

“The Holy Among Us”
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
December 9, 2018

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Reading “You Have to Know Your Body as the Home of God” by Rebecca Parker

You have to know your body
as the home of God
And this is the purpose of Christmas.

The rose blossoming in the wilderness
is the unfolding of your pleasure
as the fingers peel an orange and sweetness buds in the mouth.

The bright star in the night sky
is the sudden clarity of your instinct for joy.

The birth cry in the night
is your child,
falling into the dark,
and your arms holding her.

The terror of Herod’s murderous intent
is your rage that would prefer death to change.

The singing angel is your voice at church,
not sure of the tune
but certain, for a moment, that there is glory.

The animals, breathing their warm breath
in the fragile stable are your emotions
kneeling into the body of earth

at ease in the presence of God.
Mary is you
God in your body.
Joseph is you
sheltering God in the world.

This is the key to the mystery,
The Word became flesh.

We are the dwelling place.

Sermon

Today marks the second Sunday of Advent, a season in the Christian tradition set aside as a time of preparation for Christmas when the birth of Jesus of Nazareth is celebrated.

The religious meaning of Christmas can easily get lost amidst the stream of ads and nonstop Christmas music on the radio or in stores. The religious meaning of the Christmas season can also be a challenging one theologically for some Unitarian Universalists.

This holiday can be fraught for some Unitarian Universalists who may not believe in the divinity of Jesus or in the idea that Jesus was the son of God in a literal way. Indeed, the roots of Unitarianism developed in large part out of a theological move away from emphasizing the divinity of Jesus towards emphasizing the humanity of Jesus.

The mystery that is celebrated by Christians in the Christmas season is the mystery of God becoming human. God being brought into our world through the birth of a baby. Not that God wasn't present before but that, as Christians believe, God would choose to take the form of human life, of human flesh and blood and breath. This bridging of the sacred and the profane, of divine and human, of the transcendent with the immanent is mysterious and wondrous for anyone who might believe in a supernatural presence beyond our material existence.

Yet, even if you don't believe in the supernatural or in God or the divinity of Jesus, I think you can still to be filled with wonder at the truth found in this ancient story.

For me, the remarkable meaning of the story is the incarnation of the holy - the right here fleshiness of the sacred. This idea that the holy, the sacred, the small “d” divine is right here with us, is in US “merely mortal beings” is mysterious and wonderful. Mysterious in the sense that I can’t fully explain what it means for holiness, sacredness, and the divine to be part of us and it fills me with awe.

It feels me with awe largely because if the holy is present among us I don’t think that it is only present in the brightest, shiniest moment; or only present in those of us who always have it together, whose lives are neat and clean around the edges - because who is that anyway? The truth of the Christmas story is that the holy is present most especially in the messiness, the ugliness, the griminess of our lives.

This message is contained within the ancient story of a baby born in some pretty rough conditions. We’ll be hearing more of this story during our No Rehearsal Christmas Pageant in a couple weeks. These are just a few parts of the story. Two young people - Mary and Joseph - were on the move. They were, in their own way, part of a migrant caravan through the Middle East forced back to Joseph’s home by a despotic ruler who wanted to make sure every person was counted properly for tax purposes. Mary, a pregnant teenage girl, must have been frightened. They had to stop and seek shelter as the baby was coming soon. The only place available to them was the stable of an inn amongst the sheep and cows and goats. Some pretty mysterious things happen in this story including the question of how Mary got pregnant in the first place and a group of magi following a star to seek out a messiah.

In light of this story at the heart of this season of Advent and Christmas, I can’t help but reflect on what is happening at our U.S.-Mexico border.

Throughout the news all last month, we were hearing about the group of people coming from countries in Central America, especially El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, walking through those countries and into Mexico on their way to the southern border of the United States to seek asylum. Sadly, the “migrant caravan” as it came to be called was used as a political wedge in the recent midterm elections with rhetoric that sought to stoke fear. Now thousands of people - adults and children - are in waiting there.

One story recently caught my attention. It is the story of three women from the caravan all of whom are under the age of 25 and all of whom have young toddlers. Two of the

women are from Honduras and one from Guatemala. They had met in Jalisco in western Mexico more than halfway through the caravan's journey.¹

One of the women said that her ex-boyfriend, a member of the 18th Street gang, had been chasing her from her hometown in Honduras ever since he learned that she was pregnant with another man's baby in 2015. She fled to southern Mexico and joined the north-bound caravan when it arrived there in October. She and her young child were amongst those who were tear-gassed when migrants ran towards the border last month. The three women and their children have been in Tijuana, Mexico the last few weeks and had decided they wanted to try to get across the border so that they could turn themselves in to American officials and start the asylum process. The prospect of remaining in tents that flood with no guarantee of food or security was enough motivation to try to get across the border.

So, one day recently they walked with their young children for two hours from northern Tijuana to the beach where they had been told it was easier to cross the border illegally. They would just have to make it 40 yards north of the border fence where U.S. soil officially began. They waited until sunset and watched as, right in front of them, a woman snuck through the fence and turned herself in. At that moment, a Border Patrol truck charged towards the fence shining its headlights on the group. An agent got out of the car and ran towards them with a flashlight in his hands. One of the women was stuck between two layers of fencing. Another asked the agent in Spanish: "Don't you have kids?" "Yes," he said. The group moved away from the fence. A few hours passed. Another agent arrived carrying a large gun. Then another Border Patrol truck came and turned on its siren. And then another agent came on a four-wheeler. They decided they'd try again the next day.

I wish I could tell you a happy ending to this story. But, I don't have one. In all likelihood, these women and their children are still amongst the thousands awaiting an uncertain future at the border.

There is much at stake in their waiting, in the anticipation and anxiety they and thousands others must endure as our administration clamps down on entry across our border.

¹ "3 women and their toddlers are steps from the U.S. border but months from the dream," Kevin Sieff and Sarah Kinosian, December 1, 2018, The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/steps-from-the-border-but-miles-from-the-dream/2018/11/30/ef3a6946-f2a8-11e8-99c2-cfa6fcf610c_story.html?utm_term=.ba388a3a21fe

Many of you are in waiting as well of different kinds. Waiting for health treatments, waiting to grow your family, waiting to hear from estranged loved ones. The waiting can be excruciating.

While we wait, we can look for and discover the holiness, the sacredness right in our midst.

This is another story from the border. Just before Thanksgiving a delegation of Unitarian Universalists from the UU Justice Ministry of California went down to Tijuana to bear witness and to be of service. Something unexpected happened. They learned of a small group within the larger caravan of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans folk. They had endured even more violence and abuse in their home countries and along the journey than others. Some in the group learned of the presence of ministers and asked if they could perform a marriage ceremony so that they could finally declare their love and commitment to each other in public. The ministers scrambled to pull together a ceremony that would honor the religious backgrounds of those involved. They went out in search of rings and bouquets of flowers. They preparing marriage certificates. That day, they performed seven ceremonies.

One of the newlyweds said of the ceremony, “This is really a dream come true, because you don’t see this in our home countries and this is something that we’ve always wanted to do, and today we had the opportunity to do so. I’m very happy.”²

What form does the holy take?

It is mysterious and transcendent and perhaps at times seemingly other-worldly.

But, it is also right here with us. Immanent, real.

It is in the kiss shared between two people whose love was deemed immoral.

It is in the crying child whose belly is empty.

It is in the hands that make the meal that is given to the one who is hungry.

The holy is in the feet that are calloused and blistered and tired to the bone from the miles they have fled in search of safety.

It is in the eyes of the one who must ask for help when that is the last thing they want to do.

It is in the mittens and gloves passed from one person to another to warm new hands.

It is in the laughter that arises when strangers meet over a deck of cards.

It is in a circle of voices singing songs of justice.

² <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/dream-come-true-lgbtq-couples-migrant-caravan-marry-seeking-asylum-n938051>

As Rebecca Parker writes, the key to the mystery is that we are the dwelling place. As we anticipate the arrival of Love made flesh in this season, we know that Love made flesh is already here among us.

This truth is embodied in a sculpture by Timothy Schmalz called "Homeless Jesus."³ In this sculpture, a human figure lies on a bench. It is shrouded in a blanket. The only parts of the figure that are visible are the feet. And it is there that you can see the wounds that indicate that this is a depiction of Jesus. There are now dozens of these sculptures now around the world. The sculptor has said that for him the sculpture is intended to convey the theological message that all human life is sacred.

"The Messiah is among us."

If we took seriously the sacredness of our humanity, what could be possible?

This poem by Jeffrey B. Symynkywicz called "Meeting the Messiah" begins to answer this question.

"When we scale, at last, the walls
which our hardened hearts have built,
then we come face-to-face, finally,
with the blessedness of one another.
Then we see that these struggling fellow pilgrims
with whom we share this space
are no longer robbers, pirates, and thieves,
but deepest friends, most intimate souls.
To see this Creation with the eyes of God
means seeing with the eyes of peace;
it means finding ways to bind up the broken,
even when the world says it can't be done.
To scale these walls of alienation and despair
means living our lives in truth, with justice;
neither denying the holy gifts of our hearts
and souls, nor hoarding them like miser's gold.
It is the simplest call of all, in essence:
To open ourselves to God,

³ <https://www.sculpturebytps.com/large-bronze-statues-and-sculptures/homeless-jesus/>

we first open ourselves to one another.
Each day we live, in hope, the deepest possibilities
of our dreams and of our visions in this life,
we dwell as well in heaven.
Then it is that we will turn and greet one another,
knowing at long last the simple blessing
of standing fully in the presence of another true messiah,
face-to-face with one like us: a beaming, holy child of God.”

In this season of waiting and preparing,
of welcoming in light and love,
may we be open to the presence of the holy and the sacred among us.
May we scale the walls of alienation and despair that our hardened hearts have built
so that we may see the blessedness of one another.