

USH Service Dec 18, 2022
Pulpit Guest: Rick Tsukada
Worship Associate & Reflection: Carol Simpson

Title: ***My UU Jesus***

Rick:

Opening Words

Merry Christmas, everyone...It is Christmas time!

Luke 2:1-14

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. and so it was that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

From Isaiah 9.6

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulders, and his name shall be called Wonderful, Consular, the mighty God, The everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

It is Christmas Time

And when I pause and take a slow breath deep into my lungs with the words "it's Christmas" on my heart, something drifts up into me...I can't exactly describe it...it is strangely warm...soft... and kind...and somehow the 2000 year-old story of the birth of a child that is known by the name of Jesus...easily passes through my mind. I allow myself to be touched with the presence of a remarkable soul whose message centered on love, peace and compassion for all living creatures...it is Christmas time.

The reverence for Jesus and his birth did not come from my Unitarian Church experience... Although I have a dim fragment of a memory that I and my brothers were dressed up as wisemen, Magi as my brother Ken recalls...I think in part because there were three of us...and we looked like people look from the East...and we stood very still in a crèche tableau while the Christmas Story was read...

My Japanese Unitarian family celebrated Christmas without Jesus on our minds...our tree did have a star at the top, although that symbolism was lost

on me...Furthermore I had no idea that the *church pageant* manger baby would grow up to be Jesus Christ... In fact I am reminded that today...being the first day of Hanukkah...it too was also part of my Childhood Christmas Holiday Experience...so Happy Hanukkah.

I mean my UU Easter was more aligned with an appreciation for springtime and new life...not the resurrection...without which...Jesus does not become Christ...

My UU Jesus was...well a simple man...the carpenter, the Rabbi, the teacher, and a holy man. Over the last many years Jesus has remained, *for me*, very much in the background in the world of my Unitarian Universalist life...but now... the experience of Christmas without Jesus...it just doesn't make sense to me anymore...so today I am *celebrating the spirit and essence* of that baby Jesus, and the joy of birth...and the vision of possibilities that our Unitarian Universalist Principles and Sources rest upon.

Carol Simpson: REFLECTION: MY UU JESUS

Rick has generously asked me to do a short reflection on MY UU Jesus to accompany his. I was not raised a Unitarian Universalist – I came to it as an adult after being in Methodist, Lutheran, and Congregational churches -- so my experience is quite different from his. Becoming a UU was a huge relief for me, it felt like “finding my tribe”, but I did miss Jesus. I often said, back when I first became a UU, “I have no quarrel with Jesus”, and it took a while before I would admit that I am not a Christian. I doubted the stories that the church codified into a creed, but Jesus and I We were in synch. It was a difficult thing for me to relinquish the magic of a traditional Christmas when I became a Unitarian, and I am still not happy to have gift-giving as the focus of the season.

I believed in “keeping Christ in Christmas”, and much of the Christmas magic took place in church. I loved church at night on Christmas Eve – it was dark and quiet and we lit candles as we sang carols --outside – sometimes in the snow! As a Mom, I taught our children the story of Jesus' birth; we always had a creche at home; and we lit advent wreaths and read appropriate bible passages each week. December felt holy and special – awaiting Jesus' birth as much as Santa. Yet I never believed in the virgin birth, nor angels directing shepherds to the manger, nor kings following a star with gold, frankincense and myrrh. Go figure??

Because I am a “Christmas Carol”, born December 21, and because I started singing before I could talk (according to family lore), music has always been a

prime focus of Christmas for me. I sang O Holy Night in my Lutheran church each year of high school. The song is one of reverence and awe, and I treasured those experiences. We went caroling in neighborhoods all my life, with neighbors, or church choirs, including Bob and our son and daughter.

And lights! I have photos of myself as a one-year-old sitting enraptured in front of my first Christmas tree, and that awe never wore off. Driving around neighborhoods admiring light displays, and going to Constitution Plaza for the post-Thanksgiving lighting of the magical lights there.... And the smell of baking cookies... And wrapping presents... “It’s the most wonderful time of the year...”

But back to Jesus – Like Rick, as a child I didn’t make the connection between the Baby Jesus, “meek and mild” and the crucified Jesus whose teachings inspired Christianity. The man was revolutionary, extraordinary, and inspired, and those teachings are what I don’t want to let go of. The core principle of “love thy neighbor as thy self” parallels the teaching of great leaders of every major religion.

So at Christmas I celebrate that that Jesus was born – however it happened, wherever it happened, and even though it had nothing to do with snow, lights, evergreen trees, or Santa Claus. I celebrate that his teachings of kindness and inclusion became a huge force in human history, and are still alive in Unitarian Universalism.

TURNING INWARD – MEDITATION

Adapted from Christmas Eve Prayer by Sara Eileen LaWall

Let us take a moment of silence now to turn inward.

We come together at this sacred time to awaken ourselves to the joy of
Christmas

To the miracles of life

The birth of a baby

The rise of the sun once more

The magic of this earth, of Mother Nature herself

The love of one another.

This Christmas myth calls us to remember...

To remember that the ordinary can become extraordinary

To remember that any child, our own children

Can become great prophets teachers, leaders of nations, saviors even, not of souls, but of lives,

Working to end the ills and suffering in our world.

The Christmas myth reminds us that this moment is precious

This moment is holy

This moment is powerful

This moment is love

This moment is full of hope and possibility

This moment is all we need

This is our Christmas prayer. Amen

Sermon: My UU Jesus

Rick Tsukada

This sermon has been a very strange journey for me from the moment I began to think about actually doing it...It probably started earlier this year when I was in the pulpit for the Easter Sunday Service and I decided to read a passage from the King James Bible on the "Resurrection" of Jesus.

That service started me on a process of mostly feeling my way through what turned out to be a question: What is my "relationship" to Jesus. And *this* wondering has both deepened and accelerated as the Christmas season drew closer and I realized that I had a Christmas time service to write.

I have a resistance to the name Jesus...this was the first obstacle to doing this service...and yet the question of, *what is Christmas without Jesus?* did not go away... I had to find a way to allow Jesus into my life (be assured I was not born again during this process...) but the origins of that resistance, on some level, is a product of being raised a *self actualizing* Unitarian....

My Unitarian Sunday School religious education about God was about many gods...it started with the wonderment and amazingness of mother nature, then it moved on to Ra and Akhenaten, on to the Greek and Roman Pantheon Gods, Jupiter, Zeus, Hercules, into the Vikings with Odin and Thor and Kirk Douglas, next the Old Testament Moses (Yahweh and Charlton Heston) and finally the New Testament (Jesus and Spartacus, Kirk Douglas again and The Robe with Richard Burton)...no god was above another...just more modern...

My 18 year old impression of Jesus was that he was an important Sunday School teacher...a Rabbi (A Jewish Priest)...a religious prophet (like Kahlil Gibran)...a mystic (like King Arthur's Merlin)... an outspoken revolutionary

figure (like Nathan Hale) ...and a committed, emotional man ...and charismatic (like Malcolm X)...

However...I think my biggest resistance is my aversion to worshipping... kneeling down before anything that had dominion over me...I don't do supernatural dominion...and I associated Jesus with his accumulated divinity and supernatural status deserving of fealty.

So *how* do I keep my Unitarian soul and find a path to doing Christmas with Jesus? This has become an important process for me as I thought about this sermon. As part of that thinking I have been contemplating our first source:

Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.

With an open mind, does that not lead directly to Jesus...especially this time of year. Isn't he a transcending mystery? Does not his message "move us to a renewal of the spirit"?

I realized that ...after 2000 years...his influence and fame is much bigger now than it was while he was aliveThat the power of his vision and wisdom of his teachings have lasted for so long and touched so many people is remarkable...perhaps miraculous.

And when I look around with a filter that searches for where is Jesus? I see that his handprint is all over my world ...that Peace, Love, and Compassion is what he was about....Gradually it became clear that I might do well to not throw the baby out with the bathwater ...What might I find, when the bath water is gone?

Before going on I need to share with you this caveat.

The ideas presented at this time represent the point of view of the author and any resemblance to any other person living or dead is a coincidence. I also do not feel that I am able to teach anything to you about Jesus. I have no scholarship around him, no theological trappings...but I am able to share with you an opening I have for him in my Unitarian Universalist soul.

Having said that I move on...I have *divided* Jesus' influence on me into two parts...I call them, The Ambiance Jesus and the Personal Jesus

The Ambiance Jesus...is the nature and atmosphere of Jesus as it surrounds us in the world today... it is most evident at Christmas time...it can be seen in and felt in church's, stores, homes, music, (even in elevators) it can be felt in art, social interactions...celebrations of the season...religious

practices. It is the *entirety* of the felt sense of Jesus's influence and... it manifests in real time, it manifests now...in general it is the presence of Peace and Love and Compassion for all.

It is in the feel of the carols we are singing today...the sense of reverence of the "holy night" of Christmas Eve...the joyous celebration found in Handel's Messiah and the iconic Hallelujah Chorus. It is *appreciating* the inspiration *that his presence has given the world* for centuries...It is in the awareness of the contrasts that surround us like feeling the intentions and the actual presence of the Salvation Army's bell ringers, the why they are there... TV commercials...you see families, friends, lovers smiling looking for the perfect gifts...as if any gift is not perfect... it is in the call of donations for children, for neglected animals, and endangered species of all kinds from all over the world.... For Jesus' message points to the inequities that surround us ...asking for compassion...it is in the buying of gifts and the thoughtfulness of being kind, to be caring...of awareness of being in a shared world...It is in the gratitude of living in a country where there is mostly peace...where we abhor violence...at the sight of *our* violence...where racism and unfettered hatred of all sorts is always wrong. ...These and more are part of Jesus Consciousness. It aids us in becoming more aware of the good and not so good and even recognizing *that all are not in same agreement* our ideals...yet Come Come Whoever you are....as we fumble with offering our other cheek...yet we, Unitarian Universalists, value the fumbling.

The Ambiance around the birth of Jesus is beautiful...it is about candles, and twinkling lights, and red bows and evergreens...things that sparkle...it is about churches at night...and prayers and remembrances of gatherings past...anticipations of gathering about to come. It has full feelings of joy and sorrow...and it is romantic and dreamy...of hope and desire...giving and receiving...gathered friends...families... and the consideration of Peace on Earth...a remarkable thought to dwell on... is it not? Peace on Earth...and Good Will Toward All...it feels good..it feels good to conjure an Earth where all are at Peace... take a second to imagine and feel such a world...and it is good, it is good to know we can still find that feeling inside us.

The Ambiance of Jesus is in Santa Claus...there is not in our western culture another icon that is more generous, welcoming to all children, who so enjoys the purpose he has in his life...to spread joy and love throughout the world...and who gratefully receives your gifts of a cookie and hot chocolate as a thank you for getting a bicycle...the experience of a golden rule...

Oh Yes... I have room for this Jesus in my life

The Personal Private Jesus:

This is *my imagined* Jesus as a felt and available presence, as a wisdom figure that can be a counselor, and guide to spiritual maturity around the great

questions like: Is there a god? Is there life after death? and What is the meaning of life? He is turning out to be, as I get to know him a little better, a really good companion for contemplating my choices and focus on life. Of course he is in really good company, the company of Buddha, my Mom and Dad, Mother Nature, and various other Woo Woo New Age teachers...

Deepak Chopra wrote an interesting book, called **The Third Jesus**. In this treatise, Chopra identifies three Jesuses; the first is the historical Jesus...we know very little about this factual Jesus, we know almost nothing about his childhood or young adulthood except that he was most likely a carpenter that lived in the part of the world in the eastern Mediterranean known as Galilee. We know he was a human being...and *for his era*...he lived to old age... past 30.

The second Jesus is the church-generated Jesus. Chopra describes this Jesus as “never have existed” and one that was “built up over thousands of years by theologians and scholars” to serve the agenda of the churches of Christianity.

The third Jesus is the mystic who taught and lived by spiritual knowledge. This was a person who reached a state of enlightenment and like many spiritual teachers he went about sharing his knowledge spreading the word as he saw it from his expanded view of life.

My personal Jesus is a combination of the First and Third. The factual Jesus and the mystical Jesus, the enlightened teacher. Quite simply stated Jesus was a human being a normal, regular person, a carpenter, rabbi, who in his adulthood obtained what is known as enlightenment, something that is possible I believe, though not easy, for all human beings.

This personal Jesus is as I create him... as I create him in my imagination ...so that he is compatible with my way of being in relationship. He is human.. not perfect and that makes him easier to be with...he gets hungry, tired, grumpy...frustrated...but I think he handles it in a way that I can learn from...I hope he laughs and smiles...I haven't discovered his humor yet...but my Jesus isn't overly serious about the importance of life...I like that

I am imagining a Jesus, real, authentic, quiet, a great listener, hippie long hair of course, I am not sure what kind of beard or mustache...well fed...curious about all things around him, a good carpenter that loves the feel of wood being shaped...a good story teller...with an ear for a good joke...able to say..."I don't know" or "Good Question...let me think about that"...He finds life fun and unpredictable...kind eyes...and since I am making him up...plays the cello...and I would appreciate it if he never seems to be in a rush...and underneath it all...I want to feel that he knows something about life that allows him know that he too is made of star dust.

I contemplate this personal Jesus' influence, with an appreciation of all the ways his life, after 2000 years without a body, has inspired people to reach for better...he is encouraging, urging people to be good people...to create remarkable art ...to spread love upon the earth...to forgive...to do unto others...to reach for peace...

And I would like to feel that I can have a cup of coffee with him every once in a while...maybe once every two months...and I will call him...*Grandfather*...for his name Jesus still jams up my brain too much...so Grandfather...which is an honorific title...I am much easier with myself calling him that.

So, Grandfather...happy birthday...I am glad to have been with you today...and Merry Christmas and Happy Hanukkah.

-end-