

Tis the season to be jolly, to have silent nights with eggnog, to trim the tree and sing Christmas carols. It's Christmas time in the city, and in the fields where shepherds guard their flocks by night. It's a time for parties and shopping and gift giving. Its a bubbly time, a joyous time, and a hurried time; a time when the merchants expect their bottom line to go from red to black.

It's a time when we can't help but get caught up in the Christmas spirit. A time of anticipation, a time of waiting, both for the big day and, long lines at the store.

It's a Christian time of the year, a time when Christianity blankets the nation. During this time of year, a Christian holiday envelops the nation like a warm winter quilt. The argument about whether we are or are not a Christian nation seems moot. We almost loose sight of the fact that it's also the time of the winter solstice, of Hanukkah and Kwanzaa.

Even non-Christians get caught up in singing Christ-mas carols, telling the story of Jesus's birth. Christmas carols declaring the arrival of a King of kings, Lord of Lords. Gloria in Excelsis Deo. The Christmas story tells a biblical tale of the virgin birth of a god in the flesh. The perfect gift of a son, to Mary and Joseph. The perfect gift to mankind and all the earth.

If there was ever a story of hope, this is it. This little boy arrives with mountainous expectations. The kind of expectations that no-one should be saddled with. But this very special child proves capable of living up to all the hype. Even in death, he accomplishes what no-one before nor since has been able to achieve. He took away our sins, he offered redemption to all mankind.

Jesus is said to have come to represent God on earth, to bring righteousness to the world. He came to reveal love and peace on earth. He came to teach us to care for the sick and needy, to feed the poor. He came to teach us humility and how to turn the other cheek. He came to tell of the kingdom of heaven and life ever-after.

Now I know, many, if not most, Unitarian Universalist don't buy this story. I understand how the story challenges rational thought. I understand how it would be hard for us UUs to imagine anyone more insightful, more committed to justice, to imagine anyone, greater than ourselves. And I understand too, modern-day carbon dating raises serious questions as to the timeline of this biblical story.

But even skeptics have to admit, this is a wonderful story of hope. It's a story that most importantly, offers hope of everlasting life, hope of redemption for all our mis-spoken words, hope of forgiveness for the deeds we'd be shamed to have known. It's a story that offers hope of peace and a world where we care for the meek, the forlorn and the downtrodden.

The Jesus story sets forth beliefs and concepts that align nicely with beliefs espoused by Unitarian Universalism. The story lays the groundwork for a belief in universalism, salvation for all, however we define the term. It aligns nicely with our seven principles, a belief in the inherent worth and dignity of all, justice, equity and compassion in human relations. Acceptance of one another, the goal of world peace and an interconnected web of all existence.

We Unitarian Universalists covenant to affirm and promote our seven principles. We accept our principles as basic tenets of our faith tradition. Our principles are profound and meaningful. And I'm convinced, taken together, they offer human-kind, the best hope of building the beloved community.

But I don't think I want the assignment of defending our principles as being inherently hopeful. As wonderful as they are, I'm not convinced our principles are *inherently* hopeful. They represent important values. They are the cornerstone of an honorable way of living life. But I'd be hard pressed to argue that they hold the same cache of hope as the Christmas story.

While principles and values provide us important direction for our lives, sometimes only hope will suffice. Anyone who has lived through the bleak mid winter of despair knows, hope is an invaluable commodity. The times in our lives when we can not find hope are long, dark days indeed.

As a much younger man, I was a member of a men's group for several years. We met maybe twice a month in each other's homes. We shared a great deal with each other and we became very close. And I believe we became better people, more rounded people, as a result of our time together. We learned from each other and learned to trust one another.

One of the men in the group was an avid rock climber. He convinced us we would benefit from a group adventure in rock climbing. He assured us we'd learn something about ourselves as a result of the experience. Little did I know!

On a beautiful fall Saturday, we found ourselves at the base of a rock wall maybe 100' high. We got tied into harnesses and tied to each other and in turn, off we went. I was impressed watching a few of the guys in front of me navigate this rock wall like spiders. I was not a spider that day. I got 30 or 40% of the way up and sat to rest on a convenient rock outcropping.

When I regained my stamina, I started off again, but I couldn't find a hand hold or foot hold that I could trust. I attempted the same route I had seen others take, but to no avail. I couldn't get off the ledge. I was frightened. The more I tried, the more fear I experienced. After several minutes of futile effort, I became immobilized by fear. So I sat for what seemed like the longest time. I had no hope of getting off that ledge.

It was a devastating experience. I had gone beyond embarrassment. I was gripped by despair. Guys above me and guys below me offered words of support, words of encouragement. Eventually I pulled myself together enough to try again.

I found the most promising hand hold and pulled myself onto the rock face, reaching for a foot hold. It was insufficient and I broke loose and went swinging along the face of the wall. I was belayed from above and didn't die. When I came to a stop, the rocks offered me all I needed to continue my journey to the top.

I learned a great deal about hope and the absence thereof that day. Since then, I've often thought about hope; where does it come from, how hard it can be to reclaim. That day, my buddies gave me hope when I could find none for myself.

It seems to me, hope is a form of faith. If true, the question becomes what do we place our faith in? Where do we turn when we are in need of hope?

There are times when I am envious of my friends who have a strong belief in an interventionist God. They often seem more able to access a sense of hope than my friends who lack such a belief. I'm not suggesting that one needs to have a belief in God in order to find hope. I simply don't believe that to be true. But such a belief does seem to provide more ready access to hope.

Where do you turn to find hope? How well does it work for you? These feel like important questions to ask ourselves. Hope is an important commodity in our lives. Important enough, that perhaps we should not relegate its presence to happenstance.

The Christmas story is a story of hope. Joy to the world, the lord has come. Let every heart prepare a room, and heaven and nature sing. Some take the Christmas story as literal truth, others reject it out of hand. Whether we believe the story is true or not, there is an important message of hope here. Whether the story has literal meaning or is simply a metaphor, the story carries an important message of hope.

The story is about the love of life, a time of new beginnings. It foretells a new set of laws, a new set of expectations of human kind. It tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves. It teaches us to care for the poor and downtrodden, to heal the sick and feed the hungry. It tells us there is a better world to be had. It tells us that we, in our everyday lives can and do make a difference. How can that message not be hopeful?

Sometimes I fear we Unitarian Universalist over-react and have a tendency to throw the baby out with the bath water. Because we may not accept the Christmas story as literal truth, does not mean there is nothing here for us to value. I think it wise for us to let ourselves be moved by the fundamental message contained in the Christmas story. I believe there is something here about love and forgiveness that we would do well to understand.

I believe there is something important in this story about hope. There is something important here about joy. Let us open our hearts to the message, even if our minds remain closed. Let us embrace this holiday season, let it engulf us, let it infuse us with hope, joy and an appreciation of life's mysteries. Tis the season. This is a time and a season of hope.

May there be hope and joy in all our lives.

Amen