.e., more than 50 years after Jesus' death, and 10 to 20 years after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by the Romans. Meanwhile, stories about Jesus had been passed on as oral traditions – as tales that were told and re-told (and that no doubt changed over time as they were told and told again). Scholars don't know who actually wrote the books of Matthew and Luke, although they can now make some pretty informed guesses about the authors, the audiences they were writing for, and the circumstances surrounding their writing.

Although we don't know who actually wrote the gospel of Matthew, scholars are reasonably sure that it was written by a Jewish Christian, i.e., a Jew who had become a Christian. And they believe that it was directed primarily to a community of Jewish Christians, who were no longer connected to pharisaic Judaism. Matthew is the most Jewish of the gospels, but at the same time it is the gospel that is most hostile to Judaism. Historically, very few Jews saw Jesus as the Messiah and became Christians. The author directs his arguments at the Jews who rejected Jesus as a leader and attempts to show that following Jesus is the true Judaism. The author places Jesus within the story of Israel and the Jewish people. He (and I'm guessing here that it was a he) shows how Jesus was descended from the lineage of David, how his birth fulfilled ancient prophecies. The gospel of Matthew retains traditional interpretations of the laws of Torah. It's atmosphere is one of danger (Herod and his anger) and moral dilemma (the question of Jesus' legitimacy, both as a son to Mary, and as a descendent of David).

The nativity story in Luke, on the other hand, focuses more on the promise Jesus' birth holds for the future. It portrays an atmosphere of celebration and serenity; its story is told delicately and with restraint. The author of Luke is also unknown, but he (once again, guessing that it was a he) was probably a Christian from the gentile community, i.e., he was not someone who was first a Jew and later became a Christian. The author was well educated in Greek; he wrote eloquently and was familiar with Greek translations of the Hebrew scriptures. The gospel appears to be addressed primarily to the gentile community around the Mediterranean. The author of Luke was also the author of the book of Acts, which continues the story of the development of Christianity after the death of Jesus. Although Luke places Jesus within Hebrew tradition and the lineage of David, the book emphasizes Jesus' promise for the future, not just for the Jews, but for all people.

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Ok, so we know that the nativity story isn't strictly factual. It is told very differently in these two accounts, and there are no other accounts surviving from that time. Nonetheless, it is a beautiful story, and beautifully told in these two accounts. It is also a story filled with meaning, if we let ourselves be open to it. It is one of those "foundational

myths” that define a culture. And by myth, I don’t mean that it is false, simply that it contains essential truths whether or not it is historically accurate.

What are the truths that lie behind the story? Most scholars seem to agree that there was a historical figure whom we call Jesus of Nazareth, although the Jesus of the Bible could be a composite. We know that he was a Jew, and that he saw himself as speaking within the Jewish tradition. He didn’t see himself as starting a new religion called Christianity, nor did he expect people to worship him. The historical Jesus was a teacher, who was well-schooled in the stories and prophecies of Hebrew scripture. He taught mostly in the form of parables and stories. Apparently, this historical Jesus was able to heal people. Although the healings are presented as miracles, Jesus’ healing is not without precedent – there have been many people throughout history who had the gift of healing.

Jesus was a social visionary and prophet. He challenged the prevailing mores and social structure of his times. He challenged the Jewish elites and the rule of the Romans. He traveled and ate with women, with tax collectors and lepers, and in doing so he seriously challenged the conventions of his time. An embryonic movement came into existence around him during his brief time of public activity. During his lifetime, the size of his following probably did not reach 1,000, and there were possibly no more than 15-20 people with him when he went to Jerusalem and was crucified. He preached an alternative social vision, based on love and compassion, which was both inclusive and egalitarian. Jesus was a radical, a revolutionary, who started a movement to subvert the power structure of his time and to create a world based on love and compassion. It was a movement based on hope – for a better world, a better world that was achievable, here on earth.

And finally, *Jesus was a mystic*. That is, he was someone who experienced the presence of the divine with immediacy. And this direct experience did not require the mediation of tradition and religious institutions. Or, we could say that Jesus was someone who had frequent and vivid experiences of the sacred, of God, of the Spirit. Apparently, this connection with the spirit was perceptible to other people; he was someone through whom the light of the unnamable, unknowable divine appeared to shine. And through this quality, Jesus was someone who inspired hope in other people: hope that the world could be made better; hope that people everywhere could live together in peace; hope that people could live out of a sense of caring and compassion. **[PAUSE]**

Right about this time every year, we seem to be beset with commentators claiming that there is a “war on Christmas.” These comments are aimed, for example, at retailers who wish customers “Happy Holidays” instead of Merry Christmas,” and at schools that have holiday pageants rather than Christmas celebrations. These comments seem misguided for a couple of reasons. First of all, whatever greeting shoppers find at shopping malls and big box retailers, a far bigger issue is that Christmas has essentially become a commercial enterprise for most of America. The buying season begins right after Thanksgiving, and sometimes even before thanksgiving is over. And the focus is not on the story of a humble baby born in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago, and on the significance of that birth. Instead it is on what gifts to buy, what food to prepare, and so forth. It is basically a consumer orgy. So to worry about how these consumers are greeted seems a bit beside the point.

Secondly, it is hard to see how all this railing about this being a Christian nation and about excluding other religious traditions is consistent with the Jesus whose birth we are supposedly celebrating. More striking than perhaps anything else about Jesus was his refusal to cater to the prejudices of his time. As opposed to the leaders of the Judaism of his time, Jesus refused to follow rigid dietary laws, and he included within his circle those were otherwise outcasts: women, Samaritans, lepers, the unclean, tax collectors. Wouldn't Jesus have been the first to acknowledge the existence, and the worthiness, of those who were different from him?

So, this baby, whose birth we celebrate, would grow up to start a movement that is still going strong after 2,000 years. All kinds of horrible things have been done in his name, of course, and are still being done today. But that doesn't change the fact that what he lived and what he taught gave the world a message of hope, a message of a better way to live.

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Unitarian Universalist educator, Sophia Lyon Fahs, wrote:

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

The Christmas story is the story of one birth; a birth that would change the world. Yet, every night of the year, a child is born somewhere. And each child is special, each child is to be treasured, each child brings hope once again into our lives. Having so recently witnessed the arrival of my grandson, Jayden, I am reminded once again just how miraculous is the birth and growth of each new child. Each and every birth really is a holy event!

2,000 years ago, a child was born to a teenager, out of wedlock, in a barn, surrounded by the warmth of the animals. This child would bring hope to millions over the centuries, and a promise of a new social order based on love and compassion.

The message of Christmas is that we must treasure and protect each and every child. Each child shows us how life grows once again, even in the darkest of times. Hope lives! Love triumphs!

**Each night a child is born is a holy night!
May it be so! Blessed be! And Amen!**