

**Two Christmas Eve Reflections**  
© 2008 Rev. Wendy L. Bell  
**Harvard Unitarian Universalist Church**  
**Harvard, Massachusetts**  
**December 24, 2008 – 6pm**

**First Reflection: “Do Not Be Afraid”**

Some of the most familiar words of the Christmas story are the angels’ words, “Do not be afraid.” They speak them to Mary, when they announce to her that she is miraculously with child. They speak them to Joseph, when he is afraid to take Mary as his wife. They speak them to the shepherds, who are terrified and trembling in their fields.

Were the angels to appear to us this year, in the midst of all of this economic turmoil we are experiencing, here and around the world, it is a pretty good bet what they would say to us. Were they to appear to us as we sat at the breakfast table, reading in the newspaper the stories of jobs disappearing, of homes foreclosing, of company after company reporting losses and cuts, it’s a pretty good bet what they would say. Were they to appear to us in the evening as we sit down at our desks to pay our bills, wondering what next year will bring, wondering about our 401K’s, worrying about paying our children’s college tuition bills, or the mortgage and taxes for our homes, I think I know what they’d say...

Do not be afraid!

Which is not to say, “Ignore the reality,” but “Face the reality full-on and see a path through it to the other side. And then, take that path.”

Mary took it pretty well, if you ask me. She asked a few clarifying questions, but she didn’t protest. When the angel said, “Nothing will be impossible with God,” she believed him. She gave him her ultimate trust. “Here I am,” she said. “Let it be according to your word.”

It would not go so easily with me, I know. I’m not one to trust so freely or so unquestioningly. I have legitimate worries, after all. Don’t you? But still, I’m trying to learn. I’m trying to remember that, as the title of a book in my library reads, “The impossible will take a little while.”

Historian and social activist, Howard Zinn, once said, “There is a tendency to think that what we see in the present moment will continue...The bad things that happen are repetitions of bad things that have always happened – war, racism...fanaticism, [and] starvation [to name a few].” But, he says, “The good things that happen are unexpected.”

And that is part of the good news of Christmas.

Jesus often followed up his good news by saying, “Let those who have eyes, see, and those who have ears, hear.” We see things all around us, this year and every year, that cause us to feel

afraid. But when we allow the fear to take us over, when we become our fear, we can neither see nor hear clearly that which is right around us, right before us. If we live in fear, we are likely to miss the miracles. We are likely to miss the unexpected good things that happen quietly in the little places in our lives, in the hairline cracks and crevices of our big world.

“Be not afraid!” say the angel voices. Open your eyes! Let the scales of fear fall away. Good little things are happening – right here, right now! And you don’t want to miss them! See the path that lies ahead through the darkest night. And take your first steps unafraid!

### **Second Reflection: “Every Child Born”**

This year more than any year past, I can imagine what it must have been like for Mary. I can imagine after she’d first heard from the angels and been told not to fear, that she might have occasionally lapsed and feared again. I can imagine her fatigue and worry as she rode upon the donkey, led by Joseph, to a far away town where she’d never been before. I can imagine her frustration on learning that there was not one place to stay except an old barn and nowhere to lay her baby but a dirty old feed trough.

I know full well the sleepless nights she must have spent in the weeks and months to follow, as she fed and cared for her baby. I imagine that even Jesus must have had a runny nose, an occasional cough, and periodic ear infections. How could he not?

There have been countless times in the last six months when I have looked at my own daughter as she has slept, as she has eaten, as she has studied her hands, and learned to reach for toys, and to sit up on her own, even as she has cried those precious little tears, when I have thought to myself, and even said out loud, “You, little girl, are a miracle. There is no one else in this world like you and there never will be again. You are truly a unique child of God.”

I imagine there is not another parent in this hall who has not from time to time felt the same way about his or her own children. I am certain that Mary looked upon her baby Jesus with the same awe and wonder and gratitude.

As a Unitarian Universalist, I celebrate Christmas because I believe that Jesus was, indeed, a unique child of God, whose life is worthy of honor, and whose teachings are no less relevant and radical today than they were 2000 years ago. But I also believe, as the Unitarian educator, Sophia Lyons Fahs, once wrote, that “each night a child is born is a holy night.” And as the Reverend Rob Eller-Isaacs has written, that “each child born is one more redeemer.” That is our faith as Unitarian Universalists.

That is our good news. That is our Christmas story. For in a practical sense, it means that even in the bleakest mid-winters of our lives, we have cause to hope. With all those redeemers learning to walk and then to run, the possibilities for our future are endless! If only we – and they – could remember what miracles we are!

How different would our world be if we did remember? How different would it be if, when I looked into the eyes of another person – perhaps someone of whom I am disdainful or afraid – I were to see my baby girl; if I were to see what his or her parents must have seen, when he or she was but a babe; if I were to see there the holy potential that they saw? How would my own heart be changed? And how different would this world be if you and I were to look upon ourselves with the eyes of that same loving parent, giving and forgiving, and to see that same power and potential within our own hearts?

Why, we just might see the path out of the darkness in which we find ourselves today. And we might have the courage to stumble along it. And perhaps the message of the Christmas angels would finally be fulfilled: Peace on earth, goodwill toward all! May this be our Christmas prayer.